Michel Serres, Luc Ferry, and the Possibility of a Natural Contract

In *Le Contrat naturel* (1990), Michel Serres calls for humans to cease their parasitic bond to nature, and adopt a more symbiotic relationship, respecting the “objects” of the world as much as its human “subjects.” Serres embraces an ecocentric vision of the world, rejecting the anthropocentric and Cartesian tradition that regards humankind as “maîtres et possesseurs” of nature. Luc Ferry maintains that *Le Nouvel Ordre écologique* (1992) must be human-centered. He ridicules Serres and those he considers “fundamentalist” ecologists, and suggests a “democratic ecology,” closer to the humanism of the Classical and Enlightenment periods. Ferry’s critique is not without merit, but it does not match the more nuanced arguments of Serres, Peter Singer, and Christopher Stone, all of whom envision some version of a natural contract.

Aimer nos deux pères, naturel et humain, le sol et le prochain; aimer l’humanité, notre mère humaine, et notre naturelle mère, la Terre. (Serres, *Le Contrat naturel* 83)

Nos conduites actuelles, notre sensibilité même, si nouvelle par rapport à la nouvelle fragilité des choses, vécues jadis comme dures face à notre impitoyable sensibilité, supposent bien que la nature devient, peu à peu, à mesure qu’elle s’affaiblit devant notre puissance, un véritable sujet de droit. (Serres, “Pour un retour au ‘Contrat naturel’”)
When he published his Second Discours, the Discours sur l’origine et les fondements de l’inégalité parmi les hommes (1755), Rousseau seemingly righted many wrongs of that philosophical enemy number one of many ecocritics: Descartes. Rousseau’s nostalgic depiction of the state of nature, his esteem for animals, and his identification of society and laws as the foundation of inequality among human beings clearly separate him from Descartes, who, in his Seconde Méditation (1641), declares that humans are superior to the rest of nature, since we possess an animus (mind; later named cogito) that gives us the ability to think, whereas other living beings have at most an anima (soul), which might permit them to move and to feel, but never to think.

The Descartes-Rousseau dichotomy is important for ecocritics because it brings into focus two fundamental ways of viewing humans’ place in nature: the classical anthropocentric model and the romantic ecocentric (biocentric) model. Michel Serres made an important contribution to the discussion with Le Contrat naturel (1990). This paper will examine Serres’s concept of the natural contract and the scathing critique of it written by Luc Ferry in his Le Nouvel Ordre écologique. L’Arbre, l’Animal et l’Homme (1992). An analysis of these and other texts will lead us to ponder — if not answer — this question: could Serres’s natural contract ever come to fruition, or will it remain a wistful metaphor from the pen of France’s most poetic philosopher?

In Le Contrat naturel, Michel Serres begins with an analysis of one of Goya’s black paintings, Two Men Fighting with Clubs (1819-23). The men are knee-deep in mud, and the viewer can imagine that as they beat each other, their efforts will only force them deeper into the quagmire as they fight to the death. Serres advises that if placing a bet on this fight, we would do well to put our money on the mud, rather than either of the two combatants. Serres interprets this painting as an illustration of the current standing of our relationship to nature. Long a victim of human aggression,1 nature will soon be unable to endure any more, and will swallow us up, just as the mud inevitably will engulf Goya’s fighters. We are about to pay for centuries of abusing and ignoring nature. “Brûlante,” writes Serres, “l’histoire reste aveugle à la nature” (Contrat

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1 Serres differentiates between “guerre subjective” (war between people or nations, neatly defined as “violence plus quelque contrat”) and “violence objective” (violence against the world) (Contrat 31-32).