Iannone, Carol: News Articles (1991): Letter to the Editor 08

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The Iannone Nomination

It is heartening to see The Post opposing the Modern Language Association's campaign against the nomination of Carol Iannone to the National Council on the Humanities [editorial, May 20]. The spurious charge of racism has been launched, and this level of irresponsibility typifies what is wrong with the whole MLA campaign. Still, The Post is unfair when it characterizes Carol Iannone as someone "who has made a reputation as a slash-and-burn critic." Anyone who has followed Miss Iannone's regular articles in Commentary is bound to be surprised by that characterization. Her writing is conspicuous for its carefulness and balance in a field where this is not always the case. Very likely, it is precisely this responsibility and moderation that so rankle her critics.

It is also misleading to assert that Miss Iannone has focused more on criticism than on literature. Much, probably most, of her writing consists of in-depth reviews of contemporary novels. But even if The Post's charge were accurate, there would be nothing wrong with discussing critical theory, as Carol Iannone has occasionally done. As anyone who even remotely follows critical fashion is well aware, the fashionable literary theories exact the authority of the critic over that of the text. In other words, a text is held to mean whatever the reader wants it to. If to criticize the denial of meaning, as Carol Iannone does, is now "political" and "conservative" in the eyes of The Post, there may be a lot more conservatives out there than anybody suspected.

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Many who oppose Carol Iannone's nomination to the National Council of the Humanities concede that the appointment is based on the ideological appeal of the nominee; one expects the administration to appoint a conservative candidate. But I would suggest that there is greater diversity in the academy than the opponents of what has been tagged "political correctness" find useful to recognize. There are many distinguished scholars whose views would seem to be politically palatable to power-wielding conservatives in the academy and the administration. No evidence of scholarly achievement has so far been presented to support Carol Iannone's inclusion in this by no means exclusive group.

In confirming a nominee, the Senate is being asked to decide upon a symbol that incorporates the best of our literary and scholarly tradition. In so doing, the Senate gives an official identity to the working spirit of what we as a nation value in that tradition, and it officially recognizes the type of work we wish to explore and support. In confirming nominee Carol Iannone, whose only accomplishment is a reiteration of her opinion of certain recent trends in one area of academe, the Senate would be choosing to reject an opportunity to uphold and advance what is of continuing value in favor of following a fashionable and influential circles, politically approved, scapegoating of easily ridiculed but difficult to understand ideas.

In choosing to take the easy road of acquiescence, the Senate would betray its constitutional mandate as an equal partner in a system of checks and balances. Confirmation of Carol Iannone would be, to paraphrase Miss Iannone's criticism of undeserved honors, less a recognition of achievement in the humanities than an official act of obeisance to a dubious expediency.

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