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Claudia Carlos  
*Carnegie Mellon University*

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# Indirection in Montaigne's "Des Cannibales" and Emerson's "Montaigne; or the Skeptic"

CLAUDIA CARLOS

*Department of English  
Carnegie Mellon University  
Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, 15206  
USA  
ccarlos@andrew.cmu.edu*

**ABSTRACT:** The art of "safely" criticizing the powerful through indirect argument was a well-established concept among ancient rhetoricians. It is not difficult to see the usefulness of such indirection in cultures where free speech is limited. What use, however, do these arguments have in a democracy? In exploring an answer to this question, I consider Montaigne's "Des Cannibales" (1595) and Emerson's "Montaigne, or, the Skeptic" (1850).

**KEYWORDS:** Emerson, essays, indirection, Montaigne.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The art of "safely" criticizing the powerful through indirect argument was a well-established concept among ancient rhetoricians. In the *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, for example, the anonymous author describes the figure of "*licentia*" as a device for exercising a right to speak out before those whom we have reason to fear or revere. But, he adds, if this frank speech seems too bitter, "there will be many means of palliation"<sup>1</sup> by which the speaker can soften his remarks. In other authors, most notably Demetrius and Quintilian, we see examples of such palliative strategies in the doctrine of "figured speech."<sup>2</sup> The rationale behind this softened speech is not only that expressing oneself too bluntly might be harmful in some way to the speaker, but that it might also be ineffective because the target of the criticism might cease listening altogether. The recommended techniques of figured speech vary somewhat depending on the author. However, generally we see among the most recommended strategies, the following: 1) using an implied meaning for what cannot be spoken; 2) arguing for one thing but really intending to accomplish something different; 3) arguing for one thing while actually intending to achieve just the opposite; 4) saying to another person what is really meant for the one you're afraid of offending; and 5) when criticizing your audience, including yourself in the object of blame,

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<sup>1</sup> "multis mitigationibus lenietur" (IV.XXXVII.49).

<sup>2</sup> Other well-developed accounts of figured speech (*problemata eschematistena*) occur in the works of Pseudo-Dionysius, Apsines, and Pseudo-Hermogenes.

Carlos, C. (2009). Indirection in Montaigne's "Des Cannibales" and Emerson's "Montaigne; or the Skeptic." In: J. Ritola (Ed.), *Argument Cultures: Proceedings of OSSA 09*, CD-ROM (pp. 1-8), Windsor, ON: OSSA.

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It is not difficult to see the usefulness of these techniques in cultures that limit free speech, such as in imperial Rome or the French monarchy of the sixteenth century. But is there any role for covert arguments to play in a democracy? I want to explore this question today by considering two essays, both examples of indirection but produced under two distinct sets of cultural conditions: Montaigne's "Des Cannibales" (1595) and Emerson's "Montaigne, or, the Skeptic" (1850).

## 2. COVERT ARGUMENT IN MONTAIGNE'S "DES CANNIBALES"

The cultural conditions under which Montaigne wrote the *Essais*, beginning in 1571, were dramatic ones: between 1562 and 1598, France was plagued by a series of civil wars between Catholics, aligned with the monarchy, and Protestants, who largely represented the provincial aristocracy. A few months after the St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre in 1572, Montaigne's own home town of Bordeaux was itself the site of an atrocity committed by the Sainte Ligue against Protestants. While Montaigne publicly professed allegiance to Catholicism and the French monarchy during this period, as François Rigolot has noted, this declaration of support may have been more of a humanist obligation to preserve the French state at a time of crisis than an unreserved endorsement of the Ligue. Given the observations in the *Essais* on intolerance, torture, and the European conquest of the New World, and given that he himself had two brothers who were Protestant, it would be hard to believe that he would have approved of the Ligue's excesses. On the other hand, as David Quint has pointed out, Montaigne hardly appears sympathetic to the Protestant "individualism" that would justify violent uprising on the grounds of religious inspiration (p. x).<sup>3</sup> Yet writing directly about the Wars of Religion—even if only to condemn both sides—would not have allowed his work to win the "privilège royal" (which it did in 1580) and, at the very least, it might have led to his imprisonment.<sup>4</sup>

Recent scholars, such as Quint and before him Géralde Nakam, have insisted that we must read the *Essais* "as a response to the horror of the French civil wars" (Quint xiii). In the case of "Des Cannibales," perhaps the best known of the *Essais*, Quint has argued that

Montaigne's discussion of the cannibals turns out more than casually to refer to his own France and that the terms with which it discusses the Brazilian natives are deeply rooted in his own historical and political preoccupations (p. 77).

Agreeing with this interpretation, I want to focus today on the rhetorical means by which Montaigne conveys these references to France—that is, I want to examine Montaigne's art of covert argument.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Quint also notes that "Montaigne's cannibals, who defy their captors and are cooked and eaten, bear an unsettling resemblance to the religious martyrs of "De l'yvrongnerie" (2.2), who call upon persecutors to roast them in turn" (xii).

<sup>4</sup> In the seventeenth century, Montaigne was in fact placed on the Index. The principal objections against the *Essais* were that their author had 1) used pagan notion of "Fortuna" and Christian "Providence" interchangeably; 2) condemned torture; and 3) praised the work of a Protestant poet, Theodore de Bèze.

<sup>5</sup> It is not farfetched to assume that Montaigne would have been familiar with indirection as a rhetorical strategy, given his intimate knowledge of rhetorical texts in the Latin tradition (especially Quintilian). In

## INDIRECTION IN MONTAIGNE AND EMERSON

So what are the means of covert argumentation in “Des Cannibales”? We see, first of all, a technique of deflection: seeming to argue for one thing but really accomplishing something else. The chapter is called “Des Cannibales” and is seemingly about a Brazilian tribe that eat their prisoners of war. By calling the Brazilians “cannibals,” Montaigne already suggests a likely European judgment about these people: they are “cannibalistic savages.” But we see from the first few sentences of the chapter that this title is at odds with an idea that Montaigne explicitly foregrounds: we must judge other cultures not by what people think but “par la voye de la raison” (p. 208)<sup>6</sup> and that, a few pages later, “chacun appelle barbarie, ce qui n’est pas de son usage” (p. 211)<sup>7</sup>. In fact the subject of “cannibalism” comes up only three times: once in connection with the Brazilians themselves (p. 215), another in connection with the French (p. 216), and again in connection with the Gauls (p. 216). So, despite its title, we discover that the chapter is not about the practices of cannibals, and in fact the very term “cannibals,” with all its connotations of barbarism, is itself called into question. What the chapter is *really* about is Europeans and their attitudes to so-called “barbarous” cultures.

It is through the figure of *emphasis*—another strategy of indirection by which the writer leaves unstated what he wishes to imply—that we infer a more troubling implication about these Europeans. If each person calls “barbaric” any practice that is not part of his customary usage, then this would suggest the possibility that Europeans too—at least from the perspective of those who do not share their customs—may themselves be susceptible to a charge of “barbarism.”

A further strategy of covert argument in Montaigne’s chapter is that of getting his readers to recognize their own weaknesses by describing the faults of a third person. We see this technique at work, for example, when Montaigne mentions Plato’s reference to Solon describing a great island that was once named “Atlantide” (208). This digression from the topic that Montaigne has previously introduced—that of the New World—comes about as Montaigne considers whether the newly discovered American continent might be the lost civilization of Atlantis. From Solon’s description, we learn that the people of Atlantis were great conquerors and were stopped only by the Athenians in their colonial expansion. Yet, both the empire of Atlantis and that of these early Athenians were eventually swallowed up by a great flood; for this reason, there is now no trace of this civilization. Having suggested the possibility of an association between the New World and Atlantis, Montaigne’s digression implies that the present-day European conquerors—including those of his own country—may one day suffer a similar fate to the people of Atlantis and Athens. Thus, it seems that the glory of colonialism and European

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“Considérations sur Cicéron” (I.39), he in fact strongly hints that such a strategy is precisely what is at work in his choice of stories and citations:

Ny elles [“histories”], ny mes allegations, ne servent pas tousjours simplement d’exemple, d’authorité ou d’ornement. Je ne les regarde pas seulement par l’usage, que j’en tire. Elles portent souvent, hors de mon propos, la semence d’une matiere plus riche et plus hardie: et souvent, à gauche, un ton plus delicat, et pour moy, qui n’en veux en ce lieu exprimer d’avantage, et pour ceux qui rencontreront mon air. (255, *Pléiade*)

As Charles Rosen remarked last year in the *NY Review of Books*, this statement amounts to “an open invitation to read between the lines” (48, 2/14/08).

<sup>6</sup> “by the ways of reason” (p. 228 Screech).

<sup>7</sup> “any man calls barbarous anything he is not accustomed to” (p. 231 Screech).

superiority may not be the immutable truths that Montaigne's French readers think they are.

Another example of having the readers recognize their own faults in a third person is when Montaigne describes the Brazilians with respect to their religion. Prior to describing the Brazilian tribe, Montaigne had noted how nations tend to wrongly assume that, because they don't know anything different, they have the "religion parfaite" and the "police parfaite" (p. 211). Already, then, we sense that Montaigne is calling into question his readers' sense of stability with respect to their own religion and government. In an atmosphere where rival religious and political factions are at war precisely because they each believe it is their right to control the country, this questioning carries political consequences. A few pages later, Montaigne describes the religious practices of the "cannibals" as follows:

Ils croyent les ames eternelles ; et celles qui ont bien merit  des dieux, estre log es   l'endroit du ciel o  le Soleil se leve: les maudites, du cost  de l'Occident. Ils on je ne s ay quels Prestres et Prophetes, qui se presentent bien rarement au peuple, ayans leur demeure aux montaignes. A leur arriv e, il se fait une grande feste et assembl e solennelle de plusieurs villages [...] Ce Prophete parle   eux en public, les exhortant   la vertu et   leur devoir: mais toute leur science ethique ne contient que ces deux articles de la resolution   la guerre, et affection   leurs femmes. (p. 214)<sup>8</sup>

This description suggests some significant parallels between the Brazilians and the French. Like the French, the Brazilians believe in an eternal soul and an after-life; they also have preachers who urge them to carry out their ethical duties. But here is where the parallels seem to cease, for the Brazilians have only two duties: 1) to fight wars and 2) to love their wives. In fact, the juxtaposition of violence and love seems incongruous to the Christian and even illogical—unless, however, the readers remember their own aristocratic values of military honor and family.

Another practice of the Brazilians that would likely shock the French readers is the brutality of the former toward soothsayers who err in their predictions. Whenever a prediction turns out to be erroneous, the diviner is immediately labeled a "faux Proph te" (p. 214), and as Montaigne tells us, "il est hach  en mille pieces" (p. 214).<sup>9</sup> From the Brazilians' point of view, Montaigne writes, this is only fitting given that divination is a gift from God, and hence pretending to have this gift is the worst possible offense one could commit: "[...] faut-il pas les punir, de ce qu'ils ne maintiennent l'effect de leur promesse, et de la t m rit  de leur imposture?" (p. 215).<sup>10</sup> Crimes relating to spiritual matters, then, require barbaric punishment. What Montaigne does not say here—but knows that his audience will understand—is that it is by this very reasoning that both the Catholics and the Protestants justify their violence against each another.

When towards the middle of the chapter Montaigne eventually discusses the actual cannibalism of the Brazilians, he leaves no doubt that he wants his readers to

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<sup>8</sup> They believe in the immortality of the soul: souls which deserve well of the gods dwell in the sky where the sun rises; souls which are accursed dwell where it sets. They have some priests and prophets or other, but they rarely appear among the people since they live in the mountains. When they do appear they hold a great festival and a solemn meeting of several villages [...] The prophet then addresses them in public, exhorting them to be virtuous and dutiful, but their entire system of ethics contains only the same two articles: resoluteness in battle and love for their wives. (p. 234 Screech)

<sup>9</sup> "hacked to pieces" (p. 234 Screech).

<sup>10</sup> "should they not be punished for it and for the foolhardiness of their deceit?" (p. 235 Screech).

## INDIRECTION IN MONTAIGNE AND EMERSON

reflect on the conduct of their own countrymen. After describing how the Brazilians kill their prisoners of war and then feast on them, he remarks:

Je pense qu'il y a plus de barbarie à manger un homme vivant, qu'à le manger mort, à deschirer par tourmens et par gehennes, un corps encore plein de sentiment, le faire rostir par le menu, le faire mordre et meurtrir aux chiens, et aux pourceaux (comme nous l'avons non seulement leu, mas veu de fresche memoire, non entre des ennemis anciens, mais entre des voisins et concitoyens, et qui pis est, sous pretexte de pieté et de religion) que de le rostire et manger après qu'il est trespasé (p. 216).<sup>11</sup>

The only difference between us, the French, and them, the “cannibals,” is that we eat people while they are alive and they eat them when they are already dead. This allusion to reported atrocities that occurred on both sides during the civil wars amounts to a thinly veiled accusation against the aristocratic readers. Yet, in extending it, Montaigne is careful to employ another tactic of indirection: using “nous” when he means “vous.” Thus, he criticizes his readers, while including himself in the object of blame: “Je ne suis pas marry que nous remerquons l'horreur barbaresque qu'il y a en une telle action, mais ouy bien de quoy jugeans à point de leurs fautes, nous soyons si aveuglez aux nostres [...]” (p. 216).<sup>12</sup> Similarly he notes that the readers can call the Brazilians barbarous in relation to reason, but not in relation to their own behavior: “[...] nous, qui les surpassons en toute sorte de barbarie” (p. 216).<sup>13</sup>

Who then are the *real* cannibals? Through its techniques of covert argument, the chapter offers its readers an unflattering mirror image of themselves.

### 3. COVERT ARGUMENT IN EMERSON'S “MONTAIGNE; OR THE SKEPTIC”

Montaigne was writing during a time of intense political and religious turbulence within a monarchical regime. It would be tempting to think that the techniques of covert argument he employed would have far less relevance in a society that allows frank and open discussion about issues of public policy. But, as Demetrius observes, “[...] great and powerful democracies often need this type of speech just as much as tyrants” (p. 294), and he goes on to cite as an example the Athenian democracy when it exercised hegemony over all of Greece. In situations like these, Demetrius argues, critics of the government's policies know that “Flattery is shameful, open criticism is dangerous, and the best course lies in the middle, namely innuendo” (p. 294).

To explore this point, I now turn to the greatest American essayist, who perhaps more than any other figure invites comparison with Montaigne. Emerson in fact has more in common with Montaigne than it might seem: he lives in a divided country, and at the time he wrote the essay I am about to examine, that country is only a decade away from

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<sup>11</sup>“I think there is more barbarity in eating a man alive than in eating him dead; more barbarity in lacerating by rack and torture a body still fully able to feel things, in toasting him little by little and having him bruised and bitten by pigs and dogs (as we have not only read about but seen in recent memory, not among enemies in antiquity but among our fellow-citizens and neighbours – and, what is worse, in the name of duty and religion) than in roasting him and eating him after his death” (pp. 235-236 Screech).

<sup>12</sup>“It does not sadden me that we should note the horrible barbarity in a practice such as theirs; what does sadden me is that, while judging correctly of their wrong-doings we should be so blind to our own” (p. 235 Screech).

<sup>13</sup> “ourselves, who surpass them in every kind of barbarism” (p. 236 Screech).

erupting in a civil war over slavery; what, for Montaigne, was a Protestant/Catholic divide, for Emerson, is an Abolitionist/Pro-Slavery divide. Also like Montaigne, Emerson's own engagement is not always easy to pin down. Although he did begin to campaign actively against slavery in 1851 (Bloom, p. 2), as Lawrence Buell points out one could argue uncharitably that,

His receptivity to abolitionism grew in proportion to its growing strength as a movement and to his sense of slavery's impingement on his region, his state of Massachusetts, and on people he knew personally (p. 148).

Buell notes further that in early sermons, Emerson alludes to slavery only briefly and places much more emphasis on denouncing materialism.

Published to popular success just a year before he would openly oppose Daniel Webster's Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, "Montaigne; or the Sceptic" appeared as one of seven essays in *Representative men* (1850). As with the other essays in that volume, it was adapted from a series of lectures on historical figures such as Shakespeare, Napoleon and Plato, which he had given in England in 1847. When Emerson lectured at the Lyceum in Concord (which he frequently did), he understood that the audience expected him to avoid "political partisanship" (Buell, p. 25); stating a political position was simply not something he was used to doing in his lectures. Furthermore, as he learned from his angrily received "Divinity Address" at Harvard in 1838, speaking too frankly could entail serious social and political consequences; in Emerson's case, he was not invited back to speak at his alma mater again for two decades.

In an introduction to William H. Gilman's 1965 edition of Emerson's writings, Charles Johnson notes that Emerson often writes in a "double-edged" manner, so that his remarks can be taken on two levels (p. viii): a remark may be, for example, "a general, timeless declaration" (p. viii) about a universal value, but at the same time, "an historically specific condemnation" (p. ix). What will interest me with respect to this essay is to point out some of these covert "condemnations" and, more importantly, the techniques that Emerson uses to make them.

As we saw with "Des Cannibales," the title of Emerson's essay is deceiving, and so the essay suggests an overall strategy of argument by deflection. We expect the essay to offer an extended biographical portrait of Montaigne, but while Emerson does briefly give such a portrait, it occupies barely a quarter of the whole essay. The essay has three major sections: in the first, Emerson describes the constant tension in humanity between two extreme philosophical positions (abstractionist/materialist) and asserts that the sceptic seeks always to occupy the middleground of these extremes (pp. 690-696); in the second section, Emerson presents Montaigne as the representative example of a sceptic (pp. 697-701); in the third section, Emerson considers whether Montaigne's sceptical position is a wise one for us to adopt (pp. 701-709). It is in this last section that we see the real subject of this essay: the conduct of Emerson himself in the face of societal injustices, such as slavery, and by extension, the conduct of the readers themselves.

Emerson first alludes to this actual theme in the opening paragraph when he describes a series of paradoxes that plague all human beings. Among these paradoxes is that of a successful capitalist: "A man is flushed with success, and bethinks himself what this good luck signifies. He drives his bargain in the streets; but it occurs, that he also is bought and sold" (p. 690). This allusion to slavery reminds the readers—who may likely

## INDIRECTION IN MONTAIGNE AND EMERSON

belong to this successful class of man—of an unpleasant truth: it is only by luck, not by any merit of his own, that he is not a slave. This should trouble him.

Two pages later, Emerson further presses this point through an anecdote that forces the readers to imagine themselves being judged as slaves:

Spence relates, that Mr. Pope was with Sir Godfrey Kneller, one day, when his nephew, a Guinea trader, came in. "Nephew," said Sir Godfrey, "you have the honor of seeing the two greatest men in the world." "I don't know how great men you may be," said the Guinea man, "but I don't like your looks. I have often bought a man much better than both of you, all muscles and bones, for ten guineas." Thus, the men of the senses revenge themselves on the professors, and repay scorn for scorn. (p. 692)

The story conveys a humorous insult from the materialist slave-trader to the abstractionists who assume that their intellect makes them superior to him; in fact, physically they are not worth what the slave is. The reason the story seems comical is that it seems ridiculous to apply the same criteria to men of learning as to slaves. But, given the previous implication that the successful man's freedom is merely "luck" perhaps this idea is not so ridiculous. Emerson suggests, through the voice of a third person, a provocative idea that reminds his readers that under other circumstances they too could be "weighed by the pound" (p. 692).

This provocative role towards conservative customs can only belong to the sceptic. We need scepticism to fight injustices, like slavery. According to Emerson, we rightly prefer those who uphold "a well-ordered society" and "empire" over a "nonconformist" who would "say all manner of unanswerable things against the existing republic" without offering a constructive alternative (p. 701). Nevertheless, Emerson suggests that scepticism offers a reasoned means of calling "custom" into question:

But though we are natural conservers and causationists, and reject a sour, dumpish unbelief, the skeptical class, which Montaigne represents, have reason, and every man, at some time belongs to it (pp. 701-702).

Scepticism is in fact a "natural weapon against the exaggeration and formalism of bigots and blockheads" (p. 702). By implication it should be a model for anyone who wishes to fight slavery and intolerance.

But "the wise sceptic" who heroically doubts in order to voice needed criticism of established beliefs is not by any means equivalent to an upstanding citizen:

The superior mind will find itself equally at odds with the evils of society, and with the projects that are offered to relieve them. The wise skeptic is a bad citizen; no conservative; he sees the selfishness of property, and the drowsiness of institutions. But neither is he fit to work with any democratic party that ever was constituted; for parties wish everyone committed, and he penetrates the popular patriotism. (p. 702)

In fact, as a result, "It turns out that he is not the champion of the operative, the pauper, the prisoner, the slave" (p. 702) Rather, his search for truth is above any blind allegiance to one cause:



## CLAUDIA CARLOS

Now shall we, because a good nature inclines us to virtue's side say, There are no doubts,—and lie for the right? Is life to be led in a brave or in a cowardly manner? and is not the satisfaction of the doubts essential to all manliness? (p. 706).

Doubting is a courageous activity and, without it, society cannot progress. By implication, then, Emerson has called into question those among his readers who may see themselves as above criticism simply because they belong to the “right” political party.

### 4. CONCLUSION

What I have tried to suggest today is that the techniques of covert argument occur in rhetorical discourse across political cultures, in both “closed” and “open” societies. Although argumentation theorists have often recognized such arguments (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 1958, Meyer 1986, Van Eemeren et al. 1996, Amossy 2006), actual analyses of how they work from a rhetorical perspective are still too few. One well-known detailed analysis (Van Eemeren et al. 1996) focuses on an arguer with dubious motives, and thus implies an illegitimacy about these techniques: we need to be able to analyze indirect arguments so that we are not “taken in” by them. By contrast, part of my purpose today has been to offer two “positive” examples of this art and thereby highlight its contribution to the rhetorical tradition.

[Link to commentary](#)

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