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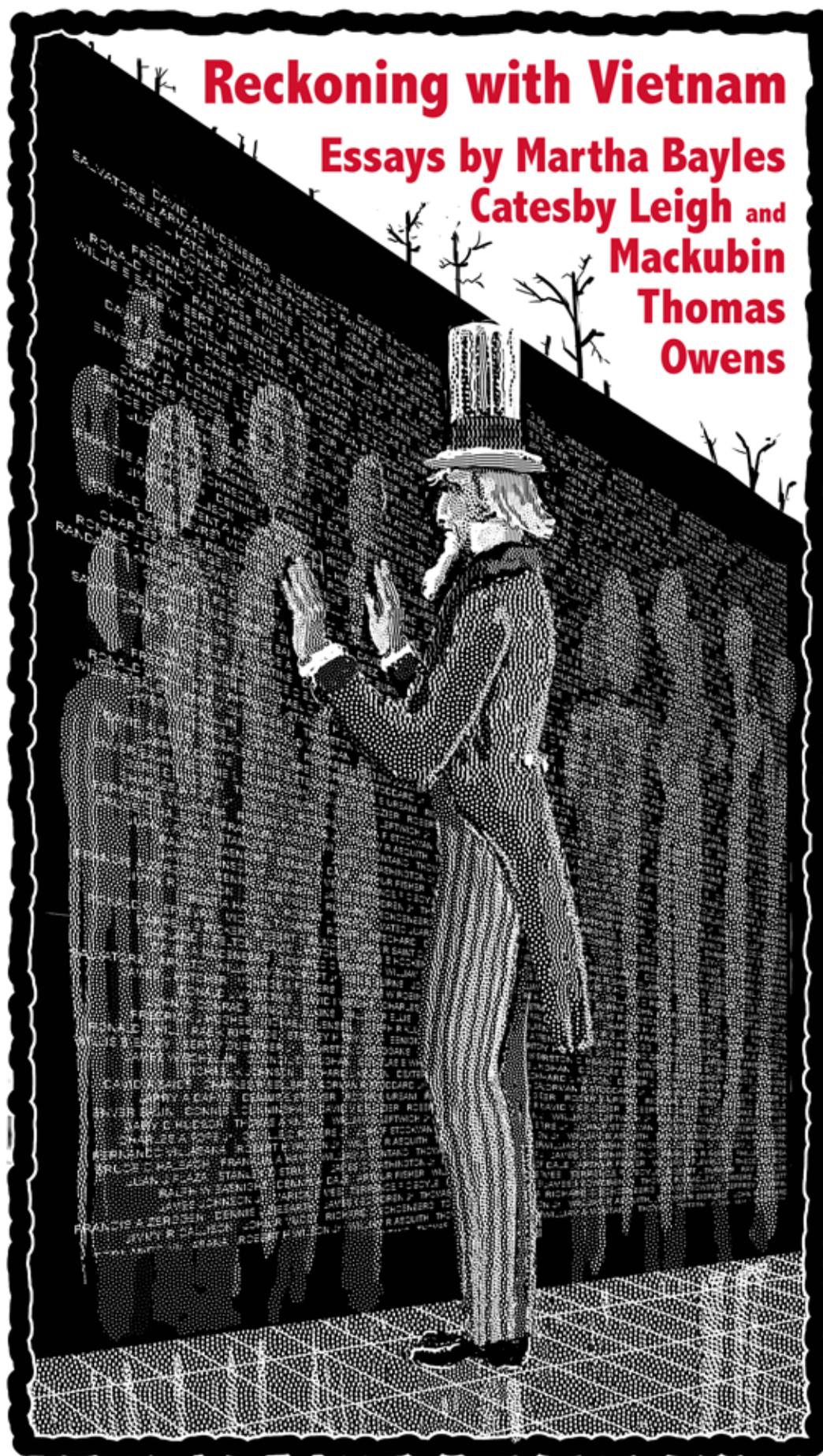
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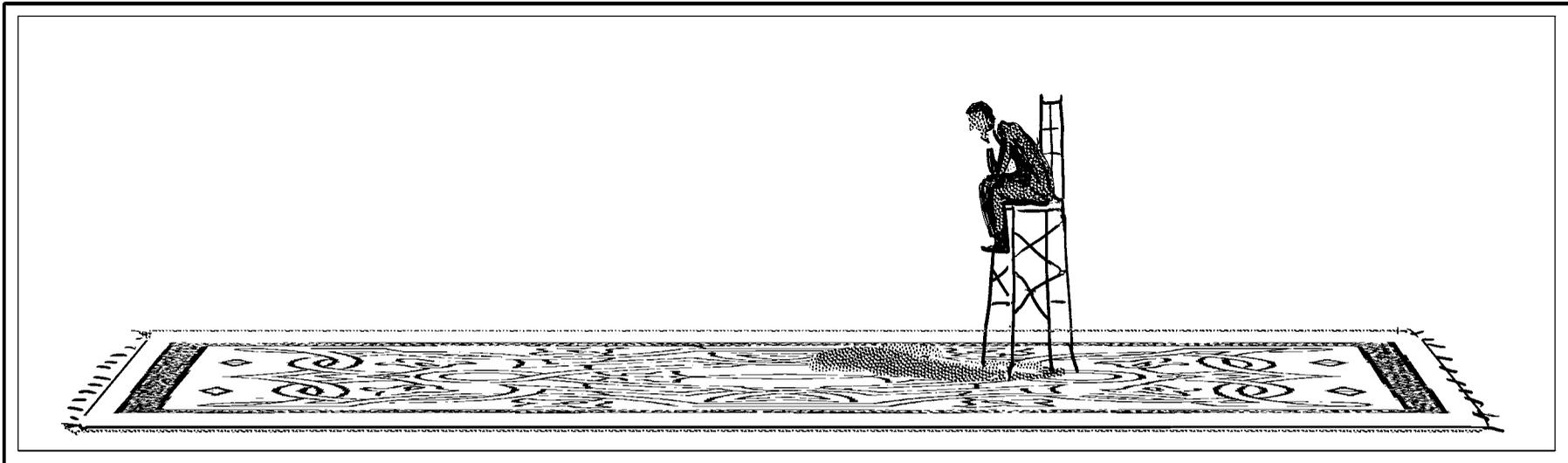
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Book Review by Diana Schaub

THE FIGURE IN THE CARPET

Naïve Readings: Reveilles Political and Philosophic, by Ralph Lerner.
The University of Chicago Press, 240 pages, \$45



FOR A CRITIC TO LAY CLAIM TO NAÏVETÉ is unusual. The tribe of scholiasts prides itself on its super-subtlety, its powers of penetration, its ability to get *at* an author or *into* him. That professional assumption of knowingness can, however, in its haste to “dig deep, dissect, and deconstruct,” interfere with real knowing, of the fuller and more intimate kind. In the introductory chapter to *Naïve Readings*, Ralph Lerner makes the case for “patient attentiveness” to the surface of a text, especially when the text in question is notoriously difficult or elusive. This is what he means by that strange adjective in his title (titles being one of the surface features about which he is careful): “In proposing that we approach such works naïvely, I am suggesting that we not give short shrift to the obvious.”

Lerner demonstrates by doing. In nine chapters, each of which is dedicated to reading one author (and curiously, reading one particularly favored author twice), Lerner gives all the needed proof that his “experiments in reading complex texts” have been successful. His way of reading yields “readings” (the other term of the title), which is to say interpretations that bring into view “the figure in the carpet”—the figure that has been present all along, “somewhere in that dazzling array of colors, curves, and lines.” This Persian rug metaphor is a good one for Lerner, since

it levels off, so to speak, the controversy about esotericism. In the Afterword, Lerner says explicitly that his aim has not been “to unearth and display secret thoughts” but rather to highlight “the message or teaching that is lying out in the open.” This planar openness, however, is rarely the openness of plain assertion, being instead “the very movement and action of the argument itself.” His readings, thus, are tracings—as he follows the shape of things that might initially seem incidental, from the “choice of form” and the “order of presentation,” to a “peculiar mode of opening and reopening its sundry themes,” and even “irregularities and idiosyncrasies.”

ALTHOUGH LERNER DOESN'T MENTION it, the title of his very short introductory chapter, “Looking for the Figure in the Carpet,” is, I assume, beholden to the wonderful short story “The Figure in the Carpet” by Henry James, who understood a great deal about authorial intention and the pitfalls of interpretation. A character in the story, a novelist, Hugh Vereker (*vērē* is Latin for “truly”), complains of his reviewers, who are all “little demons of subtlety,” that they miss his point (and this whether patting him on the back or kicking him in the shins). Unburdening himself to the reviewer for a literary journal called (perfectly) *The Middle*, Vereker reveals that his works contain a general inten-

tion, unglimped despite its palpable presence. The fascinated critic asks: “Is it a kind of esoteric message?” to which the crestfallen author replies: “Ah my dear fellow, it can't be described in cheap journalese!” Begging for a clue to guide his new research agenda, the critic is told:

My whole lucid effort gives him the clue—every page and line and letter. The thing's as concrete there as a bird in a cage, a bait on a hook, a piece of cheese in a mouse-trap. It's stuck into every volume as your foot is stuck into your shoe. It governs every line, it chooses every word, it dots every i, it places every comma.

One couldn't ask for a better description of “logographic necessity”—a term that Lerner does employ, just as he skirts the term “esoteric.” James's critic, uncomprehending, tries to bring to bear the categories of literary analysis: “Is it something in the style or something in the thought? An element of form or an element of feeling?” The author rejects the hermeneutic distinctions: “Well, you've got a heart in your body. Is that an element of form or an element of feeling? What I contend that nobody has ever mentioned in my work is the organ of life.” This Jamesian exchange echoes the passage from Leo

Strauss that Lerner places as the epigraph to *Naïve Readings*:

There is no surer protection against the understanding of anything than taking for granted or otherwise despising the obvious and the surface. The problem inherent in the surface of things, and only in the surface of things, is the heart of things.

While James's narrator fails—humorously (“I not only failed to find his general intention—I found myself missing the subordinate intentions I had formerly found”), then obsessively, and finally pitifully and cruelly (through various twists and turns of love and death)—Lerner does immeasurably better. Problematizing the surface, he helps us to see what James calls “the primal plan, something like a complex figure in a Persian carpet.”

FITTINGLY, THE BENJAMIN FRANKLIN Professor Emeritus at the University of Chicago begins with two chapters on his namesake, exploring Bifocal Ben's “plea for *human* providence” and his strategy for evangelizing future generations in his new gospel of self-improvement. One of the many delights of Lerner's writing is that he moves so adeptly from close analysis of particular passages—like the opening paragraph of Franklin's *Autobiography* or its many references to religious belief—to larger insights about an author's full ensemble. *Naïve Readings* contains quite short pieces, most of them under 20 pages, but they are clearly distillations of long, long experience with each of these authors. Lerner may be engaged in naïve reading, but he is no naïf.

Interestingly, one of the first vignettes from Franklin that Lerner selects as illustrative shows an adolescent Franklin learning about the “dunce head” kind of naïveté, as the Philadelphia apprentice observes the out-of-town father of a local printer (the Bradfords, *père et fils*) trick a rival printer (Keimer) into revealing trade secrets simply by addressing him, falsely, as “Neighbor.” Keimer is “a congenital believer”—a disposition toward the world that “leaves this naïf naked and exposed” to the machinations of “a crafty old Sophister.” Lerner's version of naïve reading is not similarly gullible; it interrogates the surface presentation, resulting in a dialectical conversation between “attentive reader and artful author.”

Thus, Lerner demonstrates that the much-reprinted extract from Franklin, often titled “The Way to Wealth,” can't be understood without taking account of its complex-frame: the admonitory speech of Father Abraham,

based on the proverbs of Poor Richard and delivered to an unregenerately profligate crowd, as related by the fame-seeking almanac-maker Richard Saunders, himself (like Father Abraham and dozens of other personae) the creation of Franklin. “The Way to Wealth” may be “the first American book on personal finance” (as the website Goodreads claims), but none other is so satirically distanced, so aware of the internal obstacles to real reform. Sermons against this-worldly fecklessness are about as persuasive as sermons against other-worldly fecklessness (a.k.a., sin). And while Father Abraham delivers a sermon, Uncle Ben never does. It's not that he doubts the salutary consequences of “early to bed, early to rise...” or any other of his wonderful apothegms but that he seeks richer, more successful modes of communication. Franklin is the inventor of a voice (really a cornucopia of voices) better able to entertain and educate a people in their independence.

PART I OF NAÏVE READINGS, DESIGNATED “American Originals,” is rounded out by two chapters—one on Thomas Jefferson, one on Abraham Lincoln—that continue the theme of the formative, originating role of democratic persuasion. The Jefferson chapter explores the rhetorical trajectory and purpose of Jefferson's “A Summary View of the Rights of British America” (1774). While Franklin tells stories that reorient the occupations and habits of Americans, Jefferson tells a story “of the origins and characteristics of those who first transplanted themselves to America,” with the aim of generating a new American self-consciousness. Jefferson's discourse

invokes the existence of the very audience it means to address. Before there can be a nation there must be a people. In this case that people must be roused to a sense of their special being, distinctiveness, and self-respect. That arousal is already in itself a revolutionary act. It is the first step they must take toward positioning themselves to assume a separate and equal station among the powers of the earth.

We might say, with respect to these particular writings at least, that Jefferson acts as Romulus to Franklin's Numa Pompilius.

Where then does Lincoln fit in the triumvirate of “American Originals?” Lerner's essay argues for an affirmative answer to an unusual question: can a private citizen exhibit statesmanship? Throughout the 1850s, while he was out of office, Lincoln very self-consciously endeavored to shape public sen-

timent, not only strengthening the anti-slavery convictions of his audiences, but setting those convictions in a political (and prudential) frame. Lincoln frequently speaks to the public about the nature of public sentiment, the public mind, and public opinion. The best-known instance, quoted by Lerner, is from the Lincoln-Douglas debates:

In this and like communities, public sentiment is everything. With public sentiment, nothing can fail; without it, nothing can succeed. Consequently he who moulds public sentiment goes deeper than he who enacts statues or pronounces decisions. He makes statues and decisions possible or impossible to be executed.

This passage certainly explains how the highest statesmanship (and the most dangerous demagoguery, as well) could indeed issue from a non-officeholder, an “outsider.” Lerner considers this “nurturing of an opinion about the signal importance of opinion” to be one of Lincoln's greatest accomplishments. In making citizens aware of the phenomenon of public sentiment and its “moulding,” he guides them to assume more responsibility for their own formation, and especially to be aware of the threat of mis-formation (emanating from those who would undertake “an insidious debauching of the public mind”). As far back as the Lyceum Address in 1838, Lincoln's statesmanship had been directed toward raising the “general intelligence” of the American electorate. In the 1850s, that project assumed its ultimate focus: “making ordinary Americans understand that the founders' ‘central idea’ was indeed central to national identity.”

BY THE END OF PART I, THE MEANING of Lerner's subtitle, “Reveries Political and Philosophic,” starts to dawn on the reader. The volume explores various sunrise signals to “get woke” (as today's slang puts it). Whereas the buglers of Part 1 summon Americans to their matutinal tasks, the buglers of Part 2 (Francis Bacon, Edward Gibbon, and Alexis de Tocqueville) call to different audiences and employ different registers. Although the new pitch might seem to move from the political to the philosophic, that distinction is too sharp, or maybe too flat. In any case, the most obvious candidate for the title of philosopher in Lerner's pantheon of authors, Bacon, is shown to be rather more fixed on Command (over nature and men) than Truth. Examining minutely two of 18 late additions to *The Essayes or Counsels, Civil and Morall*, Lerner shows how the opening and closing essays (“Of Truth” and “Of Vicis-

situde of Things”) serve as “pillars or portals” to the work and how they frame and answer the question of the choiceworthiness of the life of contemplation as compared to the life of action. Bacon steps through his portals as a new sort of philosophic “founder-legislator.”

GIBBON AND TOCQUEVILLE, ALSO, ALTHOUGH referred to as “philosophic historians,” are shown to have awakening (or enlightening) political intentions. Lerner follows the scattered references to that singular people, the Jews, as they pop up in Gibbon’s *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. During the 18th century, “the evocation of ‘Jews’ or ‘Judaism’ offered a trope at once versatile and flexible, rich with connotations, and ready for use in tarring others by insinuation”—those “others” being Christians who manifest a similar “spirit of intolerant exclusivity.” Although this form of displaced criticism was common, Gibbon’s version differed from that conducted by zealously anti-Christian and virulently anti-Jewish *philosophes* like Pierre Bayle and Voltaire. Lerner presents a Montesquieuan Gibbon who made “prodigious efforts in leading his readers to recognize and reject immoderation and hatred in all their guises,” including, it seems, hyper-progressive ones. Nonetheless, Lerner expresses a reservation about Gibbon’s easy resort to Jewish tropes (“characterizations and images that had been used to stigmatize Jews and Judaism through the ages”), even when those stereotypes are turned to humane and tolerant purposes. Accordingly, he declines to award Gibbon (or his fellow moderate Edmund Burke, whom Lerner also examines) the highest accolade. That distinction goes, in the chapter’s final paragraph, to their American contemporary George Washington, “a public man with no pretensions to philosophy—who had the vision and fortitude to declare openly an enlarged and liberal policy that he commended to the rest of mankind as deserving of imitation.” Lerner quotes from Washington’s letter to the Hebrew Congregation in Newport, Rhode Island:

It is now no more that toleration is spoken of, as if it was by the indulgence of one class of people, that another enjoyed the exercise of their inherent natural rights. For happily the Government of the United States, which gives to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance requires only that they who live under its protection should demean themselves as good citizens, in

giving it on all occasions their effectual support.

Lerner concludes: “Men of greater learning and sophistication in Europe had yet to stretch themselves to reach that level.”

EDMUND BURKE IS A KIND OF BRIDGE between the Gibbon and Tocqueville chapters, since he shares Gibbon’s “Jewish Problem,” and is a “brooding presence” in the first volume of Tocqueville’s *Ancien Régime and the Revolution*. Lerner again pursues a highly specific question: what “political or rhetorical necessity” led Tocqueville to use Burke as a “foil,” as if “he and Burke are engaged in a kind of winner-takes-all contest” as analysts of the French Revolution? His answer leads to important insights into the respective situational “urgencies” of Burke and Tocqueville and the resulting differences in their judgment about the sort of public sentiment necessary to sustain the political liberty of their compatriots. Their common quest for “a useable past” leads Lerner to the larger question of how readers should regard this “admixture of edifying intent” which turns an unvarnished historical account into a re-varnished political account, for which Lerner employs the medieval term *kalām*. Fittingly, the title of Part 2 is “Stories to Live By.”

Although some of the essays included in this volume have been previously published, the collection is no jumble; it has a warp and woof of its own. For instance, there is a striking parallelism between the respective sequences of Parts 1 and 2. Bacon’s project for mastery is surely connected to Franklin’s own “bold and arduous Project.” In telling his “memorable tale...of one man’s radical self-assertion,” Franklin is perhaps one of Bacon’s “like-minded managers and promoters.” Then we have the “history as story” tag-teams of Jefferson-Gibbon and Lincoln-Tocqueville. Gibbon’s use of the early Jews to correct Christian zealotry is not unlike Jefferson’s use of the early Saxons to attack British tyranny. Tocqueville constructs his retrospective study of the French Revolution in order to revive and redirect the dangerously diminished French spirit just as Lincoln resurrects the meaning of the American Revolution in order to meet the crisis dividing the people of his nation.

Part 3 beckons. but unfortunately, as Lerner’s treatments get longer, my summaries must get shorter. The final section, “In Aid of Lost Souls,” contains only two chapters, taking us back to the 12th century for guidance

from Judah Halevi and Moses Maimonides. These Jews are not the “tropes” of Gibbon or the fellow citizens of George Washington, but the greatest of Jewish sages pursuing the deepest matters of faith and reason. Despite having studied both authors with Professor Lerner at the University of Chicago, I remain a perplexed pupil, tremendously grateful for another round of his teacherly patience. Lerner approaches Halevi’s *Kuzari*, which he characterizes as a “protean” and “sprawling” maze, through its dialogic form. Reading it as one would a Platonic dialogue—attentive to argument and action, tensions and characters—Lerner wends his way, or Halevi’s way, through the nature of the divine, what can be known of the life pleasing to God, and the opinions of the philosophers. Throughout *Naïve Readings*, religion has been a visible thread, but now the question of God’s providence (and its relation to man’s providence) comes into view as the central and most ornate medallion of the carpet.

SIMILARLY, WITH THE GUIDE OF THE *Perplexed*, Lerner escorts us into and through Maimonides’s “perfected whole”: the “product of his vast ambition to transmit his coherent understanding of matters human and divine.” Maimonides explodes popular conceptions of God’s corporeality. Those idolatrous misconceptions have been at least partially encouraged by the Bible’s figurative language—language that Maimonides explains as a necessary but risky rhetorical concession to the limits of ordinary human understanding. At least for those few who can pursue rigorous clarity of thought, Maimonides intimates the compatibility of Scripture, now properly understood, with essentially Aristotelian physics, metaphysics, and political science. The gulf between Jerusalem and Athens closes.

Lerner has chosen his own figurative language (and cover art featuring two bugles) very carefully. The bugle is an instrument that plays only pure notes—notes that belong to a harmonic series. Lerner ends his final chapter at his highest harmonic pitch: “The philosophers, ancient and modern, have made this clear; and the prophets too have said as much: the true human perfection consists in the acquisition of the rational virtues.” At 90 years of age, Ralph Lerner is still wide awake; his stirring reveilles call us to join him in an active regimen of concentrated reading, thinking, and writing.

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