

Correspondence

To the Editor:

As both a former student of his and a one-time campus journalist, I know well the expansive artistic license with which Wabash College professor of theatre James Fisher portrays reality.

But when his penchant for factual misrepresentation and psychological fragility spills from the stage onto the pages of an ostensibly peer-reviewed journal, a response is required. I am delighted to rise to the challenge, especially since Mr. Fisher has deemed earlier writings of mine worthy of citation in his article ["Fighting the Culture Wars in Academia," Fall 1999].

When Mr. Fisher first requested materials from *The Wabash Commentary*, a collegiate publication that I edited between 1994-97 and on whose parent board I still serve, he explained that the resulting essay would appear in *Lingua Franca*. Then, a year later, he reported publishing a piece entitled "On the Front Lines in a Skirmish in the Culture Wars: *Angels in America* Goes to College" in *On-stage Studies*. And now we are presented with yet another cutting that he dispatched to *Thought & Action*. Although Mr. Fisher has often professed to be among Wabash's most prolific scholars, I am beginning to suspect that his real forte may be recycling.

Mr. Fisher's factual errors are numerous and shameful. His untrue—and undocumented charges include claims that the *Commentary* rummaged through

trash, "started unfounded rumors" (including one about planned disruptions of his performances), and unleashed "a public assault" that, in his own words, unreasonably consisted of discussing the very play, *Angels in America*, that was at the center of controversy.

Elsewhere in the piece, Mr. Fisher repeatedly cites—and even directly quotes—hearsay as fact and makes other dubious assertions that remain unsupported. One expects higher sourcing standards from a professor whose scholarly output substantially consists of bibliographies.

But, sadly, Mr. Fisher has long proven factually unreliable. For nearly a year, he frequently and publicly misrepresented the production of *Angels* at Wabash in October 1996 as the first collegiate staging in America. After this false claim was repeated in print by a reporter, it occasioned a formal correction in the *Chronicle of Higher Education's* November 8, 1996 issue.

In fact, the University of Central Oklahoma, among other schools, had previously staged a licensed run on its campus. Broadway Play Publishing, the New York agency handling the *Angels* rights, separately confirmed this to be true.

One also gains insight into the reductionistic political typology of Mr. Fisher when he improbably maintains that he had no inkling that his decision to stage *Angels* at Wabash would spark controversy, as if he were a bystander swept up in

one of those Hegelian world-historical moments about which Mr. Kushner interminably discourses.

In actuality, Mr. Fisher chose to announce the *Angels* production at the same lecture in which Mr. Kushner began his remarks by expressing disappointment that he had not discovered a boyfriend during his visit to Wabash's campus. How could anyone, least of all at a Midwestern men's college, find such a writer's work distasteful or offensive?

In Mr. Fisher's rendering, those who criticized his decision to stage *Angels* or expressed critical opinions about the play's content are denied the possibility of good faith. Administrators are "frightened," alumni and local citizens "confused," the opposition "small but wealthy" and supported by that vast right-wing conspiracy of conservative foundations. Before long "alumniphobia," a linguistical non sequitur apparently of Mr. Fisher's invention, had been whipped up by the *Commentary*!

The only honest people in this unbalanced account appear to be Mr. Fisher, who champions "difficult, controversial, unsettling, and unpopular viewpoints," and Mr. Kushner, who is said to urge that we "constructively embrace the changes that are occurring."

Mr. Fisher's article is a self-serving treatment of both politics and the

James Fisher replies:

Although he makes several assertions about my factual unreliability, Morgan Knull only provides one clear example: My supposed claim that ours was the first college production of *Angels*.

Early on, we believed we might be the first to do the play, but no poster, program, study guide, or public announcement emanating from the theater department ever made such a claim, nor do I make it in my essay or any published interview before, during, or after the

particular facts of the *Angels* production at Wabash. Its fantastical quality becomes complete when Mr. Fisher postures as, among other things, a defender of academic freedom for "publications."

But it was he who vowed to slap the *Commentary* with legal action. I am proud that the *Commentary* and its staff doggedly persisted, in the face of such threats, with reporting the facts and exploding the many pretensions of James Fisher. Such journalistic integrity helps explain why the *Commentary* is Wabash's most award-winning student publication.

Castigating one final time those who have supported and financially sustained his work for two decades, Mr. Fisher closes the essay by declaring: "For now, some quarters of Wabash, like American society in general, resist equality, respect for, and greater openness, for gays."

But it is Mr. Fisher himself, in his relentless politicization of sexuality and promotion of gay victimology, who has marginalized those Wabash students who understand sexuality as something too sacred to be exploited for political sloganeering, America-bashing, or as the pretext for a creative essay published in a teachers' union journal.

Morgan N. Knull

Wabash College Class of 1997

play's presentation.

As Knull writes, this assertion does appear in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, and this error was later corrected. If I ever made such a statement in any setting, it was indeed incorrect, but I see no evidence supporting Knull's accusation or, more significantly, his implication that this claim was employed as some sort of selling point.

Knull insists that I am guilty of everything from "America-bashing" to ingratitude to the institution I have

taught in happily for over twenty years.

As a matter of fact, although I certainly criticize the *Commentary* for attempting to stop the production and Wabash's president for his mistrust and interference, I believe my article is a tribute to an academic community that proved, once again, its willingness to allow a differing view to be heard.

I never thought everyone would agree with what the play had to say, but I also never expected anyone would try to stop it from being presented. It took Knull's *Commentary* to introduce such a possibility—and the rest of the community to reject this attempt.

I have learned from my experience, as I try to explain in my article, that controversy, despite the inherent risks and the resultant exhausting battles, is not necessarily a bad thing. In fact, one might argue, artists owe a debt of gratitude to the assailants of free expression.

Our production of *Angels* was staged over the *Commentary*'s storm of organized, and presumably costly, protest. The result was a heartening outpouring of support for the arts and freedom of speech from students, colleagues, and

alumni, as well as groups from around the state.

It is wonderfully ironic to me that the *Commentary*'s efforts succeeded mostly in attracting media attention, resulting in excellent reviews and honors exceeding our little theater's wildest dreams...

In the final analysis, it is up to artists—and academics—to commit themselves to challenging perceptions, examining values, and raising pertinent questions about how we live together in the world.

In the November 29, 1999 issue of *The Nation*, Tony Kushner, the author of *Angels in America* wonders, "Would a God who gave us powers of creation, curiosity and love then command us to avoid the ideas and art these powers produce?"

The response of any reasonable person is no, of course, even though the rabidly censorious, like Knull, think otherwise. He is entitled to his opinion, but I would prefer to work toward a society in which challenging and diverse ideas and images share the stage with the familiar and comfortable.

To the editor:

Enid Bloch ("Fear of the Self in American Academic Life," *Thought & Action*, Fall 1999) laments the absence of grace, beauty and vision in modern academic life and culture.

I doubt myself that grace, beauty and vision were more prevalent in the past than today. Even among those who spend their lives pursuing a branch of learning, these are rare qualities in any time.

On the other hand, I don't have quite as bleak a view of the academy as Bloch does.

The academy is not a place that drives away creative or passionate minds.

There are a lot of bright and admirable people teaching and writing at universities. (Enid Bloch is a member of the academy as well.)

But Bloch doesn't really doubt that there are plenty of bright people in the academy. She just dislikes what it is that she thinks they do. She sees the academy as having turned its back on the big issues, to have become dessicated, dull, spiritless, to have sucked the life from itself. It isn't so.

And this brings me to the particular bugbear I wish to bite. Bloch cites philosophy as a prime example of this sad state of affairs, asserting boldly that

philosophy, once “the queen of the humanities, the unifying force of all human learning, philosophy has of its own free will shrunk to a mere shadow of its former self.”

Astonishing news! I was caught completely by surprise. I am a philosopher myself, and yet this development had somehow escaped my notice.

Indeed, all the evidence I have available suggests that philosophy as a subject and pursuit is thriving as never before. There are more people who actively pursue pure philosophical research today than there have ever been before, and there have been enormous advances in our philosophical understanding of virtually every traditional philosophical question, in addition to the development of many new areas of research.

How could Bloch have arrived at the conclusion that the discipline has shrunk to a shadow of its former self?

Here is the answer: “American philosophy departments are heavily weighted toward British analytic philosophy, and its practitioners dismiss any quest for comprehensive understanding as a naive dream. All that philosophy can accomplish, such scholars maintain, is to identify the linguistic confusions hidden within particular propositions. There is, they insist, no higher wisdom to be sought or found.”

There’s nothing like a broad brush for painting with a passion! But this is really a grotesque caricature of the state of philosophy in the English-speaking world, a view that could have been formed only by someone who has no active knowledge of the profession and a feeble grasp on the history of the subject this century.

I would not mind so much if it were not so boldly stated, as if it were agreed on all hands, particularly by those blinkered narrow-minded practitioners of the subject! Let me set the record straight. For it is truly lamentable that this fable

should be propagated by *Thought & Action: The NEA Higher Education Journal*, which might be mistaken for an authoritative source.

First, it is odd to hear analytic philosophy described as British analytic philosophy. Though the tradition we call analytic philosophy began with the work of Bertrand Russell and G. E. Moore in Cambridge around the turn of the last century, the center of gravity of analytic philosophy has been in the United States since the 1960s. You might as well characterize Western philosophy as Greek philosophy because we trace the tradition back to ancient Greece.

Second, analytic philosophy is not properly characterized in terms of some doctrine that everyone working in the tradition adheres to. Philosophers working in the analytic tradition occupy all the positions in logical space on most of the major issues of philosophy, and then some.

Analytic philosophy was born in the revolt of Russell and Moore against 19th century British idealism. Russell represents the technical wing of analytic philosophy, Moore the common sense, ordinary language wing. Russell and Moore didn’t agree on every topic, and they both changed their minds on various matters during their careers. Russell’s views in particular underwent a number of significant revolutions.

What Russell and Moore shared was a rejection of the futility of analysis in philosophy, an emphasis on clarity of thought and rigor of argumentation, and, indeed, an emphasis on the importance of getting clear about the workings of language in areas of philosophical research. By and large, these are features that are still characteristic of work in analytic philosophy, and I, for one, can find nothing to regret in this.

Beyond that, what unifies the tradition is, in part, just the fact that induction into it involves studying earlier

“classical” work in the tradition and acquiring certain technical tools from logic.

The doctrine that Bloch cites as constituting *the* view of analytic philosophy (an absurd thing to say), that all philosophy can do is to uncover its own linguistic confusions, is just one strain of thought represented in the tradition.

It is certainly true that one of the fruits of analytic philosophy has been to help us to avoid certain errors by providing us with a clearer picture of the workings of language. And some prominent figures in the tradition—one thinks here above all of the later Wittgenstein—have urged that the only legitimate activity of philosophy is to provide a kind of prophylactic against and therapy for “misinterpretation of our forms of language” (*Philosophical Investigations* Section 111).

In this view, as Wittgenstein puts it, “Philosophy is a battle against the bewitchment of our intelligence by language.” (*Philosophical Investigations* Section 109) This is not a negligible view, or an unimportant one.

And as far as casting Wittgenstein among those who lack grace, beauty, vision, and passion, nothing could be further from the truth, and no one could pick up *Philosophical Investigations* and open it at random to any page and read and fail to be impressed with the force of his personality and intelligence. Wittgenstein’s work impresses one as, to vary Emerson’s figure, thought passed through the fire of life.

Yet this is but one view among the panoply of views of philosophers who have worked in the tradition and had an influence on it. I am impressed with Wittgenstein’s work and have learned much from it. But I do not accept his

view about the limits of philosophy, nor do most other active practitioners of the subject.

I entered the study of philosophy interested in its big questions: How should one live? What can we know? And how do we, or can we know, what we think we do? Are there any transcendent values? What is the place of mind in the natural world? Is the freedom with which we suppose we act an illusion, or is there some way to reconcile it with seeing ourselves as elements of the natural world subservient to natural law?

The study of philosophy has not been a disappointment to me.

The profession in which I was trained—and not like “circus animals”—has not turned its back on these questions. I have now an immensely more sophisticated understanding of them. I even think I have answers to some. I don’t know whether the answers I think I have, even if correct, would qualify by Bloch’s lights as “higher wisdom,” but I am sure they are of the form that constitutes the kind of wisdom which philosophy has traditionally sought.

I want to end with a moral. Passion is all very well in its place. We should teach with passion, we should work with passion, we should think and write with passion. Who could disagree?

But passion gets the better of us when it encourages us to hyperbole, or to strike a pose, or to sacrifice truth for the sake of a striking figure. This discredits, rather than exalts, academic inquiry.

Let passion be the engine of our intelligence, not its driver.

Sincerely,
Kirk Ludwig
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To the Editor:

The arrival of the year 2000 has instilled in me a sense of reflection and retrospection about my twenty years of teaching English and humanities at a community college.

As a teacher whose intellectual and cultural roots are in the 1960s, I am naturally intrigued by the political, social and ethical transformations I have observed between my senior high school English students in the 1960s and my students today in my community college humanities classes.

I had initially considered putting these thoughts into a fairly lengthy article that would have been entitled: "From Malcolm X to Generation X: A New End of Ideology?" The figure of Malcolm X was to suggest the revolutionary spirit that permeated a good portion of the social fabric of the '60s.

I can recall 17- and 18-year-old African-American students enormously energized by the ideas of Martin Luther King and Malcolm X. I recall classroom discussions erupting into passionate controversy over the 10-point program of the Black Panther Party.

Things seem much quieter in today's classrooms. Even in the "Culture vs. Counterculture: America in the '60s" courses I teach, few issues provoke the kind of passion I often found in the classroom three decades ago.

Kevin Mattson, a self-proclaimed Generation Xer, writes in a recent *Dis-sent* article, "Talking About My generation and the Left" (Fall 1999) that "the tendency to roll one's eyes at any mention of the 1960s has become all too easy among many of my generation."

Discussions about the '60s, says Mattson, sound like "the good old days" to many of today's students. He asks whether we are experiencing a repetition of the end of ideology phenomenon that Daniel Bell proclaimed in the 1950s.

This is a question that Ted Halstead raises in his August, 1999 *Atlantic Monthly* article called "A Politics for Generation X" when he wonders if the political agenda of Generation X could serve as the basis of America's next political consensus.

Halstead predicts that the new politics of Generation X will be a style that is less politically and civically engaged, distrustful of government and lacking in a strong commitment to the country or either of the two major political parties.

Halstead points out that, although Generation Xers are not inclined to join a radical student movement, many generally support innovations in participatory democracy such as an electronic town meeting. Further, Jesse Ventura's electoral victory in Minnesota was largely the result of the alienation among today's young voters—like the New Left of the 1960s—felt from the status quo of the Democratic and Republican parties.

The mainly 20-something students in my America in the '60s classes are often sympathetic to the views of that era's Students for a Democratic Society, especially what the *Port Huron Statement* says about participatory democracy.

Furthermore, Xers are often distrustful of race- and gender-based affirmative action, but they are attracted to the economic self determination ideas of Malcolm X. Such emphasis on the individual work ethic and economic self determination has a strong appeal for Generation X students.

In fact, college students today, like their counterparts in the 1960s, are wary of liberal and consumer excesses and supportive of racial and cultural solidarity "by any means necessary."

Donald Winters

Minneapolis Community and Technical College, author of *Soul of the Wobblies* (Greenwood Press, 1985)