

# Snakes and Ladders

by Alan Jacobs

Assignment: Commentary and Anthology

*Just in case anyone is interested, here's a draft of something I'll be handing out to my students in a couple of weeks.*

In most of your courses in the humanities, you're asked to write papers — probably thesis papers, in which you make an argument that you support with evidence from the text under consideration and from critical or contextual studies. It's a reasonable task to ask students to perform; Lord knows I have asked it of enough students in my thirty-plus years of teaching. But it's not the *only* appropriate assignment, and it has certain shortcomings.

Chief among those, I think, is its tendency to encourage people to get through the task of reading as quickly as possible in order to get on to the really important job of articulating and defending your own position. But reading is a task that deserves more care — especially when the texts involved are challenging, difficult, and major.

In a brilliant and important book, *Religious Reading*, Paul Griffiths demonstrates that in most of the great religious traditions — Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, Judaism, Christianity — there are **genres** of reading, that is, kinds of texts in which one records one's reading. The two major genres, according to Griffiths, are **commentary** and **anthology**. To people trained in the habits of mind associated with the thesis paper, these genres seem passive and deferential — especially when applied to non-religious texts. But those genres are not passive at all, and insofar as they are deferential that deference may be quite appropriate. After all, many non-religious texts, especially when they arise in cultures distant from us in time or space or both, pose great difficulties for the reader. Allusions will escape us, social and cultural contexts will be unknown to us, subtleties of argument or exposition or characterization or poetic language will leave us scratching our heads. To seek to identify and then resolve those difficulties — these are highly demanding intellectual tasks, and will not allow passivity, though, as they reveal the complexities that animate really significant works, they may promote deference.

In our class, we will be using a wonderful tool called CommentPress to create an online anthology of writings and to comment on those writings. You will not write papers in this class; instead, you will help to create the anthology, and you will comment on texts you bring to our attention and on the texts others bring. By the end of the term, we will have created a body of annotated readings that, taken as a whole, will significantly illuminate our subject.

So each week, you will do each of the following:

- Post one passage from one of our assigned texts (either copying and pasting from an online public-domain text, or typing in a passage from one of your books);
- Make a comment that offers some helpful contextual information about the passage (something about the text's author, or the historical moment of its composition, or the culture within which it was produced, or a work that it echoes or responds to), preferably with a link to your source;
- Make a longer comment (perhaps 150-250 words or so) that offers an interpretation of a particular passage in the text, probably drawing on existing scholarly work;
- Respond to someone else's comment by disagreeing with it, amplifying and extending it, or providing further relevant information.

You should be aware right from the beginning that this assignment will require you to form somewhat different work habits than you are used to. Many of you are habituated to an academic model in which you *read* regularly but *write* infrequently, and probably in intense bursts of activity. In this class reading and writing will be more closely joined to one another, and you will write almost as regularly as you read, and in smaller chunks than essay assignments normally require.

You will also need to familiarize yourself with the CommentPress software, including the proper ways to format text and insert links. Don't worry: I'll show you in class how it's done, and will be happy to answer questions later.

So this will be different than you're used to. But different is good. Or at least, it *can* be!

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