

CROSSROADS

An interdisciplinary journal for the study
of history, philosophy, religion and classics

SPECIAL ISSUE – LUIZ COSTA LIMA REJOINDER

VOLUME IV ISSUE II 2010

ISSN: 1833-878X

Pages 69-76

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*The Consecration and Problem of the Individual and Self, and Freedom through
'Spiritual Law'*

ABSTRACT

Luiz Costa Lima, in his study of Montaigne, Kant, Schlegel and Kafka, hopes to find 'a less imperial, less imposing idea of truth, one that is historically and culturally mutable, and that is powerless to control 'nontrue' discourses.' This paper seeks to take Costa Lima's writing of the 'oscillating' Law of Montaigne in a slightly different direction by offering an alternative conception of the religious Law that Montaigne did not foresee. This study focuses on Montaigne's consecration of the individual through the literature of the autobiographical essay, on the cost of the Law's destruction (in particular, that of Western Christendom), and then Kafka's struggle of the self after two centuries. It then seeks a new 'Middle Ground' within the literary interplay between the consecration of the individual, the destruction of the old Law, and the spiritual autobiography and religious-ethical-aesthetic language of Thomas Merton. Under this conception of Law and language, both imagination and knowledge find the greatest fulfilment and freedom. The paper therefore seeks a heuristic answer in addressing Costa Lima's ideas within the framework of Montaigne and the literary individual's freedom through spiritual law.

BIOGRAPHY

Raymond Lam is commencing his Honours year in Studies in Religion under Rev. Dr. Neil Pembroke. His primary interest is in the moral and contemplative dimensions

within Shantideva, a celebrated Buddhist monastic of the 11th Century, and Thomas Merton, a Catholic monk of similar standing and renown, and an inter-religious dialogue between their moral and experiential pathways. His other interests include Mahayana Buddhist ethics and the philosophy of religion.

THE CONSECRATION AND PROBLEM OF THE INDIVIDUAL AND SELF, AND FREEDOM THROUGH ‘SPIRITUAL LAW’

INTRODUCTION

Montaigne’s conception of particular individualism begins with every person’s *originality*, and is intended to find modes of expression that ensure that the particular is not overlooked.ⁱ Luiz Costa Lima postulates that the primacy of the individual brings the issue of Law – defined as the ‘principle of regulation’ by Kant and Schlegel – to the foreground. This is the so-called consecration of the individual that comes after the collapse of the Christian order, or the destruction of the old Law. However, this alone is not sufficient for the adoption of a new Law.ⁱⁱ The *Essays* are fundamentally subversive because it undermines a centuries-old order established by Western Christendom since the Middle Ages. What we are left with in the wake of this subversiveness is not completely certain: as a consequence of the questioning nature of the *Essays* Montaigne was left with no choice but to lapse back into the custom of his day; in other words, he failed to find a new Law to replace its collapsing counterpart and hence was forced to return to the latter. His inability to rely on a Law based on the individual’s centrality was a consequence of the *Essays*’ subversive power, and is a major reason for Costa Lima’s inquiry into the relationship between the consecration of the individual, the pressure for a concept of Law, and the rise of literature as an autonomous discursive mode. What is even more uncertain is where this leaves the religious ‘Law’ that Montaigne challenged.

This discussion paper is heuristic and exploratory in its objective. It seeks to take Costa Lima’s writing of the ‘oscillating’ Law of Montaigne in a slightly different direction by offering an alternative conception of the religious Law that is different to Montaigne’s understanding. Under this conception of Law, both imagination and knowledge find the greatest fulfilment and freedom. Franz Kafka’s approach is slightly different: as elucidated by Costa Lima himself, Kafka objectifies his literature by shifting planes: ‘what had been complimentary to the individual only – that is, a specific idiosyncrasy of his – is made the correlate of a social threat, the threat that the (social, moral) Law will reveal its own insubstantiality, the fact that its stability no longer holds.’ⁱⁱⁱ Already, different ‘angles’ have been revealed via Montaigne’s scrutiny of Western Christendom (which is particularly important), Kant’s development of regulating Law, and Kafka’s literature. I approach it differently by highlighting the insufficiency of the ‘consecrated individual’ itself (at least in its more radical forms) whilst avoiding the trappings of the religious (specifically medieval Christian) order that Montaigne subverted.

My interest is therefore the idea that the abandonment of radical individual consecration (as postulated by Costa Lima in regards to Montaigne) leads to an authentic, personal, universal freedom: a questioning, curious freedom that Montaigne was uncertain of in the face of losing this radical individual consecration. Accordingly, this discussion paper is split into three primary parts: the question of the ‘individual’ and scepticism in Montaigne’s literature, the question left behind by Kafka, and the idea of the spiritual road that these two writers unwittingly reveal in their literature. Our objective is aligned with Costa Lima’s ultimate hope: to find ‘a less imperial, less imposing idea of truth, one that is historically and culturally mutable, and that is powerless to control ‘nontrue’ discourses.’^{iv}

PART I: INDIVIDUAL CONSECRATION IN MONTAIGNE

In the conclusion of *The Limits of Voice*, Costa Lima writes that the only certain thing is that the consecration of the individual lost its grounding a long time ago.^v This is ‘backtracking’ in a sense because the introduction of the self was a new theme to begin with in the *Essays*: it is consecrated in the *Essays* ‘by means of a violent torsion: instead of harbouring conquering enthusiasm, the heart describes its own tortuous maze, an abyss too dark to be lit by Christian revelation.’^{vi} At the same time, there is a distrust of objective reason running through Montaigne’s work due to what he sees as *excessive trust in reason* in his historical situation and context. By bringing the ‘miracle and monstrosity’^{vii} of the self into the picture, Montaigne challenges the legitimacy of ‘specialists’: theologians, philosophers, or men of knowledge and men of God. This is because the common ground between miracles and monsters is that both give lie to the established order. ‘If we give the names of monster and miracle to everything our reason cannot comprehend, how many are continually presented before our eyes? ... it is custom rather than knowledge that takes away their strangeness.’^{viii}

Montaigne deplores the excessive trust that we place in the ability of philosophers and theologians, because the two kinds of phenomena in this world (the expectable normal and the monstrous and miraculous) are explained

by lowly custom, not by philosophical or theological reason. It is far too easy to play modern scientific endeavour against the church hierarchy, especially when the former is still in its infancy. Medicinal research is invalidated by the Church's claims of divine omniscience; hence there is no need to relax on one's contempt for either. These examples are what deny the philosopher and theologian legitimate claim to pure, noble reason.

While the subversive Montaigne places reason on trial through the monster, Costa Lima points out one thing that he is unable to do: to have the individual leave behind *all* footholds.

Montaigne had to have a foothold on some constant term. This can be named and diversified on various planes: the divine order, the universal order of nature, the habits and customs of one's time and place. Each of these limits behaviour in some way. If Montaigne does not intend to investigate them, if he justifies his lack of interest either by pointing to the futility of reason or by stressing the singularity of his own self, this singularity cannot be believable unless one resorts to some sort of constancy. That is, although they are not explored by reflection, those orders point to a Law.^{ix}

It is also apparent that Costa Lima sees Montaigne's subversion as merely paving the way for a new, rising Law: 'Montaigne's heteroclitite order – that is, an order that was animated by a principle, the individual subject, which pointed to a world view that dispensed with it – was by definition provisional.' His individual would soon become Cogito itself, Man rather than 'a man,' an object that understood itself to be worthy of philosophical and scientific investigation.^x For this motive, the 'trial of reason' was to be indefinitely and ironically suspended onwards from the Enlightenment. Therefore Montaigne can only follow one path in the end: that of chance: the chances that he had to read, hear, see, and experience (in particular).

But the consecration of the individual is not limited to a 'philosophy' alone. The essay itself challenges the Law through its ambiguity as a literary medium. Consider Georg Lukács. His ideas on the essay form intimately correspond with Montaigne's: that the essay is not in the service of the literary or artistic work, rather, its true vocation is criticism: 'The essay may either be an antisystematic discussion of ideas or, in its constant antisystematicity, keep close to the writing subject's life.'^{xi} It is a dual vocation: self-portrayal and criticism, which is what renders the essay such a formidable object for the subject.

Montaigne's scepticism, therefore, helps set the scene for pulling the Law into the light and roughly shaking it into self-awareness and self-critique, just as he does with his self in the *Essays*. Costa Lima writes that due to its forcefulness of questioning, the essay's affinity with criticism renders it the closest form to the literary experience, although it is not identified with it.^{xii} The unerringness of its answers is a secondary concern, perhaps even irrelevant when compared to this asset: this relentless questioning that fundamentally marks the presence of the self. The primacy of this individual, as already mentioned, places the issue of the Law in question, not merely through the various and diverse means of the essayist (which would warrant many more discussion papers in themselves) but 'precisely because the author assumed that the self's actions gained a meaning only as a function of a stabilizing medium.'^{xiii} He had done one of two things: either denied a priori that a medium within himself could be found, or the failure of the inner voice of the Law demonstrated that one had no choice but to find the medium elsewhere (which is why custom is so important in Montaigne).

The individual is recovered, but the Law now stumbles and falters. This is the first stage that Costa Lima highlights. Montaigne himself, as Costa Lima observed, did not provide any real solution to the yawning hole he tore through the old Law. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, through his example of the stolen ribbon in the *Confessions*,^{xiv} offered a different solution: the Law is discovered in the individual's heart. Literature may be the expression of the self, of the individual, searching entity, but the essay can paradoxically be the vessel, or that special expression of the Law that has come through the author's own individual efforts. There are many interpretations as to how laws can continue to be spoken of.

It is to the question of the Law and its 're-establishment' that this discussion paper now turns. The next segment of this paper addresses the second 'phase' of the issue brought forth by Costa Lima through Kafka, and how a possible answer emerges from an unlikely combination of literature: autobiography, fictionality (or the necessary fiction) and an explicitly spiritual agenda that claims to free the self by unshackling it from how it has been conventionally understood in literature.

PART II: LAW AND DISCOURSE

We now turn to the basic 'rule of regulation': which is best suited to provide foundation and meaning for the individual life, if the consecration of the individual dispenses with the increasingly weakened Law of the past. A

troubling concern that is relevant to philosophical and spiritual ‘law’ was: how can the philosopher speak of moral law if it is already established, in Montaigne and in the Costa Lima volumes, that *phenomena are not valid for the field of morals* (taking into consideration the fact that Montaigne places so much emphasis on phenomena ‘as is observed in the *Essays*’)? In other words, law itself is almost misleading in its own hidden field of language and implication. In Costa Lima’s words:

The universality claimed by moral law assumes an operation radically different from that claimed by scientific law. The latter homogenizes a result because the intuitions of sensibility and the categories with which the understanding operates find the proof of their objectivity in experience, whereas through practical reason man represents only what ought to exist. . . . It may then be said that moral law amounts to a necessary fiction. The fact that moral law is the product of the internalization of freedom as a duty had seemed to Kant sufficient to protect it against the instability brought about by fictions. What obsesses Kafka, in contrast, is the instability, the lack of a basis in something demonstrable that might translate into a precept of the moral law.^{xv}

Aside from the inadequacy of the old Law highlighted already by Montaigne, as alluded to since the beginning of the paper, Costa Lima places great importance on Kafka due to fictionality’s power to undermine the Law. In fact, Kafka essentially begins a new page in the book, ‘what it is the end of’ despite having placed us in a situation similar to Montaigne’s, and even then the validity of the comparison is not certain.^{xvi} A brief discussion on this power of fictionality is required before moving on to the reasons why a spiritual law must dispense with Kafka in order to answer Montaigne.

The fundamental dichotomy between Rousseau and Kafka is that whilst the former believes that words purify, reveal and lay bare the heart, the latter believe that words are such that they refer to waste matter heavier than themselves. Kafka positions himself against the Christian tradition, hence the old religious law of regulation, by denying the Augustinian assertion that the confessing soul moves closer to the divine source and through spoken words, achieves absolution.^{xvii} No such liberation is possible for Kafka. In *The Trial* and other works (but in *The Trial* especially), he assumes that the Law’s limits are undetermined and enigmatic. He is not concerned about whether there is a ‘solid, homogenizing core the ‘contemplation’ of which would lead to the correct interpretation of phenomena,’ but rather denies its accessibility to the traveller.

‘Know thyself’ [*Erkenne dich selbst*] does not mean ‘Observe thyself.’ ‘Observe thyself is what the Serpent says. It means: ‘Make yourself master of your actions.’ But you are so already, you are the master of your actions. So that saying means: ‘Misjudge yourself! [*Verkenne dich*] Destroy yourself!’ Which is something evil – and only if one bends down very far indeed does one also hear the good in it, which is: ‘In order to make of yourself what you are [*um dich zu dem zu machem, der su bist*].’^{xviii}

From this passage alone it is obvious that Kafka is starkly opposed to Rousseau and to an extent, more extreme than Montaigne. As he writes so explicitly:

There is no such thing as observation of the inner world, as there is of the outer world... The inner world can only be experienced, not described. – Psychology is the description of the reflection of the terrestrial world in the heavenly plane.^{xix}

There is no access to the inner world. One cannot express inner experiences descriptively because there is no direct expression of life. There is always the *mediation* of the manner in which the one who lives can express to herself and to others, her life. The *belief* in the so-called *self*, then, inevitably renders one a ‘bad actor’ who evokes her testimony so often she ends up convincing herself that she must be believed.^{xx} The consecration of the individual has been answered thus after two centuries – and it is not entirely satisfactory. So yet another empty hole is left behind by Kafka, a hole similar to the one Montaigne attempted to mend but did not entirely succeed in doing. But it is here where new pathways to the question if the individual and the Law can be opened.

PART III: THE PATH LESS TRAVELLED

An interesting point, perhaps unwittingly, is brought up by Costa Lima in Chapter Three of *The Dark Side of Reason*, “The Joys and Sorrows of the Self.” He mentions Thomas Merton’s autobiography as a passing illustration of the ‘single, determined purpose behind the impulse to tell the story of one’s life,’ but at the same time, his description of Merton’s self-imposed task is to find freedom (a markedly spiritual freedom) from the contradictory impulses of that sworn enemy of all religious faiths: *the false and inauthentic self*. In Costa Lima’s own words: ‘His [Merton] object is to depict himself as a young and ambitious student, perplexed by the

crossroads and contradictory impulses that will place him on a quite unexpected road: that of freedom through ascetic monasticism.^{xxi} Here, we see a distinct heuristic objective in the expression of the self: no longer is literature concerned merely with entertaining the reader or communicating the self. There is a palpable spiritual objective, one that – to the surprise of many – purports to offer greater freedom for the individual by radically shifting the orthodox essayist’s perspective to a position where most autobiographers would not even recognize ‘it’ as the ‘self!’ The Law, essentially, becomes a law of the spirit rather than of the institution, of God rather than of society’s already-present truths. This is, at its most basic, the intention of the *hermitage*,^{xxii} which for Merton must be detached from any Law that subordinates anyone to anything except for *spiritual freedom* – the true freedom worth ‘serving.’ And more importantly, to enter into a hermitage must be an active choice. A human is not born into one, nor is it an institution of the world. Unlike the Law that one has no choice but to remain in due to one’s social heritage and subordination, the hermitage is a different way of being: one that, through obeying the laws of God, frees one from the laws that even a questioning man like Montaigne struggled with.

We do, in fact, owe much to Costa Lima’s notable recognition of Montaigne’s preoccupation with religion and religious discourse. Traditionally, it has been held that it is indeed possible to speak of God meaningfully in essentially all contexts.^{xxiii} What is required, however, is not the recovery of meaningful language about God, but the individual’s ability to write and teach of God meaningfully. Much of what we call ‘religious language’ oriented toward the divine is in fact not based on speculation *per se*; but on experiences common to all humanity. This is through the ‘literalness’ and ‘symbolism’ that can both be seen in Montaigne as well as Kafka’s ethics and aesthetics.

In *The Blue Octavo Notebooks*, Kafka postulates (through implication), in a time of spiritual and religious search, that one should not accept clichés.^{xxiv} One cannot confuse the classical advice with the commonplace observation of oneself. For Costa Lima, this prohibition does not derive from aesthetics, but rather from ethics, because the principle of operation of the ethical presupposes activation of the method proper to the latter. Another point to note is that Kafka did not enjoy strong links with religious Judaism and the Talmud. But is the following case not a matter of ethical certainty grounded in an aesthetic approach (although it is not entirely so or else it would be reduced to the level of common literature)? Consider the renowned theologian Paul Tillich, who was famous for asserting that talk of God is symbolic, or to speak of God is to enter the realm of symbols.^{xxv} It has become common in modern philosophy to identify statements like ‘Yahweh spoke to the prophets’ or ‘The Lord is my Shepherd’ as symbolic. But a legitimate question arises: why do such statements, if meaningless or incoherent unless seen through the lens of symbolism, still seem to provide the ‘fictional’ basis for something that is stating an actual ‘ethical truth’ of something about the world or the cosmos?

In other words, there is a Middle Ground in between the aesthetic of literature, how it tears Kafka’s self apart, and how the spiritual law regulated the interpretation of phenomena in Montaigne’s day. This ground is the law of spoken language, a fine line between Augustinian confessionals and Kafka’s ‘despising’ of words, and consists of the religious-ethical-aesthetic statements that characterize the credos and ‘statements’ of living faiths which are in themselves statements of reality, phenomena and ethics – in other words, *everything*. Montaigne entertained little patience for the convoluted ‘science’ of philosophers and theologians, and hence a simpler ‘world’ is required to step into. The statements must be grounded on the ontological insistence of justice itself, of compassion, and the other saintly virtues. This spiritual perspective provides not only these virtues but also the stabilization of the cosmos that Kafka affected through the desubstantialization of the Law.^{xxvi} We must keep in mind that while Merton remained very much in touch with the world and its laws as a writer, as a *monk* of the hermitage, his entire life was centred towards *something else*: something that intentionally turned an individual *away* from the norms and social constructs of society. Furthermore, like Montaigne, Merton was writing at a crossroads of the (worldly) Law: but it was not that of the old medieval Christian order and the Enlightenment, but that of Western imperialism and two world wars, and the global reaction against it through social justice and peacemaking. In this sense, Merton was not unfamiliar with glimpsing differences with the horizon overshadowed by the Law that his spiritual descendants, Catholic and non-Catholic alike, attempt to transcend even today.

Seen like this, the confident and calmly serene literature of Merton is able to overcome Montaigne’s hesitation as well as Kafka’s desperation. Through his own religious tradition as well as the general tendency to value words as ‘pointing’ towards the Law (of the spirituality of God) rather than *defining* Law (which was a social, institutional construct Montaigne and Kafka rightly disposed of), Merton is able to tread that line between literary annihilation and regulating creation, an autobiography that hails from the same tradition as Montaigne (Roman Catholic), but no longer questions the individual in the conventional way as Montaigne did. Instead, he

overturns it, *destroying* the self but attaining a spiritual freedom that Montaigne and Kafka could not find after having overcome the Law but not the self.

This is the model for literature that is suggested in this paper. A renewed, spiritual Law of this order differs in many degrees to the radical consecration of the individual and also, implicitly, calls into questions what might be called 'Kafka's literary solution.' Kafka does not 'conclude' the questions and problems posed by Montaigne in any concrete sense; he merely begins a new era, and Costa Lima himself asserts that it is unclear what Kafka heralds. In the previous section of this paper, it was noted that Kafka denied the Augustinian concept of salvation through verbal confession, and hence implicitly denied the concept of salvation through words altogether. In fact, in building common ground between Gnosticism with Kafka's views on literature, Bloom writes that Gnosticism offers a certain form of salvation, whilst Kafkan spirituality offers no such hope.^{xxvii} But extremes do not need to be taken. Through a 'regulation of the regulating principle,' we may yet find a way to 'a less imperial, less imposing idea of truth, one that is historically and culturally mutable, and that is powerless to control 'nontrue' discourses.'^{xxviii}

CONCLUSION

In contrast to Kafka's desperate, palpable, almost manic denial of the regulatory principle in literature, the balanced conception of law that I have outlined is slightly more aligned with the aim to recapture the sacredness of the individual experience, through Montaigne's original exploration of the human self (although the exact approach is slightly different) and an increased receptiveness to Montaigne's understated caution against human hubris. Hubris implies various things, but chief among them is the tendency to unjustifiably exaggerate one's pride and self-confidence. In his *Essays* Montaigne actually provides many checks against this trap, but as Costa Lima writes, 'the assertion of the individual subject in Montaigne is so evident that it has had the effect of leading astray some interpretations of his work.'^{xxix} Part of such misinterpretations, apart from his contextual emphasis on the individual experience, is his scepticism of everything – including his own ability to understand himself and the universe. This is an important point in Montaigne's work, because without this discourse of scepticism, there would stand little reason to write of anything that could contribute something to filling the hole left behind by Montaigne's subversiveness.

Western literature, when intertwined with Western philosophy, has entangled itself in an aggressive bush of deep inner conflict that is inherently built into the established structures that literature otherwise seeks to challenge. It is therefore the task of a new law (channelled through spirituality and not through society or socially constructed truth) to cut away the thorns and entanglements whilst giving the freedom of 'individual expression of literature' that affirms the spiritual 'non-self,' as Thomas Merton achieved so successfully in his own autobiography and other compositions.^{xxx} So, the main thrust of this discussion paper has been quite simple in practical terms: rather than accepting the subordination of the individual to a Law, there is a middle ground which can be walked, and it is one that has been treated successfully by Merton because the law he followed was not that of the 'world' – it was an active choice made by one already familiar with the Law of his post-modern age, uncertain and perplexing as it was. This is the reason for his decision to live his life according to a more meaningful, entirely different and detached spiritual law. Avoiding the other extreme, this paper also suggests that we dispense with the radical consecration of the individual, which by its very nature does not offer any true foundation in replacement of the Law it subverts.

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- ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, 317
- ^{iv} *Ibid.*, 321
- ^v *Ibid.*
- ^{vi} *Ibid.*, 31
- ^{vii} Michel de Montaigne, *The Essays*. W.C. Hazlitt (E.d.) Charles Cotton (trans.) (Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1952) Vol. III, 11.

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- viii Ibid., Vol. I, 26.
- ix Costa Lima, *The Limits of Voice*, 33.
- x Ibid.
- xi Ibid., 89.
- xii Ibid.
- xiii Ibid., 91.
- xiv Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Confessions*. J.M. Cohen (trans.) (England: Harmondsworth, 1953 [1782]), 87.
- xv Costa Lima, *The Limits of Voice*, 301.
- xvi Ibid., 321.
- xvii Ibid., 197.
- xviii Franz Kafka, *The Blue Octavo Notebooks*. (Cambridge, Mass.: Exact Change, 1991), 20-21.
- xix Ibid., 14-15.
- xx Costa Lima, *The Limits of Voice*, 209.
- xxi Luiz Costa Lima, *The Dark Side of Reason: Fictionality and Power*. Paulo Henriques Britto (trans.) (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1992), 66.
- xxii It is important to remember that this may not necessarily be the intention of a religious institution. If it was, then the challenges postulated by Montaigne in his era, and the eventual rise of the new Law that did not emerge until Kant would be rendered nonsensical and incoherent. But for the community of a *hermitage*, this is the fundamental ideal.
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- xxiv Kafka, *The Blue Octavo Notebooks*, 20-21.
- xxv Michael Peterson et al., *Reason and Religious Belief*, 232.
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- xxvii H. Bloom, 'Freud and Beyond,' in *Ruin the Sacred Truths: Poetry and Belief from the Bible to the Present*. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press), 167.
- xxviii Costa Lima, *The Limits of Voice*, 321.
- xxix Ibid., 68.
- xxx See, for example, Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (London: Sheldon Press, 1975).