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Lucretius' Creation

By Howard Jacobson, University of Illinois, Urbana

Lucretius describes at length the primordial creation of animal life (5,791–877). Readers have long noticed that parts of this account are formulated by analogy with the birth of the individual from a human mother. Thus, the earth in that distant time possessed wombs (808) and after the birth it produced quasi-breasts that nourished the newborns with a milk-like substance (811–813). Recently, Schrijvers has suggested that the «roots» mentioned in line 808 are analogous to the umbilical cord¹. These instances however do not begin to exhaust the extent of the correspondences. I note here several more.

The earth did not produce offspring in a flash, but required a gestation period (*tempore maturo*, 809). The newborn *patefecerat* [*uterus*], an allusion to the dilation of the cervix; it was *fugiens umorem*, alluding to the escape from the amniotic sac, and *auras petessens* (810), recalling the infant's familiar gasp for the first breath of air.

Thereafter we are told that the earth in those early days also produced an assortment of monsters (837ff.). But if we look closely at the list of *portenta* that the earth begot one recognizes them as human offspring born with what we call "birth defects". Thus, there are children with both male and female sexual organs, those with ambiguous or hidden genitalia whose sex is hard to determine at all (*androgynum, interutraque nec utrum, utrimque remotum*, 839), children born with missing limbs or blind or mute (*orba pedum partim, manuum viduata vicissim, / muta sine ore etiam, sine vultu caeca reperta*, 840–841) or with varying degrees of paralysis (842–844).

In short, Lucretius' description of the original creation of animal life is to a larger extent than usually acknowledged informed by analogy to the birth of human beings from human mothers.

1 P. H. Schrijvers, *Mnemosyne* 27 (1974) 260.