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Dear Colleague:

"Although I am going to talk about what I have written, my books and papers and so on, unfortunately I forget what I have written practically as soon as it is finished" (Claude Lévi-Strauss). Unfortunately? I suppose it depends on what one means by "forget". In a sense, we write in order to forget--to lay a body of knowledge aside so that we can have the freedom to consider other things. Without writing, people must continue to carry a vast amount of knowledge in their head; they cannot "clean their drawers" periodically and rethink what they know or add to it something quite new. Literate societies are able to "progress," in contrast to nonliterate societies, for this very reason; the former can file away, forget (as it were) and move on, whereas the latter cannot do so.

We sometimes envy nonliterate folks for their living tradition. If a tradition is really living, then it is a part of the present. It has not been set aside; the ancestors are still looking over one's shoulder. Well, modern society is also full of living traditions--full of ancestral shadows. In addition, it has a past that no longer haunts because it is disentangled from the unreflectiveness of daily living to become texts that can be criticized, used or not used as the moderns see fit. The past, in other words, is for them no longer fate but choice.

"Those who do not remember the past are condemned to repeat it". Good. We will heed Santayana. We will remember the past so as to remove its power to condemn. "Remembering" is a distancing act, an act of thought, all the more so if the past is reconstituted through the process of writing. This distancing is a manner of forgetting; and we need to forget--that is, we need to write history and learn about the past--in order to be able to turn a new leaf and get on with our lives.

Happy Holidays!

