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Application of a Concept: Seeing Wordsworth Through Burke

In “The Effects of Sympathy in the Distresses of Others,” Edmund Burke is “convinced we have a degree of delight . . . in the real misfortunes and pains of others” that “induces us to approach them” with sympathy (118). William Wordsworth initially echoes a similar understanding of distress, affection, and the passion tying them to pleasure. His poem, “The Last of the Flock,” begins with the speaker approaching a distressed man to inquire what ails him, presumably hoping to provide consolation. In truth, the speaker is fascinated by the image “not often seen [, of] / A healthy man, a man full grown, / Weep[ing] in the public roads, alone” (1.2-6). Despite the commonalities, as the reader listens to the mourning shepherd’s story, the intricacies of Wordsworth’s views are revealed as opposing Burke’s. The two theories split apart at the point where human nature itself appears to break down. Burke argues that “If this passion [sympathy] was simply painful, we would shun with the greatest care all persons and places that could excite such a passion; as some, who are so far gone in indolence as not to endure any strong impression, actually do” (119). In referencing “indolence,” he considers the anomaly as something more than just a lazy or indifferent person. As the Oxford English Dictionary confirms, the word can be understood as a kind of pathology, denoting “Absence of pain” in addition to apathy ("indolence, n."). *Indolence* thus becomes synonymous with what might more modernly be described as clinical depression. “The Last of the Flock” in turn becomes a case-study—a patient-doctor transcript that fits right into the patient’s medical file. A dilemma

concerning correlation and causation appears with respect to the patient's prognosis. The shepherd complains of deteriorating relationships, as is often the case with depression: "in my sore distress; / . . . I loved my children less" (Wordsworth 9.5-8). Whereas Burke seems to paint "indolence" as an inherent difference in a minority, Wordsworth outlines the shepherd's distance as a symptom of a greater pathology. The shepherd was not always this way: he once was filled with "youthful follies" (3.2), achieved success (4.1-6), and "loved [his] children more" (9.3-4). He even sought help "of the parish" at the start of his decline, being denied aid (5.4-10). The failure is not his alone (if at all). Rather, it is the sum of a collective shortcoming. In this context, the communal role of delight in distress, which Burke probes, becomes more apparent as a kind of coping mechanism, "designed that we should be united by the bond of sympathy" to combat the development of indolence, apathy, seclusion, and depression, all recognized as unnatural (119). The speaker highlights the natural order, the perfect application of sympathy, not just preventing such illness, but treating it. The amount of quotation used within the poem serves to blur the boundaries between the characters of the poem and the author himself. The shepherd becomes the speaker as the speaker acts as little more than an echo-chamber, a good listener, a stranger that immediately puts himself in the shoes of the distressed. Apparently, Wordsworth's society is not as perfectly inclined to sympathy as Burke would imply. The pathology embodied by the shepherd seems to be a larger issue, not limited to this one person. Wordsworth begins by noting how he has never witnessed grown, crying men "In distant countries"—"such a one, [exists only] on English ground" (Wordsworth I.1-5). As an Irishman, perhaps Burke and his fellow countrymen are immune, but that is unlikely. What is more likely is that Wordsworth has a much more grounded practical understanding of distress and sympathy than the high philosophical high ground from which Burke looks down upon the rest of humanity.

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