

Lucretius

Unfounded Nature

There is no Nature in Lucretius. Yet, it happens that the Roman poet personifies Nature. His immeasurable poem, *De Rerum Natura*, begins with a vibrant, and very famous, homage to «Alma Venus»; in other lines there is a reference to a Great Mother or Ceres. As a matter of facts, Lucretius categorically rejects the idea of a nature as a subject, capable of acting intentionally.

Would this be a contradiction of a very restless spirit? Is Lucretius looking from time to time for names to be given to Nature to demonstrate that nothing comes from nothing, one of his most important theoretical postulates, to clarify that no external intervention is given on «things of nature». The idea is that there is a self-production characterizing natural facts. A force, an «infinite opus» that we can call Nature, Love or Demeter, would animate natural facts from within. But pay attention to this: Lucretius specifies that there is no correspondence between these names and any form of truth; we can call the earth whatever we want, but it «is indeed forever meaningless» (DRN, II, 652). Nature has no name because, in reality, it does not exist, and «things of nature» are therefore completely meaningless.

De Rerum Natura shows that it is impossible to let the variety of natural productions depend on a plan or on a spirit or on a Nature. For this reason, Nature in Lucretius, does not pertain to a nature, but to the spontaneity of the production of things. It concerns the meeting among them. If Nature does not exist, then there are things of nature, and relations, and clashes between them. If nature is absent, Lucretius is then teaching that no fusion, no conciliation, with the world is conceivable. Nature is a space to be invented, named, to be fought for over and over again.

The encounters among things are not the fruit of a reason, they do not have a sense; they are absolutely random. Infinite worlds are generated by relations among atoms that have deviated from their path by «chance». The random deviation has a very famous name: *clinamen*; it is a neologism in Latin coined by Lucretius, which is not even reported in Epicurus' original Greek texts, which the poet who was perhaps born in Pompeii, constantly refers to.

The *clinamen*: a slight, infinitesimal deviation («*nec plus quam minimum*», DRN, II, 244); an accident in the continuous flow of atoms, while they spontaneously and randomly move in their downward fall, and meet/collide with other atoms, producing other encounters/clashes creating compound bodies and worlds.

The *clinamen* is a twist, perhaps a catastrophe, in the etymological sense of the term: it derives from the Greek *καταστροφή*, composed of *katá* («down, down») and *stréphein* («turn, turn»). The *clinamen* would then represent and be the act of revolting against a simple vertical fall; a form of unpredictable «upheaval». It is not inscribed in things; it is not their soul. Rather, it reveals itself as the result of their own continuous movement which, at a certain point, at a certain place, goes «out of the way». It begins to whirl, it no longer follows the usual flow, it turns, deviates, and goes towards other atoms.

The *clinamen* ruins things, right from their inception. It portrays both the collision between the things themselves (the effect of their very existence) and, more profoundly and inevitably, the eternal

movement, the *clinamen*-free movement of atoms. When compared to the chaotic and eternal movement, it is a fleeting accident that happens to the thing, it evokes the coming into existence of a new single, a more lasting one than the accident itself. It causes whirlwinds, the emergence of even a new whirlwind world. If the eternal movement as chaos is an enigmatic form of substantial regularity, a sort of an absolutization of difference (that is, a repetition without difference), the *clinamen* releases a creative form of destitution, which is unpredictable on the ontological level (perhaps even impossible), which breaks the order of the ungovernable (we could consider the *clinamen* the irruption of the totally unexpected negative).

The *clinamen* certifies that no transcendence of a providential will or any immanence of a material necessity acts in the world. The *clinamen* simply happens. But, of course, it may also not happen. On closer inspection, Lucretius's poetry, embodies the memory of this event which may happen but also may not happen. His poetry has the task of evoking this aporia between the real and the virtual, of letting exist what may never happen, but which could have happened or happen in the future.

The «chance», the «luck», to use a term extremely dear to the Romans (and then to Machiavelli), is everything that happens unexpectedly and coincides with the being itself. Chance, from the Latin «casus», is something that happens. What happens? What is up? We want to repeat it: encounters take place among things that are made without Reason, without Sense, without a Cause. As Althusser writes, this materialism is summed up in a single proposition: «*Il y a*».

There is no principle in Lucretius. The same atoms, as Clément Rosset pointed out, do not constitute the raw material, they do not even have a specific term designating them. The world does not derive from atoms; the world is the atoms; it embodies the outcome of their encounters that occur in the infinite void. It is in this «groundless» cosmos that all things move (DRN, I, 334).

Lucretius, as often happens to him, gives a «visual» example to allude to this immensity: try to throw a dart in the sky, if it had the strength, would it ever find a limit? The poet suggests that the dart would not stop its course because «its ability to run away will prolong the flight forever» (DRN, I, 983). The dart reveals that atoms cannot stop moving because «the bottom of everything does not exist» where things can come together and make their home (DRN, II, 90-91).

Much of the ancient philosophy tradition condemns the void because in it a body would have no reason to move, it would have no goal or place to reach, or, more precisely, its movement would have no «sense». Lucretius, in his own way, replies that it is true, as a matter of facts the movement of the dart has no meaning; it runs, period. In truth, nothing makes sense: the whole world has no meaning, since it has no origin, since it has no bottom.

De Rerum Natura keeps on upsetting and disturbing us because it decodes and detects a world overwhelmed by blind chance, devoid of any purpose or effect that has value.

To us it seems particularly interesting to note that the multiplication of the different, the encounters between things take place within an unfounded space. There is no Order in what happens. In a rain of atoms, which have always flowed in infinite space, sometimes some of them deviate and give rise to aggregates.

Cézanne wrote Gasquet that the history of the world begins when two atoms meet; when two whirls, two chemical dances combine. This dawn, which for Cézanne is also the occasion of painting, takes place above nothingness: a dance on the abyss.

To argue that the space in which all these randomness unfold, in which immense rainbows, cosmic prisms are born, is an «abyss», is a «bottomless», means canceling any idea of origin. So, this is where the question

of the removal of power arises; of any power in the *De Rerum Natura*. And, therefore, the hyper-political charge of the Lucretian masterpiece, precisely because it is largely disguised. If there is no sense, if there is no purpose, we must not even think that there can be a power that would produce the world once in the beginning, and then, it would never stop, reproducing its own charge indefinitely. Indeed, Lucretius argues that things can sink, at a certain point, «with a great crash», into the abyss.

In fact, the *clinamen* does not always produce worlds. The Clinamen is not a power; it only represents a movement determined by the very fall of things. It occurs in the rain and causes things to fold (the collisions are the «wounds»). It is the *clinamen* that displaces any idea of Nature, Order, Subject, Power; so much so that one day it will no longer produce anything.

If there is no foundation, if there is no power, since everything was built on nothing, in the void, by chance, in a repetitive and eternal rain, one day everything will be swept away. What is left, as long as it stays, is an exclusively feverish, indeterminate unpredictable combination of things, materials, relationships and events.

A permanent upheaval: a catastrophe that affects the very possibility of life. There is no lack of space or depth of the abyss where, as Lucretius affirms, all the barriers of the world can disperse and be destroyed. The gates of death are not closed to the earth, nor to the sky, or to the sun, or to water: on the contrary they wait for them and scrutinize them with a vast and immense chasm (DRN, V, 366-376). The abyss, the emptiness, the problem of anarchy evokes the question of the possible end of everything. In reading the terrible verses of book V of *De Rerum Natura* (especially 93-109) one gets the idea that it is precisely the attempt to think of the couple subtraction / destruction, groundlessness and nihilism. What to do within the catastrophe which is the very nature of things, their logic (the *clinamen*)? As Camus had glimpsed, Lucretius philosophy, unlike that of his Athenian teacher, Epicurus, is never renounced. Lucretius does not teach how to build walls around man and stifle his cry. In Lucretius verses, you can feel the desire for justice, the desire to fight, in spite of everything. His poetry is a desperate cry, to imagine a common action (DRN, I, 43). The ataraxia then becomes a problematic issue in a philosophy of struggle, in a militant and never pacified thought, as that of Lucretius. Removal concerns being itself; not even those who must live within the removal of the origin, of the meaning, of the foundation, of the authority.

Those who are averse to fate appears to be wise to Lucretius; the rebel against the iron laws of things. It is not that obvious, Lucretius seems to say, that we must undergo the things of nature; it is not certain that we have to wait for the catastrophe «on our knees» and with our arms folded: the *clinamen* is that minimal deviation, that very small catastrophe, which also gives us the sense of a new urgent gesture, of new, higher responsibilities.

Lucretian philosophy allows us to enter into catastrophe; and not because it configures the space for a new human intervention in history («free will»? No, thanks, it makes us nervous!); rather because it dismisses, once and for all, the idea of history. In fact, chance presides not only on the emergence of new worlds and the evolution of species, but also on the jolts of history. There can then be no science of the historical process because there is no direction in history. This is exactly what the last Althusser tries to experience in a dramatic way by reading the Epicureans, together with Pascal and Heidegger! Facts happen, like the encounters between atoms, vortices. But facts do not follow one another in a peaceful and unidirectional way, as the reformists and historicists claim. Every now and then their flow ripples, small whirls emerge on the surface, just like things of nature do. A «turning point» is thus produced, an unpredictable twist of being. The being as it shatters itself and the ruins flare up. If this happens, nobody

determines it, especially no unhappy conscience; it simply happens. Only the poet, however, manages to dream of this revolution and lets it see and desire this rupture of things, of the world. And like Pasolini, Lucretius lets us see that one can always live otherwise than it seems inevitable.

The Lucretian *clinamen* is not a power, but a «destituent power». In his long poem Lucretius asks himself a question:

So now you do not see that, although an external force
often force many men to proceed who reluctantly
to be hastily dragged, yet it is in our chest
something that can rebel and resist? (DRN, II, 277-280).

Men and women, things of nature among other things, are drawn into the continuous flow. Sometimes it happens that these fruits of random encounters between atoms - drops of rain or grains of dust that flutter in infinite space - escape the current at an unspecified time and place. They slip away from the forward gear, they desert, making a faster, more ferocious «twist» into the flow, into the catastrophe engulfing the others: they raise an arm to be seen, they hang from a branch on the shore to save themselves, they start swimming against the current (it takes strength and physical exercise, like the one that Kafka practiced: going back, staying still). They write verses, draw or free up new spaces for everyone.

For us, the destituent power is one of these gestures. It is not a decision, it is not an act of will: it follows a sudden, unexpected, often inexplicable gesture, capable even imperceptibly of diverting the normal course of things. It is an event which alone by itself is not enough: an event needs to be picked and allowed to sprout.

We want to share our passion for Lucretius, we want to read him on the streets, we want to write his name on the walls, copy his verses in public toilets or on social networks boards because it is this extremely unfortunate, great, humble, poet who tells us that, in the repetitive passing of time, in the empty and homogeneous time, in the desolation that was his and which is ours, it is possible that someone stops, starts spinning; it is possible that a *clinamen* intervenes in the dark affairs of any being. The movement of this singularity, like that of an atom in a spiral, in obstinate and opposite direction against the flow, involves the others close to him, his fellow men, those of his social class, those of his kind (if any), those of its species (if it identifies with a species).

A vortex is produced. Why does this happen? It is not known. Perhaps the «outside force» shouted too loudly. A more sensitive «chest» suffered. A «crowd» of men and women is now there.

Something happens: *De Rerum Natura* is a text composed for the future; a future that has yet to happen.