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DEFORMING NORMALCY:
DEFORMITY AND DISABILITY IN WILLIAM BLAKE’S ART

by

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This thesis examines William Blake’s verbal and visual art from the perspective that disability is a physical and mental condition that is viewed by society as deviant. Prior to modern conceptions of disability in Britain, the deviation was labeled as “deformity.” This thesis demonstrates various ways in which Blake illustrates deformity, and through this, prefigures the modern sense of disability in his art. I argue that Blake’s representation of deformity in his poetry and drawings is intended to reveal the precariousness of the “normal” human body and inform the reader and viewer that normality is an illusion. The age of the Enlightenment is important in disability history in that its ideology encouraged people to believe in the existence of a perfectly logical world, which in turn made them rationalize and discriminate bodily differences. Blake reacts to the Enlightenment by questioning the belief in the idealized world and deforming the normality that governed his culture and society.
William Blake’s art was not positively received or fully appreciated by the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century public. Blake himself recognized that he was “either too low or too highly prizd” (E 733) by his readers and viewers.¹ The same verse that makes a “supreme and enjoyable effect” on one reader is seen as “unharmonious and meaningless” (“William Blake” 3) by another. Although nineteenth-century commentary on William Blake is not abundant, those few surviving comments all seem to agree that Blake’s works are wild, incoherent, mystical, nonsensical, and grotesque.² Among the viewer responses, I would like to bring attention to Lady Hesketh’s unfavorable letter to William Hayley (July 10, 1802) about Blake’s illustration for Hayley’s second ballad [Fig. 1]. About the illustration, she complains that “yr [sic] ingenious friend pays little Respect to the ‘Human Face Divine’ for certainly the Countenance of his women and Children are nothing less than pleasing: . . . her Countenance is to me rather unpleasant, and that of the child extremely so, without any of those Infantine Graces which few babies are without, and which are to me so delightful” (Bentley 100). To this complaint, in his reply to her letter, Hayley defends Blake by telling her that she is “prejudiced” (Bentley 100). Even from the painting that is neither morbid nor unaesthetic, Blake’s contemporary audience frequently manages to see abnormal images and feel jarred, uncomfortable towards the human forms depicted in his works. But one might argue that

¹ All quotations from Blake’s works are from David V. Erdman’s The Complete Poetry & Prose of William Blake (1988) unless otherwise noted. Parenthetical references for the poetry include the title, plate and/or line numbers, followed by the page number in the Erdman edition preceded by “E.” References for the prose are identified as “E” followed by page numbers.
² The anonymous reviewer in Morning Post harshly comments on Algernon Charles Swinburne’s William Blake: A Critical Essay (1868) that exalts William Blake’s artistic genius. The reviewer views Blake’s paintings and poems as freakish, grotesque, and perplexing, and disparages his prophetic works whose “Predictions are generally mysterious and obscure” and convey “what [readers] already know.” G. E. Bentley in “Introduction” of William Blake: The Critical Heritage attests to the divided reactions to Blake’s art works by the 19th century critics and audiences as the representation of “‘the highest beauty’ or ‘trash’” (9).
Blake’s works make the audience see the human bodies in a new way and recognize their own prejudices.

I argue that this negative reaction comes from varieties of “deformity” inherent in Blake’s works. One can easily see that human figures are often tortured, afflicted and deformed in Blake’s poems and paintings. Because of these characteristics of his art, Blake’s works have been studied in association with the Gothic and monstrosity. Also, Tristanne Connolly in *William Blake and the Body* gives extensive analysis to the representation of the human (sexual) body in Blake’s works. Although monstrosity, the Gothic, and body are the key concepts in disability studies, the topic of disability has not yet found its place in Blake studies. This thesis links the theme of physical disability to the depiction of deformity, which can be in turn related to the ideas of monstrosity, the gothic and the body, in William Blake’s art. It develops suggestions from the eighteenth-century and cultural disability studies, which correlate the ideas of the deformity with disability.

During the eighteenth century, the concept of disability was still emerging. Deformity and monstrosity were used to indicate visible disability in that period. People with visible disability considered themselves as deformed, a distinction that reflects the disabled person’s diminished sense of self-worth. We can have a glimpse of the ways in which deformity was viewed during that time in Samuel Johnson’s *A Dictionary of the*

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3 See, for example, Chris Bundock and Elizabeth Effinger (2018) and Paul Youngquist (2000, 2003) for discussion of gothic and monstrosity in Blake.
4 There is one study that directly discusses disability and William Blake, Matt Lorenz’s chapter in *Disabling Romanticism* (2016), which explores how Blake depicts epistemological blindness as a human condition of both “abled and disabled multitudes” through the character Tharmas.
5 The most representative text in which a person with disability writes about their own lived experiences is *Deformity: An Essay* (1754) by William Hay who was born with Kyphosis. A text like this one is helpful in revealing the important associations among concepts such as disability, deformity and monstrosity.
English Language. The terms “deformed” and “deform” as an adjective are defined as ugly, disfigured, of an irregular form, and wanting natural beauty. In addition to these meanings, “deformity” is defined in an even more derogatory manner as “ridiculousness; the quality of something worthy to be laughed at, or censured.” This shows that one’s deformity not only characterized their physical features, but also automatically gave other people the license to socially disadvantage them. Notice how the appearances with particular features perceived negatively by the majority become the basis of injustice to subject a person to inequal treatment. This captures the modern sense of disability which is more than a person’s physical and mental state; it is a condition given by the society and culture that disable those who deviate from the normality through discrimination.

Essaka Joshua’s review of the eighteenth-century deformity presents yet another way to view it: “Philosophers usually characterise deformity as something that exhibits irregularity, disproportion, disharmony, asymmetry, peculiarity, sickness, and decay. Looking at people or objects with deformities causes the viewer to experience ‘pain’ (Hume 349), ‘disgust’ (Burke 94), and ‘disappointment’ (Hutcheson 72-73)” (31). The intellectuals saw the effect of deformity on the viewers as well as people with deformities. What these different observations of deformity shows is that the connotations of deformity are constructed in much complexity at different levels and scales of sociocultural human contacts and relations. This informs my thesis to explore various ways in which deformity is illustrated in Blake’s art. On the way, I will also examine whether Blake’s art functions to reinforce or undermine a cultural conception of deformity in his time.

We have seen various ways to understand deformity and disability, but at the root
of all the views is the fact that disability is an externally imposed state rather than an intrinsic quality, with which Blake’s portrayal of deformity aligns. Disability and deformity originate from those who devalue certain differences. They set a default state of human and nature and evaluate whether one suits for the state or not. This is a strategy, a kind of logical thinking largely developed during the Enlightenment, to rationalize human differences and still avoid being one of them. Therefore, they demarcate the unnatural, unhealthy, and abnormal from themselves rather than accepting differences as mere variances of human forms. They diagnose and ascribe the deviations to such causes as birth defect, corruption, and religious error. This tendency is often found in literature and culture, too, in which “physical deformity [is depicted] as pathology and sign of internal flaw, social ill, and from above, symptom of human abuse of nature” (Dolmage 34-6).

This is where Blake comes in. By intentionally placing the deformed human body at the forefront in his visual and verbal images, Blake troubles the orderly world and body that the enlightenment audience tries to maintain and in so doing, Blake exposes the instability of the idea of normality. Youngquist argues that Romantic artists including Blake redefined normativity through monstrosities in the culture of the Romantic period that enforced the proper body while “invisibly but materially” (“Monstrosities” xv) constraining the bodies that deviate from the cultural norms. He quotes “William Blake’s baleful remark about the advancing normality of Britons”:

“since the French Revolution Englishmen are all Intermeasurable One by Another Certainly a happy state of Agreement to which I for One do not Agree” (783). If proper embodiment is a matter of agreement, one of the lessons of British
Romanticism is that monstrosities will disagree. . . Deviant flesh provides a material occasion for the (re)production of new norms—and forms—of life, breeding a sociability that acknowledges the abject and the disreputable. The promise of monstrosities is that they multiply lives that matter. (“Monstrosities” xv)

My thesis will investigate in what ways Blake questions the proper human form and how he imagines “deviant flesh” to acknowledge the diversity of human bodies. However, this is not to say that Blake does not participate in recreating the conventional ideal human body of classical art. The central figures in Blake’s works usually have the proper—white, fit, proportionate, male—bodies, and one might place him among the artists whose sense of beauty is limited to normal bodies. However, I would suggest that Blake uses the proper body in his art for the reader and viewer to see their own similitudes in the healthy body that is painfully tortured and put at the peril of death.

The term deformity has not been highlighted much in Blake’s corpus, but it is not difficult to find his view or use of the words (deform, deformed, deformity) in his writings. Though brief, his annotations to Bacon’s essay “Of Deformity” and The Works of Sir Joshua Reynolds show Blake’s own view of deformity. When Bacon argues in the essay that “there is a consent between the body and nature” and thus the personality of “deformed persons” is decided accordingly, Blake writes on the page, “False” and “Contemptible” (E 632). Moreover, although Blake does not explicitly explore the concept of deformity in the same way as he does with religion or imagination, deformity is implicit in many of the arguments made through his art. Particularly his visual texts provide a plentiful foundation to explore the concept.
Blake’s illustration of deformity might be best described, in Lennard J. Davis’s words, as “a disruption in the visual, auditory, or perceptual field” (129). In fact, Davis argues that disability pertains to “the power of the gaze” that subdues “the rebellion of the visual” by shoving it into the modern binary of normal and abnormal or, in the primitive sense, good and bad (129). Blake’s art strikes “visual, auditory, or perceptual” senses of the audience with its disruptive and problematic poetic language and visual images whose meanings cannot be easily grasped. Disturbing the viewer/reader’s perception and sensibility, Blake’s art triggers their Urizenic instinct to divide and organize the disorder.

In Davis’s theory of “the power of the gaze,” what makes one disabled is the disabling, disempowering gaze of the viewer who defines the object in her or his own regulatory terms.⁶ Recognizing this perspective meaningfully reveals how human eyes can disable and dehumanize others by looking and assigning the meanings that are not necessarily inherent in the objects of the gaze. It is true, therefore, as disability studies scholars say, that we can read anything in terms of a disability studies perspective because the act of seeing can be an act of disabling someone and because the normalizing view is constantly at work. This power dynamics of empowering and disempowering through gazes is omnipresent in Blake’s works. The figures in Blake’s works are deformed in literal and social senses in their relationships with their creator, with other characters, and with the reader/viewer, each of whom responds to the figures in different ways.

⁶ A similar theory of gaze is developed by Rosemarie Garland Thompson as “goal-driven stare” in Staring: How We Look (2009).
The episode of Reuben in *Jerusalem* offers an instance of the kind of interaction in which gazes become acts of disempowering someone. Reuben is one of the figures recurrent in Blake’s different prophecies as a symbol of the fallen man with limited senses in the post-lapsarian human state. In the illustrations of *Jerusalem* as in other prophetic books, we cannot easily point at figures and identify them as certain characters. Therefore, it is not easy to find the exact illustration of Reuben in the book. The image that is most likely to be Reuben is on plate 74 [Fig. 2] that shows a male figure from whose body roots are growing. The verses on the plate describe how the Daughters of Albion saw sleeping Reuben and, got struck by “His awful beauty, [and] cut the Fibres of Reuben [who] rolld apart & took Root / In Bashan” (74.43, E 230).\(^7\) In the illumination, we can see that his sense organs are yet intact despite Los’s deformation that precedes this plate. However, his “fibres” have been cut by Albion’s daughters.\(^8\) Also, his right arm and left leg are missing from one’s sight. The fibre-like roots are growing from every part of his body. His face rather subtly expresses his pain with the right side of the upper lip slightly more lifted than the other side. This already chilling image of Reuben is further distorted by Los:

Los bended his Nostrils down to the Earth, then sent him over
Jordan to the Land of the Hittite: every-one that saw him
Fled! they fled at his horrible Form: they hid in caves

\(^7\) It is possible that the illustration depicts other figures like Simeon, Levi, Judah, or Dinah who are also described on the same plate as having taken roots in different regions. However, Reuben’s transformation is depicted in the most detail including “the Fibres” that presumably grow from his body and become rooted into the ground as the illustration shows. The description about Simeon’s transformation is also detailed but he is said to have “rolld apart in blood” and there is no blood in the painting.

\(^8\) Fiber can be interpreted as internal organs in association with Albion’s disembowelment by Vala, Tirzah, and Rahab [Fig. 3] and threads “that enter into the composition of animal (muscular, nervous, etc.) and vegetable tissue” (“fibre, n.”).
And dens, they looked on one-another & became what they beheld

Reuben return’d to Bashan, in despair he slept on the Stone.
Then Gwendolen divided into Rahab & Tirza in Twelve Portions
Los rolled, his Eyes into two narrow circles, then sent him
Over Jordan; all terrified fled: they became what they beheld.

... Reuben return’d to his place, in vain he sought beautiful Tirzah
For his Eyelids were narrowd, & his Nostrils scented the ground
And Sixty Winters Los raged in the Divisions of Reuben: (29.47-32.3, E 177-178)

Los repeats his deforming of Reuben’s sense organs – nostrils, eyes, tongue and ear – and sending him over the Jordan. This episode is curiously reminiscent of Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* with the relationship between Los and Reuben analogous to that between Victor and the creature. Stephen C. Behrendt in his presentation “Teaching Frankenstein in 2018” brings attention to the “-ed” form in the adjective “wretched” in the creature’s words “All men hate the wretched.” From this, he observes a contradiction in people’s attitude towards the wretched. The wretched are in fact victims who are “made into wretches” and shockingly “the agents who render the wretched—who “wretch” them—then turn upon them, hating them for precisely those qualities and behaviors of which those agents are themselves the authors.” The same contradiction is found in the creator Los’s treatment of his creature Reuben. Los also “wretches” Reuben and then rages towards him for being wretched. Moreover, Los twists and narrows Reuben’s senses and then makes him be seen and humiliated by people. As the monstrosity of Shelley’s
creature is completed not by his own horrific appearances but by people who refuse to see him as human because of his looks, Reuben’s monstrosity is shaped by traumatizing experiences of despair and dejection. However, Blake’s creature does not rebel. In *Frankenstein*, the power shifts to the creature when he begins to watch his creator. On the contrary, Reuben does not look back at Los or those who behold him. His eyes remain upward as in the illumination instead of looking straight ahead to his viewers. Therefore, Reuben is disabled as he is not entitled to “the power of gaze” like Los or his viewers.

Blake, however, attempts to translate the viewers’ passive but powerful act of looking to the experience of being disempowered by repeatedly exposing them to the sight of the wretched figure. The process that Reuben goes through is summarized as “Exploring the Three States of Ulro; Creation; Redemption. & Judgment” (32.42, E 179). Reuben is Los’s, or Blake’s, artwork that is created and revised to be presented to the spectators who are terrified at the sight of the deformed figure. The creator repeatedly disfigures him as if trying to shock the viewers more intensely, and the viewer takes part in deforming Reuben through their assenting and reinforcing gazes. Connolly understands Reuben as a miscarried fetus that is born without a complete form and therefore reads the story as “a commentary on the human condition [in which] we are all abortive births” (120). Rather than becoming what they behold, Connolly suggests, people see their own malformations in Reuben. I agree that Reuben displays to people their own deformities. However, Connolly does not clarify the beholders’ “becom[ing]”. Becoming implies Blake’s anticipation for the viewer to change their faulty perspectives as a result of interacting with his works, to de-form their illusory “whole” forms and see their own mortality and deformity. And the transformation is achieved when the viewers
share Reuben’s painful experiences. When “his Tongue [is folded] Between Lips of mire & clay . . . All that beheld him fled howling and gnawed their tongues / For pain: they became what they beheld” (32.5-9, E 178). This time, the viewers do not merely behold and flee, but they reenact the experience of being deformed identifying themselves with the body of Reuben deformed by Los.

The intended effect of viewers’ identification with Reuben is for the viewers to realize that their perceptions are not definite. After sending Reuben over Jordan the second time, Blake speaks through Los to his reader: “If Perceptive Organs vary: Objects of Perception seem to vary: / If the Perceptive Organs close: their Objects seem to close also: / Consider this O mortal Man!” (30.55-7, E 177). Blake steers the experience of assimilation towards the more important one, that is, reflecting on their false belief that there is a definite form of normality against which the viewers tend to measure other people. This subjectivism is emphasized in many of Blake’s writings including his letter to Dr. Trusler (23 August 1799) in which he writes, “As a Man is So He Sees” (E 702) condemning Trusler who Blake thinks lacks discernment to appreciate his art. Blake goes on to write about his view of art and the viewer/reader while also implicitly attacking Trusler’s unimaginative views: “That which can be made Explicit to the Idiot is not worth my care. The wisest of the Ancients considered what is not too Explicit as the fittest for Instruction because it rouzes the faculties to act” (E 702). Adding that it was children who truly appreciated his paintings, Blake suggests that the capability for appreciating art does not depend on one’s intelligence but on imaginative eyes. He intentionally makes his art ungraspable lest the viewer/reader passively receives and settles for the explicit. To him, what is immediately visible in art is what the viewer/reader is already familiar.
with, i.e. the “material” (Doskow 78), not spiritual reality. Blake intends his art to provoke emotion, not reason, so that people can “act,” in other words, actively engage in his art. Blake, however, does not disregard the materiality of art; the material is crucial in his art. As he puts it, “Body is a portion of Soul” (Marriage of Heaven and Hell, E 34). Thus, it is equally important for the viewer/reader to react to both material and spiritual aspects of his art.

I have suggested so far that Blake’s art shows that individuals deform and are deformed through the unequal exertion of the power of gaze in direct contacts. Now I will turn to how Blake’s art shows that individuals are “deformed” at a larger level of society. Disability is not a personal tragedy but a social one; what makes disability a tragedy is not the condition itself, but the society that does not accommodate different physical and mental conditions. The minority groups like women, racial others, and people with disability are socially disabled as the system is designed to serve “normal” bodies. Individuals are required to make themselves more agreeable to the society; otherwise, they are considered abnormal and deformed requiring measures of correction. The relationship between individual and society was one of the major concerns of Romantic artists including William Blake. The Romantics acutely perceived social control over the individual mind and body and strove to liberate them from that oppression. Blake was also largely motivated for his pursuit of art by the injustice of the social system, famously writing “I must Create a System, or be enslav’d by another Mans” (Jerusalem 8.20, E

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9 Minna Doskow interprets Los’s words in Jerusalem: “Taking a subjective view of perception, which puts beauty in the eye of the beholder, Los shows how man’s limited perception affects the entire world around him: for the universe turns merely material and limited to match the material and limited sense organs of fallen man (27:55; 29:6)” (78). To the fallen human being, the reality is solely based on their material senses, so their reality is also “material.”
The same motivation drives contemporary cultural disability studies to “reverse the hegemony of the normal and to institute alternative ways of thinking about the abnormal” (Davis 49). Romanticism and Disability Studies alike strive against the established system and culture to imagine the alternative society where individuals are free from socially enforced values.

William Blake keenly recognized that individuals’ sufferings result from the malfunction of the society to a significant extent. The England that Blake saw is aptly described by Francis Grose who observes of late eighteenth-century London: “Every street, every alley, presents some miserable object, covered with loathsome sores, blind, mutilated, or exposed almost naked to the keen wintry blast . . . How frequently in winter do we see a woman, with two or three half-starved infants hanging about her, apparently dying with the rigours of the season!” (20). The London that Grose describes is very similar to the city depicted by Blake but with a different nuance. Whereas Grose’s view of people on the streets of London is without compassion, Blake’s observation of soldiers, chimney-sweepers, harlots, and infants driven into the streets is intimate as the poet pays close attention to each of their individual reactions – “sigh” and “tear” (“London” 11; 15, E 27) – to their circumstances, which cannot be noticed otherwise.11

10 It should be noted that in Jerusalem the system that Los creates as an alternative is problematic because he does not allow deviation from his law:

Los cries, Obey my voice & never deviate from my will
And I will be merciful to thee: . . .
I break thy brazen fetters
If thou refuse, thy present torments will seem southern breezes
To what thou shalt endure if thou obey not my great will. (8.29-36, E 153)

Los will unfetter the Spectre only on the condition that he will obey his will. Los uses his system created to liberate himself to oppress others. It may be Blake’s comment on his own self-contradictory statement that he will create a system to escape a system.

11 In the essay, Grose reports that the beggars use their disability for their “profession” of begging. The parish officers tell him that the beggars are “impostors” who “excite compassion, and procure money,” and this makes an old justice withdraws his charity for the poor. (19-22)
Through this intimacy, he presents them to the reader as human beings with vulnerability. At the same time, he exposes the malfunctioning society as well by illustrating how the church and palace are negligent about the people who live on the places that they “chartered.”

Blake’s perception of disability as a representation of larger social issues is different from that of his contemporaries. David M. Turner shows that disability was present in eighteenth-century London through various correspondences including Grose’s. The social treatment of disability which the correspondences reveal is dismal. In London, disability was perceived as an impediment to the development and cultural refinement of the city. Rather than contemplating the system that fails to ameliorate poverty that puts a lot of people into beggary and labor exploitation, Londoners condemn disability as a cause of “dirt” and “disorderliness” (Turner 94). Likewise, to Blake, disability represents bigger problems, but in an opposite sense. In many of his poems including “London” and “Chimney Sweeper,” Blake transposes disability, commonly thought of as a personal misfortune, onto the systematic problem. According to Saree Makdisi, Blake’s own insecure life due to unemployment and poverty made him more observant of the social problems. Blake was most acutely aware of the harsh labor conditions in England that made young chimney sweepers, prostitutes, and other social victims suffer from physical and mental illnesses (Makdisi 105). Such themes as child labor, poverty, and prostitution are central in Blake’s art. Blake is a visionary, but his subject matter is firmly based on his reality. To Blake, disability does not symbolize the social evil that needs to be eradicated; it is the corruption of society itself that needs to be eliminated.
Social order was given an especial premium in the late eighteenth-century England as the revolutionary atmosphere began to be felt in the country that was anxious about the transmission of the spirit of freedom, accompanied by violence and anarchy, from its neighboring country. Conservative England tried to “protect” the country from the influence of the French Revolution. It valued patriotism, institutions and anything that confined the energy and supported state power and authority as good and regarded the unknown, uncontrollable energy as evil. The propagation of liberal social and political ideas even led the leading visual artists like Joshua Reynolds, a founder and the president of the Royal Academy of Arts (1768-1792) to privilege the neoclassical orderliness and an artificial passionless composure in the Art Establishment. Reynolds regarded outbursts of the expressions and passion as sign of deformity. The Royal Academy’s ostensible patriotism reflected its comfortable financial arrangement with the government. Blake’s idiosyncratic art was developed in contrast to this atmosphere. Blake sought to expose chaos through his art rather than sealing energy into the sort of deceitful elegance pursued by the Royal Academy. Blake deconstructs the myth of order to awaken the public to the actual confusing world and its passionate liberal spirit latent in it. A central principle of Blake’s art is to subvert the conventional view of evil as negative and good as positive by reversing their values and thereby obscuring the distinction between them. The radical distortions of the physical bodies in Blake’s visual and verbal art can be understood in the similar vein.

Blake’s deliberate distortion of the well-proportioned body and the order of the world results in the sublime effect, and the reader/viewer’s experience of the sublime has the potential to lead them to realize their own physical reality. Through the
incomprehensibility and infinity of the sublime, the reader/viewer is exposed to the precariouslyness of their life built on the myth of order and normalcy. The sublime has often been studied in association with disability because of their similarity when it comes to the ways in which the encounter with disability makes the viewer both with and without disability feel. In analyzing the aesthetic effect of disability in literature, Ato Quayson suggests that the literary representations of the sublime and disability similarly result in unease and discomfort through their “ineffability/articulation” (208). The sublime and disability are not represented without difficulty because they cannot be fully articulated.

The sublime in Blake’s art can be effectively understood in relation to Edmund Burke’s analysis of the sublime. Blake’s art contains various visual features that can cause the sublime as conceptualized by Burke. First, Burke suggests that “the effects of a rugged and broken surface seem stronger than where it is smooth and polished” (91), an effect which can potentially lead to the experience of sublime. On the other hand, “the perfect unity” or “a complete whole” has less profound effects since it does not allow for any void that would display the frightening infinity (77). This would be an excellent analogy to the difference between Reynolds and Blake. Blake’s art is characterized by its irregularity and created by breaking the conventional surface. Reynolds idealizes the symmetry and harmony in art and expresses it with his smooth touch of brush on a canvas.

Burke’s idea of the sublime can be found in the recurrent themes of pain, fear and death expressed in the form of deformity in Blake’s visual and verbal art. Burke also pays attention to the sublime experience through body and mind. Burke writes that terror is
always a cause of the sublime: “No passion so effectually robs the mind of all its powers of acting and reasoning as fear. For fear being an apprehension of pain or death, it operates in a manner that resembles actual pain. Whatever therefore terrible with regard to sight is sublime, too” (58). Blake unnerves his viewers through images filled with horror, terror, and pain like “the formless unmeasurable death” (7.9, E 74) in Book of Urizen. The characters in Blake’s prophecies and illuminations are often those who are afflicted inducing mixed responses of horror and abomination rather than sympathy. Therefore, the radical distortions of the physical bodies in his verbal and visual art can be understood in relation to the Burkean sublime.

The idea of the sublime developed by Blake and Burke can be meaningfully used in understanding disability because the basis of the idea is in the human body. It has been pointed out that when comparing the sublime experience to looking at disability, the fact that disability is a real physical condition unlike the sublime which is an abstract concept can be neglected. As Quayson notes, discussing the intangible sublime experience as something comparable to disability, which is the actual reality to some people, might as well lead to immaterializing disability. Blake and Burke, however, do not neglect the significance of the physical body in the sublime experience as fear of pain and death is key to the sublime experience.

The difference of Blake’s sublime from Burke’s is that Blake intends the sublime effect for the reader and viewer to reflect on their own body. Earlier in this thesis, I showed how Reuben’s “terrible” deformity in Jerusalem frightens the viewer and “rouze[s] the faculty to act” as Blake puts it. According to Burke, the sublime suspends one’s action because the fear that induces terror “robs the mind of all its powers of
Blake and Burke similarly suggest fear and terror as the main source of the sublime, but the results of the sublime experience differ from each other. Blake’s sublime encourages the reader/viewer to “act,” to contemplate the source of fear and terror that they feel. The contemplation would ultimately lead them to realize that the fear comes from anxiety about their body. In dealing with the sublime that expands the human experience beyond the material bound, Blake brings the reader and viewer back to their body.

Across cultures, physical disability has been very often associated with the corruption of the soul, and it was certainly the case in the eighteenth century. In this part of the thesis, I will examine Blake’s view of form/body and soul/mind considering the social stigma of the visually unpleasing body as the embodiment of moral deficiency, an idea which Blake himself implements in his composition of art to some degree. Although Blake’s remark “Active Evil is better than Passive Good” (E 592) seems to show his subversive idea, Blake’s depiction of Evil does not entirely evade the stereotypes. An example of Blake’s explicitly using the metaphor of blindness occurs in *The Good and Evil Angels* [Fig. 4]. Some viewers observe that Blake uses racial stereotypes by depicting the good angel as a European with the light skin and the evil anger as a non-European with the darker skin. However, Blake does not use non-European character in this painting. It is the blindness of the Orc-like figure that is problematic. The lack of pupils in the evil angel’s eyes presumably causes him to flounder and fail in his attempt to snatch the infant. The Evil Angel’s blindness in addition to his hair coiled and his skin reddened by the heat of the flame is contrasted to the Good Angel’s golden hair and white skin to highlight their different moral states. The paradox in Blake’s valorization of evil
is here. He often states that evil is good, but his depiction of evil represents another exploitation of disability as the metaphor of moral deficiency. Blake’s assigning the physical state that is culturally perceived as abnormal to evil shows that he values certain types of bodies. Such a tendency to associate a bodily state with a state of the mind is ingrained in human perception such that Blake could not avoid it.

Many human figures in Blake’s images are injured, crooked, and contorted. While in classical art, the human body embodies the society’s idealized values, the perfect, rational and harmonious, Blake contorts and disfigures the beautiful body. Some figures are extremely contorted almost to look as if their limbs or head are missing. In one of Oothoon’s images in *Visions of The Daughters of Albion* [Fig. 5], both her legs are folded back at the knees, hiding the bottom legs from the sight and almost giving the visual effect of an amputated body similarly to the dis-armed figure of the Venus de Milo. Davis suggests that particular statue as embodying the Western art tradition of imposing social conventions and ideals upon the nude as the spectators of Venus imaginatively fill in the missing body parts and see her in her perfect form even though she is scarred, and her arms are missing. Oothoon’s body does not give exactly the same effect as the Venus but her body similarly questions the viewers. Above her image, the following verse is written:

Ask the wild ass why he refuses burdens; and the meek camel
Why he loves man: is it because of eye ear mouth or skin
Or breathing nostrils? No, for these the wolf and tyger have.
Ask the blind worm the secrets of the grave, and why her spires
Love to curl round the bones of death! and ask the rav’rous snake
Where she gets poison: & the wing’d eagle why he loves the sun
And then tell me the thoughts of man, that have been hid of old.

Silent I hover all the night, and all day could be silent,
If Theotormon once would turn his loved eyes upon me;
How can I be defild when I reflect thy image pure? (3.7-16, E 47)

Here, Oothon asks the important question about the contradiction implied in the human body that represents malice even though it was created in the likeness of “The Divine Image.”

In “Technologies of the Body: Polite Consumption and the Correction of Deformity in Eighteenth-Century England,” Turner and Alun Withey show how technological progress in orthopedics distorted the cultural values of the natural body. The promotion of orthopedic technology contributed to implanting the idea of achieving the ideal body as socially encouraged and polite based on the widely accepted idea that body posture was an indicator of social class. In this culture, the so-called natural body became something unattainable by natural means as it was now defined as “a socially acceptable, ‘polite’ body – something that was almost by definition unnatural, requiring careful training and cultivation” (Turner and Withey 794). Not just for medical purpose, people were encouraged to use their polite body to distinguish them from other “disabled” people and avoid being grouped with them together. Turner and Withey trace back the ascending trend of polite body to as early as 1730s in advertisements of metallurgical devices such as back-irons, steel backs and collars, and rupture trusses that were developed to help people correct their supposedly deformed bodies. Such devices
were first developed for the improvement of health and function, and enabling productive activity, but later people started to use them to have an ideal body. What is interesting in this cultural phenomenon is that the devices were not only used for the purpose of correcting but also for concealing. They corrected the body by shoving it into the frame and concealed what they saw as ugly and deformed. In contrast to this popular practice, Blake reveals the deformity of the human body and liberates the body at the same time by stripping away the clothes of the figures and presenting the distorted body as it is. Blake’s images are revealing to the extent that their skin, veins, and innards are visible.

In concealing the defects of the natural body with the artificial devices, one rationale was to give “the illusion of a ‘whole’ body” (Turner and Withey 787). Here, we can observe that with regards to the human body, the notion of natural and unnatural is reversed, subtly enforcing the idea that what is whole is what is natural, and that the unwhole, thus unnatural, body can be made natural through the artificial torsion of the body. The real sense of the natural human body loses its value in that society. In Jerusalem, Blake writes, “No one bruises or starves himself to make himself fit for labour!” (17.21, E 160). Blake’s reproach against self-harming acts intended to develop the utility and fitness of the body required by the society shows his consciousness of the absurdity that wrapped around the body. Blake pulls back the notion of the natural body to its original meaning by reversing the cultural practice of normalizing the body with the bandage and with a good posture. He makes the figures naked.\footnote{Seymour Howard suggests that around 1809, “Blake still parroted the arguments of Winckelmann concerning the salutary effects of climate, health, naturalism, and nudity enjoyed by the ancients and not by clothed, corrupted, and lifeless moderns; . . . Sir Joshua Reynolds . . . also made envious reference to the ideal and timeless images of Classical antiquity, in particular to the ideal nakedness of Laocoon. Such works had long been venerated academic paradigms for history painting and for religious and philosophical art of the highest moral order and poetic imagination” (122-123).} He exaggerates the motion and
posture of the body: stretching, bending and scrunching up the human form. For example, in *The [First] Book of Urizen* in the body of Urizen who has been just separated from Los is horribly bent and stiffened:

A vast Spine writh’d in torment

Upon the winds; shooting pain’d

Ribs, like a bending cavern

And bones of solidness, froze

Over all his nerves of joy. (10.7-11, E75)

Historically, the effort to have the proper body started as soon as the infant was born and their body was “[b]ent and distorted by swaddling, forcing into stays from infancy” (Turner and Withey 788). The similar image occurs in Blake’s “Infant Sorrow”:

“Helpless, naked, piping loud; . . . Struggling in my fathers hands: / Striving against my swaddling bands: / Bound and weary” (3-7, E 28). To the infant, the father’s hands and the swaddling bands only increase the tension as they bind the baby into something no better than the naked state. In the illustration of the poem [Fig. 6], the baby’s right leg is sharply folded imitating the iconic posture of Blake’s adult figures. Furthermore, the infant’s torso with arms stretched above twists a little to the direction away from the woman who tries to hold him as if it tries to avoid the adult’s hands, getting away from the hand and the swaddling band.

The eighteenth-century English people’s pursuit of the natural body is illustrated in Reynolds’s various portraitures especially of the noble women whose waistlines are excessively narrowed in achieving the “polite” posture that Turner and Withey describe.
Social dignity is well depicted in Reynolds’s *Garrick Between Tragedy and Comedy* [Fig. 7]. In this painting, the muse of comedy is widely interpreted as vice and the muse of tragedy as virtue. The muse of comedy, to the eighteenth-century viewers, looks like a whore as her clothes are slackening revealing her skin and the shape of her legs. Her body reclines to one side vulgarly pulling David Garrick’s right arm. Meanwhile, the muse of tragedy, properly clothed with her waistline tightened with a rope, stands upright assuming a pose of moral gravity. Reynolds’s notion of natural beauty that rejects any excessive motion can be seen as moderate compared to those who produced and used the corrective methods in the attempt to excessively change the shape of the body. However, Reynolds participates in increasing the value of the polite body by imposing negative or positive connotations upon certain bodies. Blake is not entirely free from the perpetuation of the negative cultural connotations through the depiction of posture either, as shown in his *The Good and Evil Angels*. However, it should be also noted that Blake ultimately attempts to obliterate the strict division between good and evil and virtue and vice by reversing their values.

Against this cultural and societal distortion of the natural body, Blake rejects any constraint or alteration of the natural form of creation, in light of which his poem “The Tyger” can be understood. The tiger in the poem is widely viewed as a manifestation of the divine order, which Colin Pedley affirms. Pedley lays out some leading ideas in the natural history of the eighteenth century concerning the tiger that Blake was presumably aware of and that can be shown to be the basis of “fearful symmetry” of Blake’s tiger. According to Pedley, in the same tradition, a French naturalist, Georges-Louis Leclerc, Comte de Buffon equates the tiger’s lack of proportion with its lack of morality. He
contends that Blake rejects this view of the tiger and instead suggests the tiger as symmetrical in its form and thus, as “the realization . . . of the divine energy” (244). In Pedley’s study, Blake’s “The Tyger” is placed among “eighteenth century texts, [in which] “symmetry” is the mark of that orderliness and pattern that reflects the mind of the Creator” (243). In Pedley’s logic, Blake’s illustration of “The Tyger” is mistakenly positioned in the tradition of neoclassical art. Given that Blake was more interested in disturbing the order upheld in the mainstream art than in reproducing it, it would be more accurate to view the tiger’s symmetry as its state of being constrained.

It is possible to think that Blake illustrates an oppressor’s image in the God who forms the human and oppresses the created form in “The Tyger.” Throughout the poem, the speaker gradually shifts his focus from the creator’s act of creation to the tiger itself. At the beginning, he asks the tiger “What immortal hand or eye, / Could frame thy fearful symmetry?” (3-4, E 24). He goes on to state what the creator might have done to create the “fearful symmetry” of the tiger. As God sees the human substance to be “unperfect” and pieces its parts into a perfect form, the creator’s eye along with the hand “grasp[s]” (15) and frames the tyger’s energy. Reaching the end, the speaker then asks, “Did he smile his work to see?” (19, E 25) This is a question that rephrases the repeated verse in Genesis 1: “God saw that it was good.” In Genesis, God’s beholding his creation is the act of approving the creation, the most powerful way of exerting the gazing power. The tiger’s inherent nature, the energy, and the violent instinct, which Buffon and other eighteenth-century intellectuals saw as fiendish, is contained in its extraordinary symmetry. His power is disabled by being “framed” after being created. The speaker’s

13 “Thine eyes did see my substance, yet being unperfect” (King James Version, Ps. 139.16).
admiration of the creative power of the god now turns into his resentment, however. He sympathizes with the entirely natural tiger and questions the god’s tyrannizing power: “What immortal hand or eye, / Dare frame thy fearful symmetry?” (23-24, E 25; emphasis added). Here, “frame” means “to adapt, adjust (usually something immaterial) to or unto something; to reconcile, submit” (“frame, v.”). In this question, the symmetry is now fearful because the symmetry is not the idealized balance and beauty but instead an imposed, unnatural confinement. Therefore, “the fearful symmetry” of the tyger is not a realization of harmonious configuration with the perfection of God’s creation, but the artificially modified state of the otherwise perfectly natural form of creation. The creator of the tiger represents a social, political, and intellectual power that is intolerant of any and all deviations from the norm and that imposes disability on a morally and physically neutral creature.

Blake’s interpretation of the creator as the oppressor is implied in Blake’s letter to Thomas Butts (April 25, 1803) where he writes “I rejoice & I tremble” and quotes part of Psalm 139, “I am fearfully & wonderfully made” (E 729). From the book of Psalm, Blake senses both joy and fear, two contrary feelings that are expressed in Songs of Innocence and of Experience, most ostensibly in two pairs of corresponding songs: “Infant Joy” and “Infant Sorrow,” and “The Lamb” and “The Tyger.” To Blake, God’s creation is wonderful yet fearful. Psalm 139 reiterates God’s making of the human form.

For thou hast possessed my reins: thou hast covered me in my mother’s womb. / I will praise thee; for I am fearfully and wonderfully made: marvellous are thy works; and that my soul knoweth right well. / My substance was not hid from thee, when I was made in secret, and curiously wrought in the lowest parts of the
When read in a physical sense, the creation of human bodies in the book of Psalms is not only awesome but also awful. God saw the substance of the incomplete human body and had the “reins” which can be variously interpreted both figuratively and literally as the kidney, an internal part of the body and the mind. With that substance, the Creator weaves the human form. From this gory image, Blake might have perceived fear in the sense of Gothic terror and sublime as well as awe.

Blake’s deconstruction of the mythical order and reconstruction of the natural disorder are expressed in the tension between balance and imbalance in his works. Blake’s works, while seemingly chaotic in many cases, simultaneously show strong symmetry in their composition. In The Blasphemer [Fig. 8], Blake depicts three men on the right side, and another group on the left. But the blasphemer’s body is contorted by the pain: the torso with his head is flipped backward, and the waist is twisted so that the legs are directed to one direction rather than facing the front. The number of the mob is equal on each side. All of the figures use the right hands to stone him. They move in “harmony.” Between them the blasphemer breaks the symmetry, bending the vertical middle axis that would be straight otherwise. The combination of order and disorder is also found in The Good and Evil Angels that achieves unity despite the hostile tension among its figures. The excessive expression of energy in the fire bursting from the bottom left corner that instantly draws the viewer’s attention is soon moderated by the cool sea that makes the straight line of horizon on the opposite side striking halfway through the plate. Diagonal lines made by the flame and the Evil Angel on the left and The Good Angel on the right, both figures tilting towards each other, compose a
symmetrical triangle. While the infant is frightened of the Evil Angel, his legs move synchronized with the movement of the angel’s legs as his legs make parallels with the evil angel’s. Although Blake’s visual art might seem confusing at the first glance, a closer look reveals that Blake’s paintings are well structured, oscillating between balance and imbalance.

When it comes to narrative structures, Blake deforms a body of text, disintegrates the familiar coherent forms of writings. Davis argues that a novel that has a conventional logical plot enforces normativity. The unconventional narratives, the dialectics in Blake’s verbal and visual texts that are not easily grasped, are often seen as incoherent. But that disruption is part of Blake’s aesthetic. One can be easily frustrated in their attempt to understand Blake’s works in chronological or any other logical structure, especially his prophetic books. For example, finding the chronological order of the prophecies is a vain pursuit because they are set in eternity where chronological time does not exist. It is with great difficulty for us to navigate the eternity with our material sense of time and space. Pierre Berger, pointing out the obscurity of Blake’s works, equates summarizing the prophecies to “rearrang[ing] the disordered occurrences of some feverish dream” (341).14 As reproducing dreams requires the dreamer to exaggerate the dream to a certain degree and consequently feign its truthfulness, any attempt to retell Blake’s prophetic works is inevitably mistaken. Similarly in his illuminations, Blake challenges the conventional relationship between the illustration and its verbal text. In Reading William Blake, Behrendt points out that in The (First) Book of Urizen, “Blake’s images are deliberately

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14 Berger suggests that Blake wrote his prophecies instantaneously without planning, which Berger considers ineffective, and that the dream-like narratives are a result of the spontaneity in his writing process rather than his contrivance. Further, Nicholas Shrimpton argues that Blake’s epic poetry was influenced by the prophetic traditions and the Hebrew poetry of the Old Testament.
anti-contextual, devoid of distinguishing details that would enable us to attach them with any certainty to particular time, place or event” (137), thus, leaving the reader/viewer with “feelings” rather than “meanings” (140). Blake not only deforms the figures but also deforms the logic of the world through his writing and drawing. This is problematic to viewers who expect to see a coherent structure in art. They prefer perfectly logical reality, though artificially constructed, over the natural world that is not always logically construed. This tendency to normalize perceived objects aligns with the problematic gaze in disability studies. Disorder, or “disruption,” in Davis’s words, “must be regulated, rationalized, contained” (129) in some way that is culturally conditioned.

The distorted expressions in the faces and bodies in Blake’s illuminations and illustrations may make the viewers cringe, but they also show Blake’s view of beauty. Reynolds states: “to preserve the most perfect beauty in its most perfect state, you cannot express the passions, all of which produce distortion and deformity, more or less, in the most beautiful faces” (E 653). For Reynolds, what reduces the human from the “perfect beauty” is the passionate expressions of human face and body, an idea which Blake detests: “What Nonsense / Passion & Expression is Beauty Itself--The Face that is Incapable of Passion & Expression is Deformity Itself” (E 653). What is considered as deformity by Reynolds is beauty to Blake. In contrast to In Reynolds’s paintings where the subjects are composed with smoothness, elegance, and gravity in their expressions, Blake’s works present human forms vulgar and naked with their unbridled emotions of pain and sorrow. Blake rejects the bland, neoclassical, expressionless beauty and suggests that the absence of passion and its physical expression is actually a form of deformity.

Another contrast between Reynolds and Blake is their execution of art; Reynolds,
greatly influenced by Italian art, composed the structure of light and shadow to make the
subject look realistic and natural, Blake highlighted the outline creating a stark texture
that endows his work with the unworldliness. In order to bring his ideal beauty to life,
Blake experimented and developed his unique style of visual art throughout his career. In
Descriptive Catalogue, arguing for “the outline” as an essential element in preserving
expression and character in paintings, Blake states that “the more distinct, sharp, and
wirey the bounding line, the more perfect the work of art” (E 549-50). The artistic
procedure that Reynolds pursued, namely chiaroscuro, was scorned by Blake as “vile
tricks” (E 547) that beguile the viewer to believe that there is an outline delineating the
subject; what they believe as a line is an illusion created by contrasts between light and
dark. In his satiric verse “To Venetian Artists,” Blake ridicules the promoters of
chiaroscuro as a dog that admires its reflection on the water saying, “This is quite
Perfection, one Generalizing Tone” (8, E 515). When the dog touches the water both
“shadow” and “substance” (11, E 515) of its image reflected on the water disperse. While
alluding to his remark about Reynolds’s view of art, “To Generalize is to be an Idiot” (E
641), Blake suggests that the illusion of reality created by chiaroscuro is only temporary.
To Blake, using that technique is not only undesirable but immoral because it encourages
the viewer’s preference of artificially constructed reality that is pleasing to the eye over
the natural world that is often unsightly.

The human body functions as the main vehicle of Blake’s ideas with “the
communicative potential of the bounding line” (529) as Matthew Green puts it. In the
relationships between text, outline and human on the one hand, and meaning, essence and
divine on the other, the former serves the latter as a communicative device. The
communicative potential of Blake’s art can also be drawn from Ruth Bienstock Anolik’s observation of Gothic literature that in a culture dominated by the normativity, not only the deviant body but also the discourse of differences is disabled, and so the communicative role of Gothic bodies in literature is vitally important in enabling the discourse of differences. Unlike the popular belief of body as the embodiment and container of soul in his time, Blake believed that body and soul are mutually essential for each other. Connolly wrote: “For Blake all Human Forms are despised and glorified at once” (26). This can be interpreted that for Blake, all bodies inevitably and unavoidably contain contradictory values. Rather than dividing different bodies into one group as glorious bodies and the other as despicable bodies, Blake views the contradictions implicit in all human forms equally. In *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, Blake explains that in his art-making, he “melts” the surfaces using corrosives, unlike the conventional engraving process, in which it is the lines to be printed that are removed, whether by the engraver’s burin or by acid. Through this method, Blake hopes to cleanse the doors of perception and makes surfaces that would display infinity stand out. The lines are left because of their “communicative potential.” The body has a similar role as the line; without it, the souls of the fallen human cannot communicate with each other.

In Blake’s philosophy of art, there is one bounding line other than the one that creates expression and character: the Newtonian line that divides the world. In his monotype named after the physicist, Blake portrays Newton as the epitome of the Enlightenment whose understanding of nature depends on straight lines drawn with a compass. This view is objectionable to Blake because it bounds our view of the world. Blake holds that, unlike his bounding line that makes infinity visible, the Newtonian line
splits the world to understand it and demystifies its mystery, giving a false belief that there is only a physical reality. The Newtonian line can be easily adopted to make law and order for a society and create social boundaries that facilitate government control. Deformity in Blake’s art can be understood as his strategy to obliterate this bounding line.

The bounding line was prevalent in the whole culture of eighteenth-century England. Fearing the French Revolution that threatened Britain, for example, the government tried to institutionalize the public taste for art, just as the Royal Academy of Arts also worked to steer the public taste and contain the spirit of the diseased liberty. Liberty was to eighteenth-century England analogous to infectious diseases, and the government’s treatment of the influence of the French Revolution was not unlike society’s isolation of the potentially contagious bodies. Blake seems to regard England’s campaign to defend against the atmosphere of liberty invading the country from other countries as a mistaken attempt at preventing spread of the disease:

The human race began to wither. for the healthy built
Secluded places, fearing the joys of Love
And the disease’d only propagated;
...
These were the Churches: Hospitals: Castles: Palaces:
Like nets & gins & traps to catch the joys of Eternity

(The Song of Los 3.25-4.2, E 67-68)

Makdisi associates this poem with the fact that Blake lived near the Royal Asylum for Female Orphans in Lambeth where young girls were apprenticed as domestic servants.
Observing that the aim of disciplinary institutions in England including the asylum was to produce the labor force of “regularity and uniformity” (103), Makdisi interprets *The Song of Los* as Blake’s criticism of the institutions “for organizing productive labor” and usurping children’s “joys of Eternity” (103). I would add that Blake’s criticism of the institutions is based on his humanistic interest in the curious reaction of “the healthy” to isolate them from “the joys of Love” as well as his humanitarian instinct to recognize social injustice in the institutionalized exploitation of child labor.

From such institutions as hospitals and asylums, Blake seems to observe the human tendency to categorize people into groups and isolate themselves from one another. In *The Song of Los*, we should pay attention to the word “secluded.” The institutions of contemporary England were not only built to produce useful labor force but also to protect the healthy population from “the disease’d.” In a sociocultural sense, the bounding line that stems from the Enlightenment is materialized into social boundaries; its scientific ideas reinforce the rationale of differentiating and discriminating human bodies. The institutions in eighteenth-century England played a key role in drawing social boundaries that systematically demarcate human differences by sorting people into the proper and improper. A vivid example of this can be found in the book for the patrons of the Royal Asylum for Female Orphans that shared a street with Blake’s house:

II. No child can be admitted, not accepted by the Committee as a proper object, who is under the age of nine, or above the age of twelve years.

III. No negro or mulatto girl can be admitted.

IV. No diseased, deformed or infirm child can be admitted.
VI. To prevent the admission of improper objects, every child is to be previously examined by a Physician or Surgeon, and Matron; and such Physician or Surgeon is to sign a certificate that such child is a proper object. (34-35)

The children’s individualities are reduced to race, gender, and body as they are screened as either “proper” and “improper.” The regulations show how the asylum, their patrons, and more broadly the English society defined people as either proper (healthy, white, and at the correct age for education) and improper (unhealthy, non-white and untamable).

Individual human bodies were measured against regularized social values, consequently, reinforcing the notion of the proper body and normality. In 1827, Blake stated in a letter that “the French Revolution Englishmen are all Intermeasurable One by Another” (E 783), which, as noted earlier in this thesis, according to Youngquist, shows that Blake might have been conscious of the rise of normalcy in England. This might indicate Blake’s observation of the social and cultural changes in eighteenth-century England in which an individual’s value is decided by comparison to another’s, making them correct their bodies to fit. Eventually, in the poem, the healthy people’s seclusion of the diseased that they fear ironically weakens the entire human race.

What makes one truly “healthy,” Blake asserts, is carefully seeing the bounding line that reveals to them infinity, the unknown world, instead of hiding it from their sight. According to Anolik, the link between monstrosity and disability is that they both disturb the deep-seated anxiety about the idealized human wholeness that they induce in both nondisabled and disabled people alike: “[T]he non-normative, transgressive figure [] troubles the category of the norm and transgresses the boundaries necessary to create the
norm” (7). The Gothic tends to “reflect the Enlightenment delineation of a boundary between the known and the unknown, and to cast the figure of human difference into the frightening territory of the unknown” (4). Blake’s art also aims to trouble the reader’s sense of security in their familiar boundaries. Through the images of deformity, he blurs the boundaries built to protect what is known from the unknown.

Blake uses his “bounding line” for the viewer to see what is actually before them instead of what they are conditioned to see and to reflect on their own human bodies that are as susceptible to death as any other. In The House of Death [Fig. 9], Blake illustrates the scene of the “Lazar-house” in Milton’s Paradise Lost:

. . . wherein were laid

Numbers of all diseas’d, all maladies
Of gystly Spasm, or racking torture, qualms
Of heart-sick Agonie, all feavorous kinds,
Convulsions, Epilepsies, fierce Catarrhs,
Intestin Stone and Ulcer, Colic pangs,
Daemonic Phrenzie, moaping Melancholie
And Moon-struck madness, pining Atrophie
Marasmus and wide-wasting Pestilence,

Dropsies, and Asthma’s, and Joint-racking Rheums. (11.479-88)

In the poem, the Lazar House is represented as swamped with all the maladies, diseases and death that human beings are too afraid to see. Blake tightly fills his plate with the images of the sick, pale figures. It is so swamped that the viewer cannot rest their eyes. The eye finally rests on the Urizen-like figure above the sick that looks most peaceful,
but he is also the personification of Death. In this illustration, the viewer cannot but see the dismal human conditions from which they are not free.

In the Lazar House, there is another figure than Death and the sick: Despair who “Tended the sick busiest from Couch to Couch” (Milton 11.490) while Death hovers over the sick shaking his darts. Blake’s rendering of this scene displays intriguing details that change noticeably in each of its reproductions. The most striking changes are found in the facial expression of Despair. In the first of the series, Blake illustrates Despair as it is, a sad, hopeless, tender figure with his eyes and mouth firmly shut and his head hung down. But he opens his eyes in the second [Fig. 10], and finally, his eyes are wide open looking upward to see his front and his mouth is open as well showing his teeth [Fig. 11]. This change seems to represent the Despair’s growing anger, resentment and gradual awakenment into the revenge. Despair opens his eyes and faces the reality unlike Reuben who never looked back at the oppressing Los and viewers.

In disability studies, empathy of the able-bodied towards people with disabilities is viewed as functionally impossible because the fully abled instinctively refuse the gesture because of their deep-rooted fear of the possibility that they may also be disabled or that they are already disabled in some way. By deforming the established order and the proper, normal human body, Blake exposes people’s fear of disability and suggests that “no one is normal” (Dolmage 91) and therefore, “No Individual ought to appropriate . . . to themselves Universal Attributes / Are the Blasphemous Selfhoods & must be broken asunder” (90.28-33, E250). Blake advises readers instead to hone their self-expression and individual uniqueness. Mike Goode’s “The Joy of Looking: What Blake’s Pictures Want” suggests that Blake’s art galvanizes readers’ overpowering individual sense of
beauty, which will eventually form the collective power to disturb the regulatory systems that govern the individual’s senses of beauty. Blake through his art reverses the hegemony of normality and imagines the world with diverse views of beauty constructed by different individuals.

With his deep interest in humanity, Blake explores different human forms and invites his reader/viewers to do the same. In his experiment with the human form, Blake forms and deforms what he forms, and he re-forms what he deforms. His art is a process of continual destruction, revision, and reconstruction. The reason why Blake seems to contradict himself sometimes might be because his ideas are in flux. He understands that ultimate truth is itself never entirely accessible to, or comprehensible by, the limited powers of mortal perception even to Blake himself. The artist’s experimental spirit is transferred to the reader/viewer. While warned against falling for one’s single vision, the reader/viewer is given the liberty to have subjective responses to Blake’s art. When reading and viewing Blake’s art, a reader/viewer’s belief in a definite form of normality is challenged. They see various realities observed from different perspectives. Blake does not intend for the reader/viewer to simply be more tolerant of differences or sympathetic towards them. He wants them to reflect on their ways of thinking about different human forms and to realize that they think not autonomously but automatically, that their eyes are programmed by culture and society to see the world in certain ways. Blake’s art “cleanses the doors of perception” for the reader/viewer to be capable of seeing beyond, and eventually, with the broadened imagination, to ask a more fundamental question “What is Man!” (E 259).
Fig. 1. William Blake, *Frontispiece to “The Eagle. Ballad the Second” in Hayley’s Designs to a Series of Ballads* (Chichester, 1802), 1802, British Museum (1894.0612.34.1), digital image © Trustees of the British Museum, www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details.aspx?objectId=1356447&partId=1&searchText=william+blake&page=3.
Fig. 2. William Blake, *Jerusalem*, Plate 74, “The Four Zoa's clouded rage....”, 1804 – 1820, Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection (B1992.8.1(74)),
collections.britishart.yale.edu/vufind/Record/1667798.
Fig. 3. William Blake, Jerusalem, Plate 25, “And there was heard....”, 1804-1820, Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection (B1992.8.1(25)), collections.britishart.yale.edu/vufind/Record/1667738.
Fig. 4. William Blake, *Good and Evil Angels*, 1795-?c.1805, Tate (N05057),
digital image © Tate released under Creative Commons CC-BY-NC-ND (3.0 Unported),
Fig. 5. William Blake, *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*, Plate 6, “And none but Bromian . . . .”, 1793, Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection (B1978.43.1583). collections.britishart.yale.edu/vufind/Record/1667401.
Fig. 7. Joshua Reynolds, *Garrick Between Tragedy and Comedy*, 1760 – 1761,

Fig. 8. William Blake, *The Blasphemer*, c.1800, Tate (N05195), digital image © Tate released under Creative Commons CC-BY-NC-ND (3.0 Unported),

Fig. 9. William Blake, *The House of Death*, 1795-c.1805, Tate (N05060), digital image © Tate released under Creative Commons CC-BY-NC-ND (3.0 Unported),

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