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Iannone, Carol: National Council on the Humanities Nomination (1991): Correspondence 08

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Senator Claiborne Pell  
United States Senate Office Building  
Washington, D.C.  

Dear Senator Pell:  

Mrs. Cheney has asked me to comment on the dispute over the qualifications of Carole Iannone who has been nominated by the President for membership in the National Council on the Humanities. I am equipped to figure in this controversy only in virtue of having examined the objections of the Modern Language Association, as formulated by its Executive Director, Ms. Phyllis Franklin, and the replies of Mrs. Cheney to those objections; by my general familiarity with the work of the National Council on the Humanities; and by whatever qualifications I can lay claim to as the author of 33 books, 35 years as editor in chief of a journal of opinion, and the holder of 33 degrees, only one of them earned. And of course I know the work of Carole Iannone, having several times commissioned her to write serious criticism for National Review.

Let me begin by saying that I go months, even years, without perusing the work of the Modern Language Association, and tend to do so only when some aspect of their activity is called to my attention, which is about once every decade. I don't mean to minimize their importance, any more than I would minimize the importance of an association devoted to the study of Zarathrustian Mysticism. I mean to say only that the National Institute for the Humanities would quickly be discredited if it were thought to restrict its membership to specialists who appeal to the MLA, or to exclude from membership anyone not recognized by the Modern Language Association as having done "distinguished" work.

The humanities are everywhere encouraged in virtue by the consensus of a free and proud, informed and intelligent public that a knowledge of the disciplines encouraged by the humanities is necessary for one's intellectual and spiritual wellbeing. Miss Iannone, in her regular contributions to Commentary alone, can be said to have contributed more to the general understanding of important academic, cultural, and philosophical questions than a dozen issues of the PMLA. When we looked for someone ideally suited to
Weigh the arguments of Professor Harold Bloom in his extraordinary reinterpretation of the Bible, we asked Miss Iannone to undertake the job and were proud to present her distinguished review of a work by one of the most formidable scholars in the country.

There is room—there should be room—for thoroughly recondite work by spelunkers in academic arcana. But Professor John Kenneth Galbraith was persuasive when he observed many years ago that, as an academic, he elected to participate in the public discussion rather than to write footnotes on the subject of footnotes: which is the only criticism that can possibly be made of a woman who has a doctorate, teaches, and writes widely for journals as sophisticated as Commentary, National Review, and Academic Questions.

Mrs. Cheney has dared to advance an explanation for the extraordinary intervention of the Executive Director of the Modern Language Association, namely that Miss Iannone’s orientations are different from those of the MLA. Of this there is no doubt, and there are those who rejoice at the flowering of anyone who takes issue with the body of MLA’s doctrines, as pronounced in recent years.

I am forced to conclude that there cannot be any serious objection to the qualifications of Carol Iannone to serve on the NEH—except that she is not a member of the same ideological sorority as Ms. Franklin. I hope the Senate Committee on Labor and Human Resources will not disqualify a candidate of the President on such specious and tendentious objections as lie behind the MLA’s action.

With personal best wishes, yours faithfully,

Wm. F. Buckley Jr.