

1991

Iannone, Carol: National Council on the Humanities Nomination (1991): Correspondence 02

Lawrence Auster

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June 25, 1991

W. Clarke Wescoe
Chairman, Board of Trustees
John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation
90 Park Avenue
New York, New York 10016

Dear Dr. Wescoe:

I am writing to you about the activities of Joel Conarroe of the Guggenheim Foundation in opposing the nomination of Carol Iannone to the National Council for the Humanities.

As you may know, Mr. Conarroe wrote a letter on April 9th to Lynne V. Cheney of the National Endowment for the Humanities attacking Miss Iannone. That letter, written on letterhead of the Guggenheim Foundation, was nothing less than an exercise in character assassination. Referring to a recent article by Miss Iannone in Commentary, he said, inter alia, that Miss Iannone "clearly views all African American writers the way the late Paul de Man viewed Jewish writers--as easily dismissed second-raters."

The last remark is scandalous, possibly libelous. What Mr. Conarroe has done is to equate Miss Iannone's literary judgement of certain recent works by black writers (and her disapproval of racial quotas) with Paul de Man's racist generalization that Jews, because of their very Jewishness, could not be important European writers.

Moreover, if Mr. Conarroe had read more than one sample of Miss Iannone's work, he would have known that she has given high praise to the Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe and to Ralph Ellison, as well as to an earlier novel of Toni Morrison's. I would direct you in particular to her magnificent article in the December 1990 New Criterion on Chinua Achebe. Who is Conarroe to condemn Miss Iannone's judgment when he himself--on the basis of having admittedly read only one article by Miss Iannone--makes such a sweeping, false and damaging judgment about her, which he then publicizes to the world?

But, in a way, what Miss Iannone has written in the past about black writers is beside the point. In a civilized society, it should not be necessary to prove one's ideological correctness by showing that one has sufficiently praised members of a designated racial group. Nevertheless, the fact remains that Carol Iannone has given high praise to black writers.

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Furthermore, her comment that a group of black writers "demanded and obtained" the Pulitzer for Toni Morrison, while it is a strong statement about which opinions could differ, is certainly a legitimate and plausible interpretation of the extraordinary facts of that case. Mr. Conarro called Miss Iannone remarks about Morrison's Pulitzer "cheap gossip" and "arrogant inflammatory nonsense"; yet, as The Wall Street Journal pointed out on May 23, a very strong letter by black writers pressuring the Pulitzer committee on behalf of Morrison was indeed written and published, and Toni Morrison shortly afterward got the Pulitzer. By saying nothing about that letter in his accusation about "cheap gossip," Mr. Conarro tried to create the impression that Miss Iannone was inventing a story out of whole cloth.

In sum, Mr. Conarro's imputations that Carol Iannone is a racist, the moral equivalent of a renowned Nazi sympathizer, and a "perpetrator of cheap gossip" show a shocking lack of intellectual conscience--even of common decency. It reminds one of the "Big Lie" technique we associate with totalitarian regimes. It is terrifying that such methods are now being used by America's academic elites.

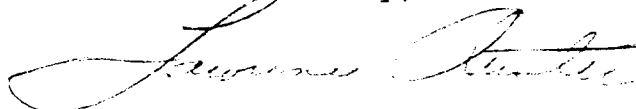
The damage to Miss Iannone is not yet done. Although papers such as The Washington Post have rejected Conarro's charge of racism against Miss Iannone, that charge continues to be circulated, as tends to happen with these things. Whatever the outcome of the nomination dispute, her reputation has been hurt.

As an individual Mr. Conarro has a right to his opinions. But he shouldn't be able to use his position as president of a distinguished Foundation to destroy a good person's character. At the very least he owes Carol Iannone a public apology. Furthermore, the Guggenheim Foundation owes the public an explanation: does the Foundation endorse Mr. Conarro's methods and his charges?

I am sorry for having had to speak so strongly on this matter. But I feel that the trustees of the Guggenheim Foundation should know about, and take responsibility for, the bad thing that has been done in their name.

I would very much appreciate receiving a personal response to this letter. Thank you.

Sincerely,



Lawrence Auster

cc: Joel Conarro
Hon. Edward M. Kennedy, Chairman, Senate Committee on Labor and
Human Resources
Lynne V. Cheney

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