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De rerum natura and the second *Discourse*

Lucretius's work *De rerum natura — On Nature —* was in the canon of "great Latin poetry" from the start, and cultivated Europeans read it presumably with little regard for content. The poem was so respectable it was even in "Les Dauphins," the list of books approved as suitable for educating the son and heir of Louis XIV, an inclusion that both Voltaire and the *Encyclopédie* would later take mischievous pleasure in pointing out.[1]

There have been two eras, however, when *De rerum natura* was looked at in France for its ideas as well as its poetry, predictably the sixteenth century and the eighteenth. For the eighteenth, there was no shortage of texts to consult, with nine European editions from the previous century, and nineteen editions or translations in England alone between 1700 and 1740.[2] France saw Coustelier's edition of 1743 and a culmination of Lucretian activity in 1768 with two translations, by Bérardier de Battant and by Charles Panckoucke, plus a dual-language effort the same year by de la Grange. Some idea of the no-longer-neutral atmosphere in which this activity was taking place may be had from knowing that de la Grange was a tutor in the household of notorious atheist Baron d'Holbach and that Diderot went over the work with the translator prior to publication.

Indeed by now Lucretian thought was very controversial stuff. Referring to de la Grange's book, Baron Grimm reports a widespread belief that it was "in connection with their cherished plan for destroying religion that the philosophes wanted to make widely available a good translation of antiquity's most disbelieving poet" (8: 151–53). There even appeared the *Anti-Lucretius*, a Latin poem longer than the ancient one, in which Cardinal Polignac sought to refute the ideas of *De rerum natura*.

Which ideas? I single out three areas of thought, though there are more and they overlap. Firstly, materialism: Lucretius postulates a world in which everything, including mind and soul, is composed of tiny particles in constant recombination. On this topic one thinks especially of Diderot, the eighteenth-century French intellectual most deeply influenced by Epicurean-Lucretian philosophy; Diderot's *Rêve de D'Alembert* has been called "a modern *De rerum natura*" (Fabre lxiii).

The second area is the fight against the excesses of religious superstition, in Lucretius not *superstitio* but *religio*. If thunderstorms and dreams are merely atoms falling through space and commingling in various ways, then they are not the work of gods. Anyone who tells you otherwise, says

the poet, is out to enslave your mind through fear, and such people will commit atrocities to keep you submissive: witness the sacrifice of Iphigeneia, to appease a goddess. "Tantum religio potuit suadere malorum!" ['Such wicked acts could religion inspire!'] (Lucretius 1: 99, my trans.).[3] This time we think first of Voltaire and his "Écrasez l'infâme"; that line *Tantum religio* occurs eleven times just in Voltaire's correspondence.[4]

The third area of Lucretian thought that I single out, as catching the attention of eighteenth-century writers, is speculation about early human societies. Book v of *De rerum natura* has a detailed account of how the earth came into being, what early humans were like and how they evolved into the societal creatures of today. This time the modern who comes to mind is Rousseau, especially the Rousseau of the *Discourse on Inequality*. On the subject of early humankind, there is a whole tradition, not just linear but crisscross, with names ranging from Aristotle through Montaigne to John Locke and Buffon. I am putting the case for one name in the web, that of Lucretius, certainly recognized today in connection with the second *Discourse*, but insufficiently and superficially.[5]

Something I hoped to learn at this conference is whether Rousseau knew his *De rerum natura* in Latin or in French. He was offered a copy of Panckoucke's translation, but declined, and anyway that was after the second *Discourse*. He has single Latin quotes from the poem in both his books on music, but single quotes are inconclusive. Pufendorf's seventeenth-century opus on natural law, a major source for Rousseau's essay, is full of Latin quotations from Lucretius: many of these reappear in the discourse, but in French, and modified to fit Rousseau's text, never as quotes. In 1909, Jean Morel showed that there are connecting bits of Lucretius, missing from Pufendorf but present in Rousseau, who consequently must have gone back to a complete text, but in which language?[6]

Be all that as it may, the presence of Lucretius's poem in the *Discourse on Inequality* is very substantial. Spread more or less evenly over all of Part One and the first half of Part Two in Rousseau's essay, I have found three dozen word groups borrowed and adapted from a 475-line portion of Book v in *De rerum natura* (925–1401, with gaps), where the Roman imagines early humans and their social development.[7]

Some of the borrowings are quite short. "Often they stayed their hunger among the acorn-laden oaks," wrote Lucretius (945). "I see him satisfying his hunger beneath an oak-tree," wrote Rousseau (135).[8] "Rivers and springs called to them to slake their thirst," said the Latin writer (945). "[S]laking his thirst at the first stream," said the French one (135).

Others are somewhat longer. This is from *De rerum natura*: "As time went by, men began to build huts. [...] Male and female learnt to live

together in a stable union, and to watch over their joint progeny. Then it was that humanity first began to mellow" (1011–14).[9] This is from the second *Discourse*: "The first developments of the human heart were the effect of a new situation which brought together in a common dwelling husbands and wives, fathers and children" (168).[10]

A reader may feel hesitant: meditating the same broad topic, was it not inevitable that the two thinkers would come up with some of the same examples? Hesitation gives way faced with the sheer numbers of parallel segments, faced with the grouping of them in their respective texts, and also in face of two pairs of sustained passages involving sequences of thought that are by no means inevitable.

One of these matched pairs discusses the origins of speech. Not merely does Lucretius's "As for the various sounds of spoken language, it was nature that drove men to utter these" (1028–29) find an echo in Rousseau's "The first language of man [...] is the cry of nature" (148), but in each work a long digression or pause is devoted to this matter of verbal communication, and each author is left puzzling over how one savage, having decided, let's say, that "cucumber" would be a nice designation for that plant over there, managed to convey this idea to his fellows, let alone persuade them to adopt it. "Where would he have got the notion that this would be useful," exclaims a perplexed Lucretius, "if the using of words had not already become widespread?" (1045–47, my trans.). We have here the direct origin of Rousseau's famous paradox "[...] speech appears to have been extremely necessary in order to establish the use of speech" (148–49).

The other sustained parallel tells how people came to institute systems of law. Surely one can speculate about early social development without postulating a blip, in which that development, having reached a complex stage with private property, and with powerful individuals ordering others around, suddenly dissolved in chaos as the poor killed the rich, the jealous killed the fortunate, and everything had to start over, this time with rules and regulations. Yet such a sequence is in both writers. "The kings were killed [...] the illustrious emblem of the sovereign [...] trampled under the feet of the rabble." So wrote the Latin poet (1136–38). "Equality, once violated, was followed by the most fearful disorder. [...] [C]easeless conflict which always ended in fights and murders." So wrote the *philosophe* (176). "There came a time when some men suggested creating magistrates and the founding of law." Thus Lucretius (1143–1144, my trans.). In Rousseau, "some men" becomes the rich men, saying "Let us institute rules of justice and peace" (177). And since anything was preferable to the prevailing anarchy, humans "enfeebled by feuds" as Lucretius puts it (146), "with too many quarrels to sort out" as Rousseau has it (177), were "ready to

submit of [their] own free will to the bondage of laws," said the one (Lucretius 1147), "hastened to don their chains" said the other (Rousseau 177).[11]

Are not some of the borrowings trivial? Does it matter whether early people ate acorns rather than berries? Indeed many are anything but trivial. They may involve so basic an issue as the general social advantage: early men, according to the ancient poet, "could have no thought of the common good, no notion of the mutual restraint of morals and laws" (958–59). "Men in this state," according to the modern *prosateur*, "having no sort of moral relationship or recognized duties to one another, could be neither good nor bad." Or a topic so fundamental as mine and thine: Lucretius imagined that at a certain stage "they parcelled out cattle and lands [...]. Later came the invention of property" (1111, 1113); while Rousseau thought that "from the cultivating of lands there necessarily followed the sharing out of them, and from the recognition of property, the first rules of justice" (173).

So the adaptations are numerous, in some cases sustained, they relate to major subjects, and they are unacknowledged. There are direct quotations from, or references by name to, John Locke and Mandeville, Tacitus and Ovid, but no hint, however oblique, of the name Lucretius or the name of Epicurus, Lucretius's admired forebear.[12] I have been interested in unacknowledged literary borrowings — Montaigne's from the explorer Jean de Léry, Sartre's from Maupassant – and have found a common factor: overt references to other, sometimes lesser sources, lulling the reader into an assumption that all is open and honest, while a principal source goes unmentioned. Rousseau even passed up an opportunity to make some sort of acknowledgment, when Voltaire sent him that letter about the *Discourse* making a reader want to walk on all fours. Defending literature, Voltaire pointed out that the evils of Rome could scarcely be blamed on Cicero, Virgil, or Lucretius. True, Rousseau blandly replied, but if Rome had not become corrupt, Cicero or Sallustus or Lucretius would never have needed to write.[13]

If Jean-Jacques was guilty of concealment, did he get away with it? Apparently not: Jean de Castillon's *Discourse on Inequality*, framed in 1756 as an answer to that of Rousseau, carefully translates most of the bits of Lucretius that Rousseau would have found in Pufendorf, highlighting for contemporaries that portion of the borrowings at least.

The question of why would Rousseau draw heavily on Lucretius and not acknowledge the fact is so wide open as to be fruitless.[14] I prefer to examine the question of why would Rousseau draw heavily on Lucretius at all. The answer goes deeper than discovering useful phrases there about

nature providing the model for our first attempts at agriculture.

Let us say as a starting point that what he found in *De rerum natura* was the strong and, for him, powerfully attractive suggestion that in those early days things were better. "The human beings that peopled these fields were far tougher than the men of today," reads the Latin poem (935). "Men developed a robust and almost indestructible constitution," according to the *Discourse* (135). "They were relatively insensitive to [...] bodily ailments in general;" quoth the Roman (928–30). "Infirmities of all kinds [belong] mainly to man living in society," agreed the citizen of Geneva (135). And that twist in the wording — "man living in society" — gives us the key. Rousseau, who repeatedly blames society for all our problems, found in Lucretius the Epicurean a soulmate.[15] Let us follow this sequence of ideas and their illustration:

— Idea number one: things were better "back when."

Lucretius: "[besides ailments] they were relatively insensitive to heat and cold." (929)

Rousseau: "[they were] accustomed from childhood to the inclemencies of the air and the harshness of the seasons." (135)

— Idea number two: certainly things were no worse.

Lucretius: "The proportion of mortal men that relinquished the dear light of life before it was all spent was not appreciably higher than now." (988–989)

Rousseau: "I will ask whether [...] in countries where [the art of medicine] is most neglected, the average life of man is any shorter." (138)

— Idea number three: in fact, things are demonstrably worse now.

Lucretius: "[...] an individual victim would furnish living food to a beast of prey [...]. But it never happened then that many thousands of men following the standards [into battle] were led to death on a single day." (990–98)

Rousseau: "Thence arose national wars, battles, [...] and there were more murders committed in a single day of combat [...] than had been committed in a state of nature over entire centuries." (178–79)

— Idea number four: so-called progress has brought physical degeneracy.

Lucretius: "Thanks to fire, their chilly bodies could no longer so easily endure the cold." (1015)

Rousseau: "Through easier living, both sexes began to lose some of [...] their vigour." (168)

— Idea number five (going straight to the heart of eighteenth-century disputation): civilization, with its luxury, is bad. These next quotes refer to the elderly.

Lucretius: "[...] it was lack of food that brought failing limbs at last to death. Now it is superfluity that proves too much for them." (1007–1008)

Rousseau: "In the case of old people, [...] the need for food diminishe[d] with the ability to provide for that need [...] Finally they die[d]. [...] [Today] the excessively refined foods of the rich [...] overwhelm them with attacks of indigestion." (137–38)

— Idea number six: along with the physical, society brings moral depravity, and the harm depravity does.

Lucretius: "Pride, meanness, lust, self-indulgence, boredom — what casualties they inflict!" (47–48)

Rousseau: "[...] vanity and scorn [...] shame and envy [...] compounds that are fatal to happiness and innocence."

— Idea number seven: the moral decay, brought by society, reaches existential depths where we have to ask other people who we are and what we want.

Lucretius: "they savour life through another's mouth and choose their target rather by hearsay than by the evidence of their own senses." (1131–32)

Rousseau: "man in society [...] is able to live only in and through the opinions of others, and it is so to speak from their judgment alone, that he derives the feeling of his own existence." (193)

— Idea number eight: surely there ought to be, or must have been, a better way.

Lucretius: "And yet, if a man would guide his life by true philosophy, he will find ample riches in a modest livelihood enjoyed with a tranquil mind." (1117–19)

Rousseau: "[perfectibility] eventually drew [man] out of that original state in which he would have spent tranquil, innocent days." (142)

Other affinities could be put forward, to explain the appeal for Rousseau of Book Five in *De rerum natura*. One could invoke the poetry — assuming he could appreciate the Latin. That would be appreciation of one artist for another; Casimir-Alexandre. Fusil, reproaching Buffon and Rousseau who "remembered Lucretius [but] did not give him much recognition," refers to the culprits as "two great French prose poets" (169). Or, one could invoke the step-by-step, cause-and-effect presentation in the Latin work, found also in the *Discourse*, with, in each writer, a curious air of inevitability hanging over the description of what happened to the human race.[16]

But I think the main attraction lies in the resemblance we have seen, of attitude to social evolution, stemming from a commonality of temperament: a certain austerity, a certain aloofness from the crowd, a certain regret for things as they once were, or ought to be, or might have been, a lively interest in the phenomena of this world, tempered always by moral judgment. When one writer drinks deeply at the source of another, it is not just to borrow words and ideas, but because some chord has been touched.[17]

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Notes

[1]See Voltaire, "Prix de la justice et de l'humanité," "Letter written from England" (22: 26), and *Dictionnaire philosophique*, article LIBERTÉ D'IMPRIMER. See also *Encyclopédie*, article DAUPHINS.

[2]Concerning editions and translations, see Fusil 1928, Fleischmann 1964, and Fleischmann 1964 ch. 2–3. The two critics had widely divergent views of the same facts, Fleischmann insisting that during the Enlightenment "in England, France and Holland, seventeenth-century vernacular translations of *De rerum natura* were published in quantity, along with new, contemporary ones" (1963: 631), where Fusil had claimed that "never has Lucretius been less published in [France...] Lucretius, in the eighteenth century, was the exclusive property of the English and Dutch scholars" (195, my trans.). All translations from secondary sources are mine.

[3]Most quotations from Lucretius in this paper are taken from Ronald Latham's translation, but in a few cases I have used my own translation. All but one of the *De rerum natura* quotes being from Book v, only line numbers are shown in text.

[4]See Redshaw 22.

[5]The Pléiade *Discourse* is a good example. Only three of its very substantial editor's notes send the reader to *De rerum natura*, which is woefully

inadequate, as this paper shows, while the general statement that Rousseau "no doubt reread Lucretius at the time he was composing the *Discourse*" (1305 n. 1) is superficial to the point of being dismissive.

[6]The colloquium did at least add to my understanding of the question "Which language?" Catherine Volphilhac-Auger's paper (see pp. 000–000) convinced me that there was no reason why Rousseau, competent translator of Seneca, would not be reading *De rerum natura* in Latin; and Robert Wokler pointed out in discussion that Rousseau used Jean Barbeyrac's 1740 translation of Pufendorf and that Barbeyrac's notes might have the missing bits of Lucretius. For a compromise picture, in which Rousseau uses the original *and* a prop, see Fusil: "He was an indifferent latinist, but he could follow the Latin text [of *De rerum natura*] with the help of a translation" (1928: 171). Which translation? Fusil does not hesitate: the one by Jacques Parrain, baron des Coutures, published in 1685.

[7]Not all of the three dozen are used in this paper. For other, also non-exhaustive samplings, see Morel and Fusil 1930: 169–70.

[8]All translations from Rousseau are mine.

[9]In his synopsis of the poem, translator R. Latham chooses, as a handy tag for lines 1011–27, "The Social Contract."

[10]In one case a few lines of *De rerum natura* correspond to a long passage in the *Discourse*. The Roman wrote: "They appealed on behalf of their children and womenfolk, pointing out with gestures and inarticulate cries that it is right for everyone to pity the weak" (1021–23). Rousseau, who of course attached importance to natural pity, refutes Hobbes, draws support from Mandeville, and so on, but his pages on this subject (153–55) do include: "I am speaking of pity, a quality suited to creatures as weak [...] as we are [...] the tenderness of mothers for their little ones."

[11]There is another sustained development, in the section of *De rerum natura V* considered by this paper, about how socially evolving humans came to practise religion (1161–1240). No equivalent in the *Discourse*. But there almost was! The "Fragment d'un brouillon du *Discours de l'inégalité*" (3: 224–25) is on precisely that topic, and is such a virulent Lucretian attack on "idolatrous, ambitious priests dominating over populaces by means of superstition and over magistrates by means of terror" that Rousseau presumably took fright and left it out.

[12]Well, perhaps one hint: four times in the *Discourse on Inequality* (3: 115, 125, 133, 162), a sentence is to be found containing the word-group "la nature des choses". The burglar unable to resist leaving a clue?

[13]See the "Lettre de Voltaire à Jean-Jacques Rousseau" (3: 1380) and the reply (3: 227).

[14]If one must have a reason for non-acknowledgment, one could cite em-

barrassment at borrowing so extensively from one whose very activity Rousseau decried: repeatedly, when he says that philosophers just want to distinguish themselves from the herd, so they invent nonsensical systems, Lucretius is one of those he names. See for example the preface to *Narcisse*: "[...] absurd systems of people such as Leucippus, Diogenes, [...] Lucretius" (2: 965).

[15]"Rousseau owes much more than has often been stated, to the Latin poet's anathemas against the corrupting effect of civilization"(Robin 273, quoted in Leduc-Fayette 26).

[16]Or again, perhaps Rousseau simply found in Lucretius an approach and organizational structure suited to his immediate needs. In Roger D. Masters's six-point summary of the second *Discourse*'s argument, point one is that "the Christian account of human origins, based on the Bible, needs to be replaced by a scientific one, based on the model of Lucretius's *De rerum natura*" (171).

[17]My final remarks still refer to Book v and the *Discourse on Inequality*. Whether Lucretian materialism touched *another* chord in Rousseau is another topic, which would have to center on the "Profession de foi d'un Vicaire Savoyard" and on other sections of *De rerum natura*. The Vicaire systematically rejects Epicurean cosmology in very Lucretian language, so that critic Frédéric de Buzon is led to state flatly: "It is clear that Rousseau totally rejects materialism; in its way, the 'Vicaire' is an anti-Lucretius" (337). But several discussants at the Durham colloquium stated with equal firmness that the Vicaire persona is *not* a mouthpiece for Rousseau. I am indebted to Victor Gourevitch, who in conversation suggested avenues for exploring a possible Lucretius-Rousseau link in the area of materialism.

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