

Lucretius and nature's monsters

Of the six books of Lucretius' *De rerum natura* Book V has generated the least disagreement among the commentators, for the reason that Book V itself is narrative rather than argumentative. Not that Lucretius has abandoned his role as an expositor of Epicurean teaching. Rather it is now no longer a case of explaining, illustrating, and defending the technical details of Epicurean doctrine, but a case of applying to a more general theme certain Epicurean principles which have for the most part already been established. I am loathe to disturb the ground which the scholarly tradition has left reasonably well alone, but there is a point on which the commentators have done Lucretius an injustice and he deserves to have the record set straight. The point is not unimportant in itself. Moreover, a correct interpretation illustrates a cardinal principle of Epicurean scientific method.

Book V divides itself neatly into three parts. At the beginning we have some seven hundred lines describing the formation of the world and the nature and movement of the heavenly bodies; at the centre we have some one hundred and fifty lines dealing with the emergence of plant, animal, and human life; and to close we have some five hundred lines reviewing the development of human society. Our concern is with the short middle section (5. 772-994).

Now it is important to recognise that when Lucretius comes to describe the primal condition of the earth and the emergence of plant, animal, and human life, he does what he does on several occasions throughout the poem when he is faced with the problem of treating things which for one reason or another lie beyond the limits of human experience: he argues by analogy. We are familiar, for example, with his comparison of invisible atomic particles with motes dancing in a sunbeam (2.114-120). The analogy which he