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# Commantary on Carlos

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# Commentary on Claudia Carlos' "Indirection in Montaigne's 'Des Cannibales' and Emerson's 'Montaigne; or, the Skeptic'"

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Claudia Carlos' illuminating paper occasions some crucial questions about the relationship between style and epistemology, rhetoric and politics, frankness (*licentia*) and indirection. She argues that Montaigne and Emerson practice indirection and *licentia*, and that both thinkers offer rhetorically and political savvy models of discursive intervention. Covert argument, Carlos suggests, impugns certainties—rubbishing colonialism for Montaigne, savaging slavery for Emerson—and allows its practitioners to embrace a heady mix of scepticism, diversion, even modesty [*modestus*], with the latter's suggestive constellation of ethical sensibilities. But Carlos herself practices a mild form of indirection: I shall attempt to broaden and contextualise Carlos' insights by arguing that, if frankness (*licentia, parrhesia*) marks a field, indirection is its master, that *licentia* finds its home in the history of *copia* and amplification, and that redescription (*paradiastole*) is the specific technique employed by both Montaigne and Emerson. My remarks are necessarily brief.

## 2. PRAISING LICENTIA

Emerson celebrates Montaigne's *licentia*: he is "the frankest and honestest of all writers," Emerson argues, and suggests that his "French freedom runs into grossness; but he has anticipated all censure by the bounty of his own confessions." Even with Montaigne's sometimes "superfluous frankness," an "invincible probity" grows in every one of his readers' minds (p. 165). Excessive frankness is checked and calqued by the circumlocution that funds *probitas*, moral decency, integrity. Sheltering both circumlocution and amplification, 'bounty' or *copia* immures the magistrate against censure. This sensibility pleases Emerson, who employs similar strategies in order to occasion various "moods" (p. 175): his interest in Montaigne's rhetorical performance, especially his abundance, also entails the emulation of Montaigne's style (p. 168). But Emerson's purpose is to rejuvenate scepticism as a response to a waning public sphere, to a state run by 'sets of criminals' (p. 185), and to do so with a particular target in mind, as Carlos demonstrates.

The "moods" and "complexions" that spur Emerson are central to Montaigne's concerns. That Montaigne embraces frankness and shuns dissembling is, by now, a

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scholarly commonplace (p. 642; see Starobinski 1985, pp. 4 ff.). But he also wrote, as Carlos suggests, in response to bloody religious conflict. Indirection, the covert, stealth: all these seem the necessary armaments for a rhetor after 1572. How do we then balance Montaigne's—and Emerson's—claims to frankness with the magistrate's indirection? What are the political and ethical valences of indirection and *licentia*? As Carlos implies, the answer might be found in the history of rhetoric.

### 3. BOUNTY

Elsewhere in the *Essays*, Montaigne retails his attention to *licentia*, confession, and *copia*, precisely the concerns on which Emerson trains his eye. Everyone is discreet in confession, Montaigne writes, “people should be so in action.” But boldness in sinning “is somewhat compensated by boldness in confessing” (p. 642). Licence can be compensatory, just as confession mutes one's indiscretions. In fact, amplifying one's sins, retailing tractable, sometimes shameful, experience, does civic duty. “I know well,” Montaigne writes, “that very few people will frown at the licence of my writings who do not have more to frown at in the licence of their thoughts” (pp. 641-642).

God grant that this excessive licence of mine [*cet excez de ma licence*] may encourage our men to attain freedom, rising above these cowardly and hypocritical virtues born of our imperfections; that at the expense of my immoderation I may draw them on to the point of reason. (p. 642)

Exposing hypocrisy means embracing *licentia*, a licence, though, nestled in abundance and circumlocution, in ‘running on carelessly,’ even in error (p. 667). Like licence and indirection, Montaigne's ‘immoderate’ style has an ethical end: larding his work with “vigorous and varied services, [...] stretching and bending it” (p. 665), he is prodigal in order to return his readers to themselves. Indirection might circumvent rule, but abundant, ambulatory frankness embraces, and situates, reason.

Both indirection and *licentia* have epistemological, ethical, and political coefficients: indirection is a sign of scepticism, if not pyrrhonism, a scepticism which subverts shrewd political expediency, which guarantees the confusion of judgments dear to Montaigne in the “Apology,” while certainty, both of knowing and of doing, underwrites *licentia*. But all is not as it appears: the relationship between style and epistemology is frangible. For example, the *Ad herennium* suggests that ‘pungent’ frankness is mitigated by praise, that ‘simulated’ frankness should be adjusted to an audience's capacities (4.37.50); the latter worries Quintilian, who suggests that *licentia* “may frequently be made a cloak for flattery” (9.2.27). Thus Montaigne's fecund mixture of frankness and indirection obliges his readers to investigate the political register of his work, his *ethos*, and the moral horizons of both. At stake in the use of indirection is the relationship between truth-telling and emotion for, if indirection offers palliation, as Carlos forcefully argues, palliation requires pathos (though, of course, pathos is occasioned by a range of figures, both of thought and of speech). Rhetors occasion and redirect passion in a number of ways; both Montaigne and Emerson redescribe.

### 4. REDESCRIPTION

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According to the most popular rhetorical handlist in the sixteenth century, *paradiastole* or redescription is a figure which “palliate[s] our own or another’s faults by some flattering explanation” (Susenbrotus 1953, p. 45). Using this figure, passions or vices deemed excessive or untoward are redescribed as virtues: in Aristotle’s examples, rashness might be called courage, extravagance generosity, and “the passionate and excitable man” frank (*Rhetoric*, 1367b1ff.). As the *Ad herennium* has it, rhetors must strive to show that what their opponents call virtue is actually vice (3.3.6). Most discussions of redescription draw on Aristotle as does, for example, Quintilian’s (3.7.23ff.). Redescription discredits (see Skinner 1996, p.147), and deliberately confuses descriptive with evaluative discourse. Quintilian shelters redescription under amplification (8.4.1), which should not surprise us given our acquaintance with Montaigne. Indeed, in the essay on cannibals, he insists that the learned are prone to amplification, that such a tendency cannot help but “alter history a little,” and that everyone, learned or not, is habituated to describing as barbarous practices not their own (p. 152).

So, too, with Emerson: in his slavery example, one that suggests a reevaluation of the relationship between freedom and value, Emerson redescribes worth (in this case, “muscles and bones”) as a condition not always, or only, associated with the free (p. 152). His point is to contrast ‘materialism’ and ‘abstractionism,’ and to redescribe what he calls “inflamed individualism” (p. 179) as divisive, decrepit. Emerson’s sceptical indirection is nestled in abundance and amplification, too, but his means and ends are rather different from Montaigne’s. Where Montaigne impugns European religious and moral superiority, suggesting that the cannibals did not possess words for “lying, treachery, dissimulation, avarice” (p. 153), Emerson’s sceptic is a “bad citizen,” rejecting both the status quo and popular reform, saying simply “There are doubts” (pp. 172-173).

Since the “march of civilization” is a “train of felonies” (p. 185), the sceptic’s doubts are unresolved by reason of state [*ragione de stato*]. Instead, Emerson wonders about the relationship between “the power of moods, each setting at nought all but its own tissue of facts or beliefs” (p. 175) and a “community of sentiment,” the “remedy” for variable mores, inflamed individualism, even the doubts that are mere “accommodation to the common discourse” of the period (p. 180). Indeed, moral sentiment is the “solution” into which scepticism has been dissolved, leaving the sceptic to try his moods, to “feel the thought that is the parent of the universe; that the masses of nature do undulate and flow” (p. 183). Here, Emerson’s quietism prevails against the “knaves” victorious in every political struggle (p. 185), and his own sentiments suggest the triumph of the “world-spirit” and the “Eternal Cause.” The “bad citizen” has become someone who “helps himself by larger generalizations.” The lesson of life is to generalize, to “resist the usurpation of particulars,” to believe what the centuries say against faith in the hours. We must invest in ways of redescribing civilization as a colloquy of spirit against the lure of mobs, emperors, or “shabby experience” (pp. 185-186).

### 5. CONCLUSION

‘Shabby experience’ requires, then, redescription in order to activate sentiment, to illuminate vice, to kick against knaves and hollow particulars. The confection of covert argument, *licentia*, and *paradiastole* in both Montaigne and Emerson confirms that passion is the heart of palliation: seeing in a different light, changing one’s

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frames, subtly shifting perspectives, funds critique. Jeff Mason has explored ‘techniques of indirection’ in a diverse array of nineteenth- and twentieth-century thinkers. Embodied in various tropes, especially metaphor, indirection changes minds: while philosophers aim at truth, rhetoric inhabits philosophical discourse in order to arouse “the appreciation of a truth” (Mason 1989, 96). ‘Appreciation’ and arousal entail sentiment. If the art of covert argument, as Carlos argues, occurs across the political spectrum, if it is part of the “rhetorical tradition,” then it sits, somewhat uncomfortably, with its cousins: redescription, sentiment, and frankness.

[Link to reply](#)

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