Lyn - Please share with Michael. Thanks, Mary Ellen Conroy

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# Tales from the Public Sector

*This article contains quotations from obscene and pornographic writing which will offend many readers. We realize and regret this, and have not taken the decision to publish it lightly. But the subject of National Endowment subsidies to obscene poets and writers is clearly one which a magazine devoted to public policy should properly examine. And, as the author rightly says, the reader would never believe the grossness of the writing if he were simply told that it was obscene. Examples of the obscenity are required to make the point. So as not to weary our readers with this offensive material, however, we have resorted to bowdlerization and have omitted vowels from four-letter words. This may expose us among sophisticates to the charge of being prim and old-fashioned. So be it.*

JO'S

## *National Endowment For Pornography*

This is an article about government subsidies to the arts and is consequently unsuitable for readers of a sensitive disposition. It is an odd world in which an article on the Literary Program of the National Endowment for the Arts (which each year ladles out nearly $5 million to writers and publishers "of exceptional talent") has to be prefaced by such a warning. But if the reader, who is also a taxpayer, is to appreciate the gross vulgarity, obscenity, viciousness, fierce anti-religious sentiments, contempt for democracy, and sheer perversity which he is subsidizing—not to mention the cronyism which helps to select the recipients of his subsidies—he must be provided with examples. He would scarcely believe it otherwise.

In the wake of attacks in literary magazines, the NEA last November dumped David Wilk, as the Director of the Endowment's Literary Program. He has now taken up consulting in Guilford, Connecticut. But Assistant Director Mary MacArthur, who now heads the Literary Program and is herself a former NEA selection panelist, has stated that cronyism is "non-existent" in any of the National Endowment's Programs and that she intends to keep the present guidelines for selecting grantees. Well....

In 1979-80, the Advisory Panel to the NEA awarded a $10,000 grant for fiction to one Tom Veitch of Grafton, Vermont. On the

general panel sat Ron Padgett, himself a former NEA grant recipient and the author of *Tulsa Kid*, which includes the poem "Lemon Meringue." The first verse:

Do you think it is an easy thing
to make a tuna salad sandwich
Shall I smash this pie in your face
the face of God?

Mr. Padgett's short poems include "Problem," which observes: "I don't care if America slid into the ocean. The only problem is, which ocean?" Also, from "Orange Man": "Think of the other various peoples of the world, ripping each other's clothes off and f*cking, everybody on earth f*cking simultaneously, writhing and gyrating, moaning and crying, sobbing screaming and shrieking and coming, in one vast radiation of orgasm: Well, that's how I see mankind."

Tom Veitch's views are somewhat similar. In 1976 he published *Death Collage and Other Poems*, which contains:

My eyes are glistening grapes
of gladness;
yours are two t*rds floating
in the toilet of your face.

and...

Whoops, here's God:
(I felt the orgasm
under my finger.)

Besides the anomaly of a federal agency as prestigious as the National Endowment for the Arts awarding lavish grants to poets like Messrs. Padgett and Veitch, the above scenario embodies another curiosity. According to *International Who's Who in Poetry, 1977*, Ron Padgett writes under two pen names: Harland Dangerfield, and Tom Veitch.

The obvious question is: Did Ron Padgett in 1979-80 help make a $10,000 grant to himself?

Mr. Padgett, not surprisingly, says no. Mr. Veitch is a good friend whose work he is familiar with, Mr. Padgett says, but the pen name "was actually a hoax Tom and I pulled. I filled out the form erroneously on purpose, thinking that my friend Veitch would get a kick out of it." Mr. Padgett said that although he was on the general Advisory Panel, which collectively approves all awards, he was more involved in judging the poetry section, whereas Mr. Veitch won a $10,000 award for fiction.

Perhaps. But the facts remain: Mr. Padgett and Mr. Veitch co-

authored a book of poems, *Antlers in the Treetops*; Mr. Padgett's Full Court Press has published Mr. Veitch's work; and Big Sky Press, which published Mr. Veitch's *Death Collage*, has published Mr. Padgett. For Tom Veitch it could not have hurt to have friend Ron Padgett as judge and panelist in a competitive NEA literature contest.

They jointly make the prize list in another context. According to the October/November issue of *Coda*, the poets' and writers' newsletter, Tom Veitch was awarded a $500 Fels Award by the Samuel S. Fels Fund of Philadelphia for "Song of Myself," published by the *Milk Quarterly*. E. V. Griffith, David Madden, and Ron Padgett were listed as judges for the contest, in which 200 writers applied and 15 won awards.

Mr. Padgett and Mr. Veitch are only two players in a complex and incestuous prize circuit; the NEA Literature Program abounds with examples of grant judges giving awards to writers who have published their work, and whose work they have published. One interesting association involves the Naropa Institute, a California cult group with Buddhist ties, and the National Endowment for the Arts. In 1979–80 no fewer than *fifteen* poets who taught at the Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics at Naropa Institute each won $10,000 grants. That's $150,000 to the tantric-Buddhist cult of Naropa guru Chogyam Trungpa, who has run what he calls an "experiment in monarchy" in the Colorado Rockies. (The bizarre, violent, and sometimes illegal activities permitted, even required, by Trungpa, are outlined in Tom Clark's book, *The Great Naropa Poetry Wars*.)

Steve Katz, another member of the Endowment selection panel (and NEA winner of $12,500 in 1981), said that Ron Padgett, himself a former poetics instructor at Naropa, was instrumental in getting so many Naropa-affiliates NEA grants. "The luck for them was that Ron was on the panel," Katz said. How else, one wonders, could the publisher of *Clean *ssh*le Poems* or *Cancer In My Left Ball* end up with several grants of taxpayer money in hotly contested races?

Consider the output of some of those fifteen Naropa poets. Allen Ginsberg, perhaps the most famous, is the author of *Howl* and *Reality Sandwiches*. The first verse of the poem "America" from *Howl*:

America I've given you all and now I'm nothing
America two dollars and twenty-seven cents January 17, 1956.
I can't stand on my own mind.

America when will we end the human war?
Go f*ck yourself with your atom bomb.
I don't feel good don't bother me.

Richard Gallup of Naropa wrote "The Return of Philista," which contains the following cryptic passage, not unrepresentative of his work:

"Gwanda, Crock-pig lie I'm
Certain, no lamb in sight,"
Quetch ate and Tom's a mad
Dial it and Tom ache,
Neo-Fui bat up a
'Em ass in purgatory
And inch elate ten you too?

Peter Orlovsky's $10,000 went, in part, to the ejaculation of this poem (the spelling eccentricities are his):

I rubbed two comes all over my cat
& now she has something to do
under the belley, on the paw,
behind the near
near the tail.

and this one:

My mothers very funney sometimes,
When I was 17teen she told me
she sucked my gigger when I was 3 months old
& sucked my dildo in frunt of my farther
& he got jelous she said & told her to quit haveing fun
I always loved that storey & tell it when ever I can
to sweet friendley girls.

Ted Berrigan has won both NEA grants and prizes from the New York State Council for the Arts. His poem "A Personal Memoir of Tulsa, Oklahoma," includes:

And I saw your penis there. It was right there, where
We were, and it was with us. We looked at it, there
And you said, "Why hello there Oliver!" to me, there
Beside you, without any pants on, there where I
Could hear you saying, "Why hello there!"

Then Frank came in, and George, and Bill, and Cannonball, and Frank;
And Simon, Jonas, Jennie-Lou, and Bob; and gentle Millie-Jean;
And Hannibal the Alp; and they took off their hats and coats

and all began to puke. They puked on Cal, and on Billy, and on Benjamin, Lucifer, Jezebel, Asthmador, and Frank. Then they left.

Mr. Berrigan has co-published with other Naropa poets like Anne Waldman, Lewis Warsh, and Bernadette Mayer. His book *Selected Poems 1958–79* which acknowledges state grants is dedicated to, perhaps appropriately, Ron Padgett. Mr. Berrigan's untitled poem, co-written with Anne Waldman, runs as follows:

The windows are closed
The door is closed
The house is closed
The bars are closed
The gas station is closed
The streets are closed
The store is closed
The car is closed
The rain is closed
Red is closed.

Other items which are closed, apparently, are: yellow, green, bedroom, desk, chair, geraniums, triangle, orange, shine, light, dime, cigar, pepsi, airport, mailbox, fingernail, ankle, melon, and so on.

Two qualifications: first it may be objected that quoting only sections from poems distorts their meaning. Admittedly, for space reasons, some poems have been excerpted—usually these ramble on for pages and pages, repeating stanzas, sometimes breaking off entirely to give way to a picture of a chicken. For the most part, however, poems quoted above are cited in their entirety, and if there is intrinsic merit, you are looking at it. (Some NEA poets say that if you don't find meaning, you aren't looking hard enough; others say that the fact that you don't find meaning is itself significant.)

Second, it should be emphasized that only the Literature Program of the NEA is under survey here. And although it may be contended that this program gets a small fraction—6 percent in 1979—of the NEA's overall allocation, even that is a considerable sum: more than $4 million in each of 1979–80 and 1981.

The work of Diane di Prima of San Francisco, who won $10,000 from the NEA in 1979–80, is a good paradigm for discussing an author's right to sponsorship by the taxpayer. Miss di Prima's work is monotonously sexual. An excerpt from *Memoirs of a Beatnik*:

> I slid my body down along his leg, until my mouth found his standing c*ck. I began to play with it, nibbling along its sides with my lips, tonguing here and there at its root, in the tangle of dark, musty-smelling hair. At last, under the urgent message of his hands, my mouth closed over the large head of his c*ck, and I tasted the bittersweet liquid at its tip.

> I bent my head down as far as I could completely filling my mouth, straining to make that space larger and to take him in more completely. The head of his c*ck pressed against the back of my throat and I gagged slightly, but his mounting excitement drove all other thought from my mind. I slid my hands under his buttocks and drew him closer to me, moving my head up and down, and pressing my own wet opening tight against his knee. My head was swimming; my blurred sight registered a patch of sunlight on the yellow wall over and over again. I remember thinking irrelevantly that the rain had stopped. I could hear Ivan gasping and moaning above me.

This is the kind of stuff that one can find every month in the pages of *Penthouse's* "Forum" section; even the vocabulary rings familiar. Why then is this sort of literature encouraged by our government with generous grants?

Before asking the question, however, it becomes necessary to dispel an impulsive objection: that is, the emphasis on obscenity is somehow a Moral Majoritarian attack which imposes parochial moralities, and fails to recognize artistic license, and the plurality of our society. D. H. Lawrence and *Ulysses*, we are told, were once kept off the shelves for their alleged obscenity.

Critics of the National Endowment emphasize, however, that they are not objecting to obscenity *per se*, but rather the total lack of literary merit of the works funded, of which the prevalent obscenity is a *symptom*.[1] In other words, authors who have nothing to say ramble on about orgasm after orgasm until, totally exhausted, they stagger to Washington, D.C., to collect $10,000 from the federal government to revive themselves.

One must also distinguish between the "right to publish" and the "right to be funded." To qualify for the former, an American need only demonstrate that he exists (and philosophy may claim exemption from even this), but for the latter, he must prove that his work is, in a literary sense, worthwhile, "of exceptional talent" in the NEA's own words. We recognize that the relative merit of literature is subjective, but the difficulty of setting standards does not mean that there should be no standards at all. The right of an

1. Minerva Cannon, an internationally known poet and fellow of the International Academy of Poets, for example, states "it isn't the obscenity we object to. Erotica can be poetic, but this stuff is pure prurience. It is graffiti on a bathroom wall. We can't stop it, but we can stop paying for it."

individual to free speech does not extend to the obligation of a newspaper to print his views, nor to the federal government to bankroll them.

Such literature emanates not only from NEA grant winners; it is also found in the published material of NEA judges. (The latter phenomenon may explain the former.) Of these charges of juror obscenity, former NEA panelist Lyn Hejinian says, "You can find c*ck, p*ss, and *ssh*le in Shakespeare or Henry James," but the violation is often so gross as to be almost self-evident.

Maxine Kunin, who sat on the NEA Advisory Panel for grants in 1977, and chaired that panel the year before, is responsible for the poem "Heaven as Anus," which ends thus:

It all ends at the hole. No words may enter
the house of excrement. We will meet there
as the sphincter of the good Lord opens wide
and He takes us all inside.

Michael Palmer, NEA grant judge in 1979–80, published *The Circular Gates* with Black Sparrow Press, which got $8,000 from the NEA in 1977 and $10,000 in 1978. It contains "Letter to Friends":

I also had a dream, early this morning
in which I murdered with an ax
or axe eight people I'd never seen before
In yesterday's dream it was only three.

and "An Object":

He said you will eventually drop it
and I did
It cost me fifty dollars and
fifteen to get fixed.

Suzanne Ostro Zavrian, a former NEA grant recipient, was on the NEA Literature Policy Panel in 1980. She helped set the criteria for grant awards, and some of the grants become understandable in the light of her own work. From *Demolition Zone*, published by New Rivers Press ($7,500 from NEA in 1977):

Then I dropped wax on your shoulder
and I should have said you really were the frog
I didn't even have time for the Sphinx's riddle
What has 3 legs, f*cks all night, and disappears?
An actor in someone's else's movie.

Another NEA judge, Dara Weir, writes in *Blood, Hook, and Eye* about a lady doctor who instructs a patient in the art of masturbation. Ms. Weir won a grant in 1979–80. And Jerome Rothenberg,

1975-76 winner of $6,000 and 1980 NEA judge, observes in his poem "Song About A Dead Person—Or Was It A Mole?":

Yohoheyheyeyheyhahyeyeyhahheh
Yohoheyheyeyheyhahyeyeyhahheh
Yohoheyheyeyheyhahyeyeyhahheh
Yohoheyheyeyheyhahyeyeyhahheh
(eleven times)

Anne Waldman, 1979-80 NEA winner, published *Life Notes*, a collection of poems and Haiku:

LITTLE ONES
MIND
Arab on my mind
TRUE
My life recognized my life
TOO HARD
Soldiers:
we don't like it
one bit
SLEEP
Absolutely without regret
PATH
entirely even
EXTENTION 303
you're switched
CAR
no way off
MUSIC
without you:
nothing
NOTHING
I'm
SURVIVE
sure. . . .

And so on. Ms. Waldman has co-authored books with John Giorno, the intrepid author of *Sh*t, P*ss, Blood, Pus, and Brains* and *Drinking the Blood of Every Woman's Period*. Mr. Giorno is published by *Painted Bride Quarterly*, which got NEA grants of $700 in 1975 and $2,000 in 1977.

Gay Sunshine Press was awarded a $1,000 NEA grant in 1975 and $5,000 in 1977. It publishes, among others, Harold Norse, who got one of the 154 $5,000 NEA grants awarded in 1974. Mr. Norse is the author of *Carnivorous Saint*, whence cometh the poem "Quickies."

Christ! my socks are torn
the bedsheets are dirty
the kitchen looks like the town dump
my feet are cold
the mail is dull
and faggots, faggots everywhere
but not a c*ck to suck!

No need for Mr. Norse to despair, however. From the poem "Allegro Vivace" in the same collection:

Suck off God each day and shove him
up your *ss and c*nt—that's
as holy as you'll ever be!
Thanks to the biblical scholar Professor Allegro
now it can be told
GOD IS COME.

NEA judge Lyn Hejinian said that NEA panelists are asked to focus exclusively on the work submitted by applicants when evaluating them for grants; this makes the rest of their work irrelevant to a their applicant dossiers. Mrs. Hejinian said she did not remember seeing some of the more risque poems quoted above when she looked at the 1979-80 NEA applications. This allowance of selectivity on the part of the applicant, she said, may explain criticism that the NEA funds obscenity.

Ron Padgett said it was "outrageous" to consider vulgar language in an assessment of the panel of the applicants. "The question of four-letter words is irrelevant and, I think, Neanderthal," he said, adding, "It's not up to John Q. Public to decide whether a manuscript has redeeming value. Nobody is begging him to go and read Peter Orlovsky."

Nevertheless, it is John Q. Public who is subsidizing Mr. Orlovsky—paying via federal grants, that is, for whatever hamburger and pickles Mr. Orlovsky consumes in between artistic spurts. As long as the government is sponsoring art, the public has a right to at least some say about the kind of art being funded.

Ron Padgett dismisses much of this criticism. "Virtually every time the grants are announced there is an outcry," he explains. "A lot of people who are disappointed about the grants are disappointed writers. They don't win, and so they complain." But as we shall see, there are other reasons for complaint.

*Dinesh D'Souza*
*To be continued.*