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"From out the Portals of My Brain": William Blake's *Partus Mentis* and Imaginative Regeneration

Annalisa Volpone

Dipartimento di Lettere, Università degli Studi di Perugia, 06123 Perugia, Italy; annalisa.volpone@unipg.it

Abstract: *Partus mentis* (the parturition of the mind) brings together the following two significant aspects of Romantic culture and ideology: the exploration into human generation, and the process of how imagination forms an idea and makes the mind creatively productive. This article suggests that analyzing William Blake's portrayal of imagination through the *partus mentis* trope can enhance our comprehension of how he illustrates and employs this faculty in his works. In Blake's *partus mentis*, the analogy between the brain and the womb is pivotal. The brain is seen as a host for ideas that are conceived through imagination, and once they are brought to life, they become art. This is a vital component of Blake's cosmogony, tying into his personal reinterpretation of biblical Genesis and his concept of the Human Form Divine. It also includes his response to medical theories and practises regarding generation and life. This article pays close attention to the medico-cultural discourse that was contemporary to Blake, and its wide use of the 'analogy', which defined the episteme of the long eighteenth century. The analogy approach was later challenged by the 'epistemology of the visual', which emphasized the use of anatomical atlases, wax models, and dissections for direct experiential insights into bodily functions and processes, particularly of the brain and the womb. This article argues that Blake is able to transcend these two epistemologies while harnessing specific elements from each.

Keywords: William Blake; *partus mentis*; embryology; eighteenth-century obstetrics; imagination

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Citation: Volpone, Annalisa. 2024. "From out the Portals of My Brain": William Blake's *Partus Mentis* and Imaginative Regeneration. *Humanities* 13: 99. https://doi.org/10.3390/h13040099

Received: 14 March 2024
Revised: 12 June 2024
Accepted: 8 July 2024
Published: 23 July 2024

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1. Introduction

"There is a Void, outside of Existence, which if enterd into
Englobes itself & becomes a Womb"

W. Blake

This article discusses the notion of *partus mentis* (the parturition of the mind) that emerges from William Blake's depiction of creation and generation. *Partus mentis* combines two significant features of Romantic culture and ideology. First, it encompasses the interest and investigation into human generation, which is connected to the broader topic of how life is created. This investigation is a defining characteristic of Romantic medico-cultural episteme and the so called 'life sciences', as it branches through the vitalism vs materialism debate, embryology—particularly the opposition between epigenesists and preformationists—as well as the studies and advancements in obstetrics. Second, it explores how imagination conceives an idea and how the mind becomes creatively productive. The latter also aligns with both the image of the Romantic poet as the epitome of creativity and the Romantic notion of imagination as a tangible faculty, located in the brain and utilized by the mind.

William Blake's unique portrayal of imagination has been the subject of numerous studies and analyses (see, for example, Makidisi 2003; Green 2005; Sha 2018). This article suggests that examining Blake's representation of imagination through the *partus mentis* trope can greatly enhance our understanding of how he depicts and employs this faculty, particularly in relation to his creation myth. This myth is not only grounded in the biblical

account of which he provides his own version with his 'Bible of Hell', but also in contemporary medicine. This article reads Blake's myth of creation as a neuro-biological process, in which the stages of human embryogenesis and childbirth are employed to describe the workings of imagination as an embodied faculty. In this scenario, imagination impregnates the mind, leading to the birth of ideas that transform into art. It should be noticed, though, that Blake's use of the biological paradigm in relation to imagination can be both limiting and liberating (see Lee 2023). For instance, in Urizen's *partus mentis*, he describes a cognitive process that is dominated by reason and is therefore subject to restrictions, whereas in Los it is presented as the fundamental vital energy that transcends the limits that reason has set.

Blake's cosmogony, as it relates to his personal reinterpretation of biblical Genesis and his conception of the Human Form Divine, also encompasses his response to medical theories and practises regarding generation and life. The use of the *partus mentis* trope makes the analogy between the brain and the womb particularly crucial. Accordingly, the brain is seen as a host for ideas that are conceived through imagination, and once they are brought to life, they become art. Furthermore, Blake's *partus mentis* is consistently masculine, following the pattern of previous instances of this trope, as well as more contemporary ones (see Rajan and Faflak 2022, p. 12). The insistence on a masculine birth of the mind is closely connected to Blake's ambivalent views on gender and childbirth. This is especially noteworthy, considering that he only depicts natural childbirth once in his artwork, in plate 3 of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (*MHH*), where a nude woman is shown giving birth with the baby visibly emerging from her.

Gender in Blake remains a contested site. Critics have differed over Blake's position about women's agency and independence in his poetry.[1] This is also due to the fact that his characters do not always represent actual men and women, but rather aspects of the masculine and feminine. Despite their representation in the plates, spectres and emanations do not correspond to human males and females. For example, the Eternals incorporate both male and female components, and when separation between the two occurs, it is described as painful, debilitating, and traumatic.

To understand the impact of *partus mentis* in Romantic esthetics and, in particular, in Blake's, this article briefly explores its significance in antiquity, from traditional mythology to classic literature. More precisely, it discusses Zeus's birthing of Athena in Greek mythology, the figures of the pregnant philosopher and pregnant poet in Platonic philosophy, the creation myth as depicted in Genesis, and Eumolpus's intellectual birth in Petronius's *Satyricon*. The focus then shifts to medical sources, beginning with William Harvey's compelling argument about what could be defined as the 'consubstantiality' of the brain and uterus. Blake reinterprets the *partus mentis* trope through a biological perspective, connecting it to both classical mythology and the contemporary science of his time. In doing so, he assigns the myth both immanent and transcendent significance. While engaging with the medical debates of his era, Blake uses *partus mentis* to present a model for understanding imagination that goes beyond this particular epistemological context. In this regard, I join Richard Sha in arguing that Blake employs a kind of universalism that allows him to escape from physicalism: "he is able to do so because Romantic physicality included entities like the imponderable matter, entities that do not disallow spirit" (Sha 2018, p. 96).

The article examines various instances of mental impregnation and parturition in William Blake's works, specifically through Urizen, Los, Enitharmon, and the Nameless Shadowy Female. The Nameless Shadowy Female is especially intriguing, as she is the only female character whose mental parturition is visually portrayed in a plate (*Europe*, pl. 5). Moreover, her "unnamed" and "shadowy" depiction implies an erasure of her identity and suggests that the results of her imagination could be somewhat problematic.

2. *Partus Mentis* in the Classical Tradition

In mythology, the first instance of *partus mentis* is related to the story of Zeus, who gives birth to Athena by having her come out of his forehead in a kind of parthogenesis. There are various versions of this myth: Athena was therefore either produced without a

mother, so that she emerged fully grown from Zeus's forehead, or, and this is the alternative story, Zeus swallowed his wife Metis, the goddess of counsel (her very name alludes to a practical form of intelligence) while she was pregnant with Athena because an oracle of Gaea had prophesied that Metis would give birth to a child who would overthrow Zeus. As a consequence, Zeus develops an unbearable headache so painful that Hephaestus the god of blacksmiths, artisans, and sculptors, and a parthogenenous child of Hera, performing the role of man-midwife, takes a wedge (reminiscent of forceps) and splits open Zeus's skull. Athena then springs out of Zeus's head fully grown and in a full set of armour. Due to the way of her birth, she became the goddess of intelligence and wisdom. This version of the myth is particularly interesting for my investigation because it exemplifies the two kinds of appropriation, or "theft", as the philosopher Francesca Rigotti calls it, operated by men of what is a female prerogative, i.e., the ability to give birth, and a cultural/professional space, that of the midwife performed by Hephaestus, the 'creative blacksmith and sculptor' (Rigotti 2010).

In *The Bible*, the book of Genesis provides us with another instance of male procreation, that of God creating humanity through Adam and Eve. While there is not any explicit mention or depiction of biological childbirth or mental parturition in the Genesis narrative, it does present an interesting take on the creation of life. In particular, when God creates Adam from the dust of the Earth, he remains lifeless until God breathes into his nostrils the breath of life. This act of divine breath can be interpreted as a metaphorical reference to the father's role in procreation, suggesting that something—a substance or essence—must be expelled from the father's body to infuse life into what will eventually become the child. By giving life to Adam through breath, God is also giving him identity and subjectivity. This evokes the concept of *psychē* from ancient Greece, a term etymologically and semantically contiguous to *psychēin*, meaning 'to blow' or 'to breathe', and to *pneuma*, meaning 'breath'. Both Anaximenes and Diogenes of Apollonia argued that the source of human thoughts was air, understood to be a divine element. This 'psychic pneuma' represented the invisible substance underlying sensory, motor, and mental activity (see Crivellato and Ribatti 2007).

The Genesis narrative further deviates from the typical biological process of birth and growth by presenting Adam as being born fully grown, much like the Greek goddess Athena who sprung from her father's head in full armour. Instead, the process of Eve's creation presents a distinct contrast to that of Adam's. In the case of Adam, God's intervention is direct and unmediated. For Eve, on the other hand, God's role in her creation is carried out indirectly through Adam's body. By contrast, in Cabalistic Judaism and other versions of Genesis, Adam's first female companion was Lilith, who was created from the same soil as Adam. She left the Garden of Eden, refusing to be subservient to him. Lilith is evoked in Blake's engraving of the *Laocoön* group, circa 1815, in which he turns Laocoön into God and his sons into Satan and Adam. Her name appears in the space between God and Adam under a snake. Through this space, Blake seems to reassign Lilith a role in Genesis that she was denied in the Judaeo-Christian creation myth. Morris Eaves suggests that the statements that frame Adam's head, "Satan's Wife The Goddess Nature" and "War & Misery", can also be associated with Lilith (Eaves 2003, p. 11). This indicates that Blake's depiction of femininity continues to be controversial in his latter works. Indeed, Lilith becomes significant not only in her own right, but also as a counterpart to Eve. Remarkably, while Blake assigns Lilith a place between God and Adam, he also presents her as inherently evil (see Paley 2002).

Traces of both the ancient myth and the Genesis associated with *partus mentis* are evident in Blake's portrayal of imagination. This is especially true for the character of Los, who performs quite an extraordinary *partus mentis* in plate 17 of *The First Book of Urizen* (U, 1794). He appears to be a fusion of Zeus and Hephaestus; Los births a female entity, Enitharmon, who at the same time is his offspring and his emanation - the female part of his being from which he must separate, presumably due to Urizen's fall. Much like Adam and Eve, Los and Enitharmon are consubstantial and also a pair who will generate many children. Like Hephaestus, Los is both a blacksmith and an artisan. He also acts as

a midwife to himself, expelling the "globe of life blood" (*U*, pl. 18.1, E 78) from his skull, which holds Enitharmon in a fetal stage. In *The Book of Los* (BL, 1795), Enitharmon gives birth to Orc, whom she has conceived with Los in a more 'traditional' fashion. Interestingly, like Athena with Zeus, Orc is depicted as the son who will overthrow his father.

In philosophy, the first instance of male appropriation of the female ability to give birth, is presented by Plato as the result of philosophical creativity. In his dialogues, especially *Phaedrus*, *Theaetetus*, and in the *Symposium*, he advances the notion of 'mental impregnation' that can only occur in the male mind. In the *Symposium*, Diotima famously explains the concept of pregnancy of the soul:

> [there are] those whose pregnancy is of the soul—those who are pregnant in their souls even. More than in their bodies, with the kind of offspring which it is fitting for the soul to conceive and bear. What offsprings are these? Wisdom and the rest of virtue, of which the poets are all procreators, as well as those craftsmen who are regarded as innovators. (Plato 2008, pp. 46–47)

The connection between the pregnant soul and the activity of the poets and craftsmen is key here. In Blake, this kind of pregnancy is perfectly exemplified by the character of Los, who is, as we have seen, a poet and a craftsman. This is also consistent with the origin of the word 'poet', which comes from Greek *poētēs*, as a variant of *poiētēs* 'maker, poet', from *poiein* 'create'.

While in Plato intellectual parturition is mostly attributed to men, Angela Hobbs notices that Diotima frequently uses the gender-neutral term *anthrôpos* to explain that all humans, regardless of gender, are fertile in both body and soul. According to Hobbs, Plato believed that "biological sex and cultural gender and all permutations of their relation are part of the corporeal world of becoming and impermanence" (Hobbs 2007, p. 452). Similarly, in Blake's work, the division of male and female components into 'spectre' and 'emanation' following Urizen's separation from the Eternals symbolizes the contrast between Urizen's fallen world and Eternity.

In Plato's *Phaedrus*, Socrates characterizes poetic inspiration as a form of divine madness (*theia mania*). This is instilled by the muses, and signifies that a seed of the divine has been implanted in the subject; in other words, the subject becomes pregnant with the divine. As this article will show, in *Milton* (*M*), Blake discusses inspiration through the muses in a way that is reminiscent of Plato's description of the poetic process. He goes even further, though, and transforms it into a neurocognitive process. As Harry Lesser argues, both Plato and Blake agree that, to see reality, one must see beyond the physical world, which gives us a distortion of that which truly exists. They agree, also, that to do this, one must use insight or intuition; but Blake calls this faculty Imagination and Plato calls it Reason (Lesser 1981, p. 229).[2]

Plato's notion of creativity as parturition has been developed by many other philosophers over the centuries. It is worth mentioning here Francis Bacon's unfinished essay *Temporis Partus Masculus* (*The Masculine Birth of Time* c. 1602) (Vickers 1996). Bacon's work also draws on Philolaus's analogy between human birth and the mathematical creation of the cosmos. Accordingly, Bacon argues that the result of this masculine birth is indeed science, which is an eminent masculine activity because it involves the intellect. This form of creation is seen as a proactive, assertive process, demanding rigorous thought and a systematic investigation. On the other hand, Bacon contrasts this with the more passive, receptive, and nurturing birth of nature, which he associates with femininity. In this case, creation is a process that unfolds naturally, organically, and intuitively, often shrouded in mystery and wonder. It is passive in the sense that it allows for the development of life without the need for active, intellectual intervention.

From a literary point of view, the first to associate poetic creativity to *partus mentis* is Petronius in the *Satyricon*, when he has Eumolpus say that "a mind cannot conceive or bear fruit unless it is soaked in a mighty flood of great works" ("neque concipere aut edere partum mens potest nisi intrenti flumine litterarum inundata", Petronius 2011, p. 234). Here, *partus mentis* has already begun an expression of male intellectual superiority over women.

This concept can be traced back to Aristotle, who, however, did not believe that women's role in procreation was marginal. When, in *De Generatione Animalium*, Aristotle affirms that female contributes as 'matter' to procreation, this should not lead to the conclusion that females have no part in the process. As Connell argues, in the way that Aristotle understands animals embryology, "matter is never inert" (Connell 2016, p. 121). The food and nourishment that the female body provides to the offspring is never inert. In Aristotle, generation only occurs through the interaction between the active male principle and the passive female one.

In Blake's time, the female alternative psychological condition to *partus mentis* was the so-called 'maternal imagination', "a phenomenon widely understood to be the case in which a pregnant woman's mind affected her unborn child some way" (Buckley 2017, p. 1). Effectively, the only kind of *partus mentis* that was allowed to women was one that remained inevitably related to the fetus; hence, the result of this second 'parturition' was forever imprinted on the child's body on a psychological as well as physical level.

3. The Brain-Uterus Analogy

In the chapter "Of the Conception" from his *Anatomical Exercitations Concerning the Generation of Living Creatures to which are Added Particular Discourses of Births and of Conceptions, &c*., William Harvey compares the "substance of the uterus [. . .] ready for conception" (542–543) to the "constitution of the brain" (Harvey 1653, p. 543):

> Why shall we not think, that the same Nature, which hath contrived the Womb, which is a no lesse admirable Organ then the Braine, and hath framed it of a like constitution to execute the office of Conception, hath designed it *all to a like function of a like constitution to execute the office of Conception, or at least to one which beareth an Analogy with it: and that Nature did intend an* Organ which is every way like the Braine, to an imployment, like to that to which the Braine is assigned? (Harvey 1653, p. 544)

What Harvey suggests here is more than a simple analogy. He proposes an organic, anatomico-physiological continuity between the uterus and the brain. He argues that Nature has designed these two organs with similar constitutions and functions.[3] Harvey's correspondence suggests a more sophisticated alternative to the old "encephalogenetic" seed theory, endorsed by Plato, among others. This theory proposed that a man's seminal fluid originates in the brain and travels to the genitalia via the spinal cord during intercourse. As such, it posited that a man's brain can give birth to both ideas and human beings (see Connell 2016).

Harvey's view can also be seen as a variation of Galen's generative model, which suggested the homologous nature of female and male reproductive organs. However, in this case, the comparison is between the uterus and brain and the male reproductive organs that generate the "brain child" (see Laqueur 1987). According to Harvey, the conception of a human being is not only analogous to the conception of an idea, but it is constitutionally so, because this is how Nature has designed these two organs. Remarkably, to sustain his argument, Harvey recurs to physiognomy:

> and the *Art of Physiognomy*, doth by lineaments and parts of the face (as the Eye, Nose, Fore-head, &c.) give judgement of the manners and *dispositions* of Men: What shall hinder us, out of the same *fabrick of parts*, to pass our conjecture that their Office is also the same? (Harvey 1653, p. 545)

Harvey provocatively suggests that substantial continuity between the brain and the uterus can be demonstrated through physiognomy. The link between facial features and a person's character is due to an ontological connection between the two. The same principle applies to the uterus and the brain, where the continuity originates from the "fabric of parts", implying the brain and womb are of the same essence. Harvey's belief that similar shapes suggest similar functions mirrors Aristotle's anatomical studies. This is particularly

visible in his use of animal comparisons to comprehend human internal anatomy, as there is no evidence that he conducted human dissections.

Harvey also introduced a new theory of reproduction, namely epigenesis, which described how an organism evolves from an undifferentiated mass into a complex structure. This process involves changes in organization and morphology, not just size, contrary to the preformationist view. Epigenesis proposed that each birth signifies a new formation, suggesting the presence of a vital force that organizes living matter into intricate forms.

However, this theory of epigenesis was set aside until Johann Friedrich Blumenbach more convincingly reformulated it in the late eighteenth century by advancing the concept of Bildungstrieb (formative drive), which connected embryology and physiology with natural history. In his work, Harvey also discusses the artist's brain and the unique conceptions it can produce. He suggests that an artist's prerogative is to "form things which are not present with him, but such as he only hath formerly seen, so much to the life" (Harvey 1653, p. 545). This aligns with Blake's statement in "The Proverbs of Hell", "What is now proved was once only imagined" (*MHH*, pl. 8.34; E 36).[4] In this regard, the *partus mentis* metaphor strengthens and fertilizes the connection between art and creativity, the poetic genius and his work, as it represents *a locus of contagion* and contamination; to paraphrase Harvey, this is where the biological and the poetical seamlessly blend and converge. As Terry Castle has explained, "childbearing becomes an archetype for poetic process" (Castle 1979, p. 194).

Partus mentis was seen as a model for the cultural belief that intellectual production was exclusively male. This belief coincided with the rise of male midwifery and the introduction of gynecology, illustrating how pregnancy and childbirth's medical context became a male domain. Consequently, women's roles were minimized to simply providing a nest, or nidus, for the fetus (Buckley 2017). This is evident in anatomical illustrations of the pregnant uterus, where the female body is reduced to a mere object. As Jennifer Buckley argues, the medical discourse on generation and birth also impacts "the gender hierarchy implicit in debates of poetic theory and imagination" (Buckley 2017, p. 5). This is clearly exemplified by Erasmus Darwin and his theory of "paternal imagination" when he states that "the real power of imagination, in the act of generation, belongs solely to the male" (Buckley 2017, pp. 139–40). Furthermore, for Darwin, "analogy was both central to scientific inquiry and a powerful tool for the poetic imagination" (Griffiths 2016, p. 23). Therefore, when linked to generation, it serves as a means of describing artistic creativity.

In the Romantic period, the trope *partus mentis* can be viewed as the literary interpretation of a widely used epistemological model, both in scientific and philosophical fields: the analogy. As Devin Griffiths notes, analogy was employed to explain phenomena that couldn't be directly studied or described through experiments. Analogy linked the known with the unknown through continuity and correspondences. Richard Sha interprets the extensive use of analogy as "a symptom of an epistemological panic", as it exposed an attempt to bridge the gap between empirical investigation and abstract reasoning, often by substituting one form of the visible for another: the digestive system for the reproductive, the attraction of particles for female and male sperm, the physical body of a woman for women's contributions to generation, surface for depth, or the empirical for the imagined (Sha 2001).

This model was later challenged by John and William Hunter, who were arguably the most influential physicians of their era. Their ground-breaking work involved detailed dissections, meticulous wax reproductions, and comprehensive anatomical atlases, which revealed the unseen, making it the subject of a legitimate medical discourse.

4. The Epistemological Shift

Blake's concept of *partus mentis* is positioned between the following two epistemes: the 'analogy' that permits him to establish a direct correlation between the brain and the womb, and the 'visual', interpreted as the unveiling of the unseen, providing a pictorial parallel to these correspondences. The unseen is revealed, enabling the representation

of the body's interior and exterior in a manner reminiscent of anatomical atlases and the work of an anatomist in a lecture theatre. Blake also presents us with transparent bodies, making the skin visible. Accordingly, the embodied imagination and its offspring are not merely described, but can be seen and experienced in his plates. In his works, Blake notably employs verbs related to sight in the context of the body. The eyes of the viewer—who could be the reader's or another character's involved in the narrative—investigate and interact with the body, its organs, and their functions, including the 'body in labour', whether physical or mental. In *The Four Zoas* (*FZ*), Blake insightfully noted that "they behold/what is within now seen without" (*FZ*, Night the Second, pl. 22–23, E 314). This scrutiny of the body recalls the study of an anatomical atlas. For Blake, though, the processes inherent to sight extend far beyond the mere passive reception of images. Sight has a more significant role: it leads to vision, and vision leads to the Human Form Divine.

In the *First Book of Urizen*, plate 17 offers a compelling depiction of Los's *partus mentis*. As I have argued, this moment in the narrative holds a pivotal role, primarily because of the character of Los, who stands as a living embodiment of imagination. The plate features an illustration without text, which is reminiscent of those found in medical books, an area where Blake also had experience as an illustrator. Furthermore, as Denise Gigante (Gigante 2009) compellingly maintains, it represents cutting-edge advancements in embryology, demonstrating Blake's non-casual knowledge of the medical and cultural context of his time. In the plate, Los bends over a red globe of blood connected to the nerves and sinews that extend from his lower back, like an umbilical cord providing life and energy. His hair flows around the globe. Inside the globe, one can discern the shape of a fetus, possibly Enitharmon. Plates 15 and 18 offer what might be considered to be the textual counterpart of plate 17, whereby the image is translated into a text that is built around the visual experience of both the reader and the other characters. In particular, plate 15 closes with the Immortals's (that is, the Zoas') visual experience: "the expanding eyes of the immortals" (*U* pl. 15.11; E 78) that "Beheld the dark visions of Los/And the globe of life blood trembling". (*U* pl. 15.11; E 78). Here, the perceiving eyes of the Immortals connect to Los's "dark vision" which materializes in his painful parturition. While he elevates the sense of sight to that of vision, Blake stages Los's parturition, which will be described in more detail in plate 18, in a very physical and material way, as follows:

> The globe of life blood trembled
>
> Branching out into roots;
>
> Fib'rous, writhing upon the winds;
>
> Fibres of blood, milk and tears;
>
> In pangs, eternity on eternity. (*U* pl. 18.1–5; E 78)

The separation from Enitharmon is the painful result of Urizen's fall, causing Urthona to become Los, who then experiences this agonizing divide from his female counterpart. Yet, this is also the outcome of a *felix culpa*. Much like Lucifer's fall, and subsequently Adam's, led to the blessing of redemption, Urizen's fall here leads to vision. This prompts a redeeming journey not just for the characters, but for the readers as well. Thus, the sight of Los's body in labour and the pain he endures transcend the concrete images of childbirth seen in the anatomical atlases of the era. If properly supported by imagination, sight offers a reflective gaze that transforms into vision.

In Blake's time, obstetrics had transitioned from being solely associated with women to becoming a prominent branch of cutting-edge medicine, with important advocates such as William Hunter, which also resulted in an increasing number of male midwives compared to female midwives. Hence, the more 'authoritative' man-midwives were associated with other branches of the medical establishment, which were predominantly male. The professionalization of midwifery contributed to the association of childbirth with other scientifically supervised forms of production. It is noteworthy that male midwives initially distinguished themselves by using instruments to assist in the delivery or extraction of the fetus (see Henderson 1996). As a matter of fact, men were appropriating female spaces and

prerogatives both in a practical and metaphorical way. Such an appropriation changed the approach to the pregnant female body. The anatomical literature of the time portrayed the pregnant female body merely as a vessel for the fetus. Hunter's atlas (*Anatomia uteri humani gravidi*, 1774) must also be placed in the context of the theories of generation, reproduction and parturition which deeply affected Romantic esthetics. Poets such as Edward Young, William Wordsworth, and S. T. Coleridge present instances of maternity in their works that can also be read as a result of those important changes in the medical world (see Castle 1979). Alan Richardson has defined the male poet's identification with the mother as form of "colonization of the feminine" as much as that which occurred in obstetrics (Richardson 1988). Furthermore, male imagination and its offspring, the work of art, would act the paradigm of the production of creative imagination against the simple representational imagination of pregnant women.

From his career's early stages, Blake was directly involved with these developments. He worked as an illustrator and engraver for the *Philosophical Transactions* under James Basire's supervision. The *Philosophical Transactions* was the most authoritative scientific journal of the time. Later, he illustrated and engraved some of the most prominent medical texts published by Joseph Johnson, with whom he collaborated. With *partus mentis*, Blake merges the medical, the physical, the intellectual, and most notably, the imaginative. This is evident in the unfinished manuscript *Vala or The Four Zoas* (FZ, 1796–1807), a work largely focused on embryology. Consider, for instance, how Tharmas (the Zoa associated with the body and its sensations) describes his state of separation and alienation from his emanation Enion in a way that resembles a fetus inside the womb:

> [. . .] I am like an atom
>
> A Nothing left in darkness yet I am an identity
>
> I wish & feel & weep & groan Ah terrible terrible. (*FZ*, Night the First, pl. 41–45, E 302)

The expressions of emotion and physical sensations ("I wish & feel & weep & groan") may reflect the basic instinctual responses of a developing fetus, its silent communication with the world outside the womb. The repetition of "terrible" appears to be an acknowledgment of the profound and daunting (yet awe-inspiring) nature of life's beginning, the formidable process of creation that starts within the womb. Interestingly, Tharmas's condition in *The Four Zoas* is both physical and mental. The reality he describes appears to be not only an actual physical transformation, but also a mental construct, akin to a *partus mentis*.

5. From the Pregnant Body to the Pregnant Mind

From his early illuminated books, Blake depicts the human body in the context of generation. This is reflected in how imagination can uncover the essence of things and thereby produce ideas in the mind. It also applies to how the characters in his mythology are created in a physically tangible yet profoundly intellectual manner. Such a way of proceeding is not merely typical of the creation myths he explores in *The First Book of Urizen*, *The Book of Ahania*, and *The Book of Los*, but it can also be found in the so-called Continental Prophecies and above all in *Vala or The Four Zoas*, on which Blake worked for most of his career. This section examines various instances of *partus mentis* and the role of imagination in the creative process. Special emphasis is given to the outcomes of *partus mentis* both when imagination is involved in the generation process and when it is not.

The First Book of Urizen can be configured as the result of Urizen's *partus mentis* in which the void becomes a womb that generates the world and its inhabitants. Because Urizen's generation distinctly lacks imagination, each and every form that originates from him fails to expand, evolve, or regenerate, instead succumbing to a state of sterility and contraction. Trapped in this cycle of unfruitfulness, Urizen's *partus mentis* proves to be abortive. As Engelstein observes:

> Having eliminated the distinction between mind and body and between subject and object, Blake moves fluidly between the form taken by the human body, by

> human thought, and by human surroundings. Like Hunter's text, Blake's poem is simultaneously an embryological account and an atlas. [. . .] In the *Book of Urizen*, Urizen leaves a realm of Eternals and enters the void which "Englobes itself & becomes a Womb" (J 1:1; E 144). Through his prolific desire, Urizen impregnates this void, which is himself, with himself, with the world and with a host of living forms. (Engelstein 2008, p. 84)

It is quite ironic that the being that is mostly connected to the rationality and the workings of the Logos is failing in his own *partus mentis*, but indeed, reason without imagination is sterile, and this form of infertility is vividly recounted through the image of a womb that instead of initiating life, petrifies everything that is around:

> And a roof, vast petrific around,
>
> On all sides He fram'd: like a womb;
>
> Where thousands of rivers in veins
>
> Of blood pour down the mountains to cool
>
> [. . .]
>
> Like a human heart strugling & beating
>
> The vast world of Urizen appear'd. (*U* pl. 5.28–32; 35–35; E 73)

The womb-like structure that Urizen gives form to (but not life) frames him and becomes a "vast petrific around", similar to a mountain cavern (See Sha 2009, p. 218). This process involves limiting the body's fluidity by creating distinct boundaries: life, in its vibrant and uncontainable form, is represented by the "thousand rivers in veins/of blood". In his quest to contain and limit, Urizen fails to hold the vitality of these bodily fluids within the confines of his creation. The harder he tries to contain these vital forces, the more they seem to leak and overflow: Urizen's world is left parched, a barren wasteland devoid of life.

The Book of Los details Urizen's creation from Los's point of view. By embodying imagination and creativity, Los serves as a counterbalance to the world that Urizen has just brought into existence. In this perspective, Los's *partus mentis* in plate 17, discussed in the previous section, is an attempt to hold back the world of Urizen by turning the limits of Urizen's world into a form of intellectual organization. However, this form of organization, driven by an imagination that is fallen, reveals an embryological progression from a primitive to a more complex form:

> Incessant the falling Mind labour'd
>
> Organizing itself: until the Vacuum
>
> Became element, pliant to rise,
>
> Or to fall, or to swim, or to fly:
>
> With ease searching the dire vacuity. (*BL* pl. 4.48–53; E 92–93)

Los generates creatures that undergo an epigenetic process of development marked by the passage from water to air (see Kreiter 1965). Indeed, the offspring from Los's parturition survives either by swimming or flying. This aligns with the theory that life on Earth first originated in an aquatic environment, and also evokes Joseph Priestley's discovery of oxygen, an element essential for life. At this point in the creation myth, Los's mental effort does not restore the whole (the Eternal Man), but instead leads to further fragmentation and separation (again, we might refer to the birth of Enitharmon). The risk of this gender differentiation is symbolized by the Hermaphrodite, which represents a sterile state of false reconciliation (see Paglia 1990; Hayes 2004; Rosso 2012; Engelstein 2008; Sha 2009). Under no circumstances does Blake's Hermaphrodite represent the overcoming of biological sex and cultural gender that Plato conceptualizes in his eternal realm.

Blake's reflection on generative processes also resonates in his construction of the four states of being as a journey towards Eternity and the Human Form Divine. The second state he introduces in his cosmogony is called Generation. It refers to the vegetable

world in which the cycles of life are experienced in a mindless and mechanistic way (see Sklar 2011, p. 6). This is a transitional stage towards the path to the Fourfold Vision represented by Eternity/Eden, and depicts a world whose fertility and vitality are deprived of any emotion and form of creativity (procreation as opposed to artistic creation), because this is a peculiarity that pertains to another state of being that is Beulah. It is not by chance, indeed, if in *Milton* it is precisely the Daughters of Beulah (a combination of sexual spirit, emotion, and creativity) who operate instead of the Muses of inspiration in classical epic tradition, and inspire, or it would be more correct to say impregnate, the Bard's mind. The Daughters of Beulah appear to be a re-working of Plato's Muses. He described them as birthed alongside the creation of the heavenly spheres and the sensible world, a realm of tangible, physical entities. The Muses's emergence marks a significant transition in human condition. Before their arrival, men were referred to as *amousoi*, indicating an uncultured state. With the Muses's influence, they transition from this state to *mousikê*, which represents music, song, poetry, and other forms of artistic and intellectual expression. The Daughters of Beulah also summon the nymphs who assist Phaedrus in his rebirth, acting as midwives, as described by Hermias in his *Commentary to Phaedrus* (see Finamore et al. 2020). Although they belong to Generation (that is, the sensible world), they enable his elevation from this ream. By doing so, they provide a form of inspiration that is drawn from Nature and that is crucial to the philosopher's journey of discovery and revelation. This inspiration is depicted as a kind of possession, resonating with the Bard's "impregnated" mind. Indeed, because of their creative insemination, the male pregnant mind gives birth to his work:

> Daughters of Beulah! Muses who inspire the Poets Song [. . .]
>
> Come into my hand
>
> By your mild power; descending down the Nerves of my right arm
>
> From out the Portals of my Brain, where by your ministry
>
> The Eternal Great Humanity Divine. planted his Paradise,
>
> And in it caus'd the Spectres of the Dead to take sweet forms
>
> In likeness of himself. (*M* 2.1; 5–10; E 15)

Here, Blake describes the process by which the Bard receives, or more accurately 'discovers', divine embodied inspiration. Unlike Phaedrus' rebirth, which requires the presence of nymphs/midwives, the Bard here acts as his own midwife. In a reversal of male and female roles in procreation, his mind is impregnated by the Daughters of Beulah, initiating the creative process, which he then translates into physical action. This is notably illustrated through the portrayal of what could be referred to as a nervous impulse. However, the Daughters of Beulah are not entities from an outer dimension; they reside in the Bard's brain, as they belong to one of the four states of being that constitute the path towards the Fourfold Vision.

The Daughters of Beulah's "mild power" could be interpreted as the initial spark of inspiration in the poet's brain, possibly alluding to the sudden burst of creative ideas that can occur through the use of imagination, which will find its way through the portals of the Bard's brain. Just as the birth canal opens to bring forth new life, these 'portals' open to birth new ideas and creative thoughts, hence the transformative and generative power of the creative process. Once poetic thought is created, it must materialize into the work of art. Therefore, another movement is described: mirroring the transmission of nerve impulses from the brain to the hand, the creative thought reaches the Bard's right arm. The physical act of writing transforms not fully formed thoughts in the brain into physical actions through the nervous system, enabling the poet to produce his work of art. The reference to the "Eternal Great Humanity Divine" represents the power of the creative process and also the discovery of its (embodied) divine component. The act of this divine entity planting "Paradise" in the brain can be seen as the formation of an idea or concept, a seed/sperm of creative thought that has the potential to epigenetically develop into a work of art. The

final image of the "Spectres of the Dead" taking "sweet forms" depicts the transformation of what might risk being a mere abstract inspiration into concrete poetry through the power of imagination. Blake turns a *topos* of the epic tradition, the bard's invocation to the muses, into a *partus mentis*, comparing it to the natural and organic process of a baby being born from its mother's womb, a life coming into existence. Just as a mother's body nurtures and eventually brings forth a new life, so too does the poet's mind conceive and manifest art.

As I have mentioned, the Nameless Shadowy Female presents an instance of *partus mentis*, one of the few performed by a female being, in plate 5 of *Europe*.[5] She is portrayed in a pose similar to Los's during Enitharmon's birth, with her hands gripping her head. Further down her flowing hair there is a womb-like shape, which encloses a contracted male figure. This figure is reminiscent of Leonardo's studies on the fetus, and likely represents the "secret child" mentioned in the textual component of the plate.[6] The following lines of plate 3 of *Europe* seem to be a narrative counterpart of the image in plate 5:

> I wrap my turban of thick clouds around my lab'ring head;
>
> And fold the sheety waters as a mantle round my limbs.
>
> Yet the red sun and moon,
>
> And all the overflowing stars rain down prolific pains. (*Europe* 3.12–15; E 61)

This represents the early stages of parturition, where the "lab'ring head" takes the place of the labouring womb. The "turban of thick clouds" might symbolize the membrane surrounding the amniotic sac, and the "sheety waters" could suggest the amniotic fluid that leaks during the first stage of labour, also known as waters breaking. The "overflowing stars" that "rain down prolific pains", also suggesting the breaking of waters and the pain the Nameless Shadowy Female undergoes, is "prolific" because it is generative.

These examples underscore the dynamism and fluidity of the creative process, which is constantly evolving and regenerating. While we notice a substantial predominance of male *partus mentis* in Blake's works, these instances serve as an invitation for a radical re-evaluation of the traditional constructs surrounding gender roles and the limitless potential of the human capacity for imagination. They challenge the reader to question the status quo as a result of the scientific, political, and religious discourses of Blake's time, encouraging an exploration into imagination as a faculty that—Blake seems to suggest—transcends gender. The Daughters of Beulah, who impregnate the Bard's mind, and the Nameless Shadowy Female, who gives birth to the secret child, hold a peculiar yet pivotal position in mental (pro)creation, despite the fact that they cannot be regarded as women in the conventional sense, but rather as female components. In Blake, sexuality is often depicted through the separation and reunion of spectres and emanations, as well as same-sex explorations. Within this esthetic of "predominant gender fluidity" (Bruder and Connolly 2010, p. 2), *partus mentis* positions itself as a catalyst for imagination to flourish in an unbounded creative landscape, unfettered by the constraints of gender norms.

6. Conclusions

William Blake demonstrates an intense and profound interest in the outcomes of life sciences, including the study of obstetrics, a field that was only just beginning to manifest its potential during his time. However, Blake's perceptions and beliefs about generation and birth deviated from the traditional view. He did not confine these phenomena to the single event of a baby's delivery. Instead, he transcended it through *partus mentis*, which involves the dynamic and transformative activity of imagination, viewing generation, or to be more precise, re-generation, as a repeated process occurring multiple times throughout an individual's life. This process was integrally linked to the discovery of the Human Form Divine. As Engelstein points out:

> Blake saw the new science of obstetrics, [...] as indicative of an abdication of the creative potential of humanity to a nature that is in fact barren without human intervention. Insisting on the divinity of the human form, Blake called for a new science, a con-science, that would link the search for knowledge with

> ethics by recognizing and encouraging the flexible interaction of bodies no longer envisioned as discrete individuals. (Engelstein 2008, p. 17)

Blake's nuanced understanding of embryology, anatomy, and early theories of evolution proves that he was not simply a passive recipient of these ideas. Instead, he actively reinterpreted them in light of his own artistic and philosophical vision. For Blake, the human being is not merely a biological entity, but is a site of divine revelation. Unlike Urizen, who operates in the vacuum of his contracted (w)hole, the Human Form Divine can only emerge through the collective, encompassing, and ever-expanding human experience.

Such a revelation has a validity also for the reader. Indeed, in Blake's prophetic books, readers, along with the characters, are encouraged to undertake their own imaginative *partus mentis*. This process is reminiscent of the Socratic maieutic method, which draws one of the earliest analogies between the birthing of ideas and the delivery of a baby, the Greek term 'maieutic', translating to 'of midwifery'. Just as a midwife aids in physical birth, the Socratic method aids in the birth of intellectual thought, helping others to articulate their own ideas and beliefs. The purpose of this approach is not to lead the conversation towards a pre-determined conclusion, but rather to encourage individuals to examine their own beliefs critically and to assess the validity of their claims. In this light, Blake himself can be considered a 'man-midwife', assisting not only his characters, but his readers as well, in birthing and nurturing their own ideas through imagination.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Data Availability Statement: No new data were created or analyzed in this study. Data sharing is not applicable to this article.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes

1 For instance, reconciling a work like *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* with *America* is challenging. The first reflects the values and ideas expressed by Mary Wollstonecraft in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* and demonstrates Blake's engagement with Oothoon's psychological response to the trauma of rape, while the latter shows how Orc's revolutionary spirit and affirmation of absolute freedom lead to sexual violence. I agree with Cogan's reading of Blake's use of these contrasting perspectives. They investigate the boundaries and contradictions inherent in absolute freedom and its potential slide into moral degradation (Cogan 2021).

2 Blake's knowledge of Plato might have been influenced by Thomas Taylor, who was the first to translate the complete works of Plato and Aristotle into English. Taylor was a polymath, famous as both a mathematician and a philosopher; he was also known as 'Taylor the Platonist' and 'Taylor the pagan'. In his biography on William Blake, G. E. Bentley Jr argues that "Blake knew Taylor, perhaps as early as 1783" (83). Taylor lectured Blake on mathematics. He also gave a series of lectures on Plato hosted by the sculptor John Flaxman, a dear friend of Blake's. On the impact of Taylor's ideas on Blake, Ackroyd observes that: "In his eclectic assumption of Taylor's Neoplatonism [. . .] we can observe the movement of Blake's mind; he picked up separate ideas, or fragments of knowledge, as he needed them. He was and a systematizer, like so many of his generation, but it was his own synthesis to establish his own system of belief" (Ackroyd 1995, pp. 88–89).

3 This is also consistent with what Gall and Spurzheim, almost two centuries later, argue about the relation between sexuality and the brain, stating that sexuality was located in the cerebellum, and was called 'organ of amativeness'. Blake was familiar with Gall and Spurzheim's studies; in particular, he annotated Spurzheim's *Observations on Insanity*. Their theories were also reviewed in Henry Crabb Robinson's article for Rees's *Cyclopedia*, which presents many illustrations by Blake.

4 All quotations from William Blake's works are from David V. Erdman's (1988) edition of Blake's *Complete Poetry and Prose*, hereafter E. Works are cited by plate and line number.

5 Similar to the plate 17 of *The First Book of Urizen*, it is uncertain who the depicted character is. However, it is plausible to suggest that she can also be represent another manifestation of Enitharmon.

6 This could be Orc, the son of Los and Enitharmon, although Orc is also the Nameless Shadowy Female's consort (see Damon 1988, p. 309).

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