THE LITERATURE OF PITY BY DAVID PUNTER

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David Punter's cogent and erudite book makes a much needed contribution to contemporary scholarly discourse centering on the study of affect and negativity, which too often relegates negative emotions to the margins. Punter, the author of over twenty monographs and edited collections on the Gothic, modern writing, and literary theory, offers a timely collection of short essays, chronologically ordered, around the theme of pity. Our current cultural and economic epoch, he suggests, renders pity as a "matter of public urgency" (v), opening up the possibility of releasing pity from the stigmas that negative emotions often carry for contemporary readers. In the Preface, Punter counsels that this book is best read in relation to three of his previous works: *The Literature of Terror*, *Writing the Passions*, and *Rapture*. The book's brevity mirrors its simplicity, and yet while Punter has tried to "pare this book to the bone" (vi), not weighing it down with theoretical jargon, it remains a critically rigorous and insightful text. What emerges is a nuanced and historically pertinent study which unveils and indexes the enigmatic nature of pity's weakening force.

This critical approach is especially evident in the first chapter, "Distinguishing Pity," where Punter delineates pity's deployment in philosophy—is it a genuine feeling or a sign of contempt? —and its use in literary writing, asserting that the way we think about certain emotions always changes over time. Punter distinguishes a number of different dichotomies, such as hero and monster, pity and self-pity, and the problematic proximity of pity to love. Moreover, citing Nietzsche, he notes that "under conditions of pity 'suffering itself becomes contagious'" (10). As such, pity is something that should be avoided at all costs, but the writers he invokes ask: at *what* cost?

To create an affective framework for discussing pity, in the second chapter, "Pity and Terror: The Aristotelian Framework," Punter traces pity back to Aristotle's *Poetics* and the force of tragedy by examining how drama produces effects by representing the turmoil of emotions in real life. By prohibiting the crossing of the border from feeling to action, pity "does nothing; it achieves nothing" (16). Through his analysis of the strange relation between pity and the uncanny, Punter is able to identify how pity, following Aristotle, "melts the soul" and, as such, we cease to be individuated subjects. Thus, pity is inextricably tied to fear, specifically the "fear of dissolution" (21), which, if pity is fully experienced, is capable of engulfing us all.

Chapter 3 explores the aesthetic parameters of the Pietà, where the relationship between mourning and suffering is ever-present. For Punter, the Pietà makes two simultaneous claims: that all there is in life is mourning and death, but also that "such suffering is beyond our own perception, our limited perspective" (25). In this way, Mary herself is the true emblem of suffering. Artists such as Roger van der Weyden, Michelangelo, Vincent van Gogh, and Angus Fairhurst are central to this section's inquiry, in which Punter tries to ascertain the location of pity, a site that cannot be pinned down, but only continues. Chapter 4 examines Shakespeare's engagement with pity, which generally occurs in the contexts of choice, decision, and desperation. In a variety of close readings of King Lear and Macbeth and other texts, Punter shows that while pity may initially appear to be a weak emotion, its strength is that it persists in spite of itself.

Much of Punter's interpretation of pity hinges on the social location of the reader. In Chapter 4, "The Eighteenth Century," he picks three representative texts from mid-century—

"Ode to Pity," *Roderick Random*, and *Tom Jones*—in order to ask a central question: Are we to imagine that we have the capacity to feel pity for people, or are we to imagine what it would feel like to be pitied ourselves? This leads Punter to a fascinating discussion of what he calls "inverse pity," that is, pity of the weaker for the stronger, which, for me, is a very important critical moment in the book. Punter's consideration of inverse pity paradoxically allows us to reframe it as a kind of weak emotional limit experience wherein pity's frail uselessness becomes its true strength. Chapter 6, "Blake: Pity would be no more…," focuses on Blake's *Songs of Innocence and Experience* and *The Book of Urizen* and their resonances with divinity and the soul. "The 'field' of pity asserts consanguinity between God and man," writes Punter, "much like the Pietà, where human suffering is an expression of divine grief" (66). The many faces of pity in Blake are mobilized via a series of dialectics: pity and terror, pity and memory, pity and mourning, ultimately indexing the complex nexus of emotions pity is asked to signify.

Chapter 7 explores aspects of Victoriana, situating pity within a structuralist perspective. For Punter, in the study of emotion there is a continuing excess, an enduring instability or "veering," to follow Nicholas Royle (72). Chapter 8 examines Chekhov and Brecht's engagements with pity and self-pity, attempting to think through, for instance, the "not-quite-human" status of some of Brecht's characters. Chapters 9-13 trace a multitude of topics and issues, including: the pity of war, Algernon Blackwood's Gothic, pity's cold extremities in Jean Rhys and Stevie Smith, contemporary Scottish Gothic, and pity in relation to diaspora and colonialism. Chapter 14 concludes the book with analysis of the music of Bob Dylan, putting pity in relation to the "flooding" nature of Dylan's works, about which, Punter argues, there is something surreal.

By weaving together the Western traditions of literature, art, and music throughout the book, Punter provides readers with an interdisciplinary compendium that paradoxically attempts, through the very act of studying pity's weakening force, to set it free.

In "After Thought: Under the Dome," Punter reflects upon Stephen King's novel of the same name and gives his own parting words on the subject. Ultimately, Punter concludes, "pity, which may seem the most human of emotions, is in the end strangely, uncannily not-human, or transhuman" (169). There is surely something in pity that reminds us of our humbleness, yet it always stops somewhat short of transforming into love. But he asks, whether this is not true of all the emotions. Just like the passions, emotions play through us—even *play* us (170). The question of the relation between word and feeling is not something that can be pinned down, and yet perhaps that is the book's most haunting lesson. Pity, he suspects, is endless.