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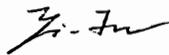
Dear Colleague:

Ever since I turned sixty, I've been getting requests to write forewords and afterwords, dust-jacket endorsements, make opening or closing remarks at conferences. Well, it's that inevitable stage in life. I welcome it as I welcome all stages of life, and what I like is precisely their inevitability. The absence of arbitrariness pleases me. But there is something else that pleases me. Surprisingly, it is a sense of relevance. You would think the opposite is true when an academic is reduced to providing mere frills to other people's intellectual monuments. No so. Without my unnecessary remarks, slabbed on works that can well stand on their own, there is no postmodernism. I am the pediment or portico that makes a house of intellect look quaint, and hence up-to-date!

Being "up-to-date" in the area of human studies is, at best, a mixed value. From time to time, a campus newssheet will profile a faculty member. Next to the charming portrait is the note: "Professor X spends many hours every week reading the current journals and revises his lectures according to the latest findings." The image is of someone who is constantly updating the files in his brain. But, unfortunately, another image is possible--that of someone with no thought of his own. Every lecture, then, tends to be either a literature review or the purveyance of the thoughts of a fashionable intellectual idol, usually French or Central European. I would be more discouraged by this state of affairs were it not for the fact that journals are becoming so expensive that even research libraries can't afford to keep all of them coming in on time. The professor, for lack of this usual source of sustenance, will have to withdraw to do his own thinking. Scary, I admit, but worth trying.

Let me put this subversive idea another way. It is the job of grad students, not professors, to be up-to-date. For us profs to smell constantly of fresh print is absurd and a disservice to our students, who need above all to be challenged by difference--a radically different point of view. And difference is not to be got in current journals: however wild the ideas in them, they are part of our zeitgeist and hence easily absorbed by students who have grown up with the idea of never falling behind the charts. Difference--real difference--resides in the past, our one true foreign country. What a healthy shock it is for students of literature and society to encounter on a postmodernist campus a prof who is a positivist or even a Christian humanist?

Best wishes,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Z. Fu".