

Lament-Praise



Albero Porta—Cedro or Door Tree—Cedar by Giuseppe Penone, 2012

Displayed at the National Gallery exhibit of St. Francis of Assisi, London

316 X 105 X 105 centimeters,

Cedarwood



Brother Francis and Brother Sun by Giovanni Costa, 1878-85, Oil on canvas, 86.4 x 195.6 cm



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“In *The Door Tree (Cedar)*, the opening is large enough for a person to step through,” a threshold. “For Penone, to carve a tree is ‘to penetrate with a chisel into the intimate history of the wood, carved by days of sunshine, rain, snow frost and encounters with other living forms, contact with insects, animals, accidents, shocks incisions, wounds, and the caresses of other plants’” (National Gallery).

Giuseppe Penone, Italian artist creating a tree sculpture



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Lament-Praise in Psalm 13

“How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long, will you hide your face from me? How long...will I have sorrow in my heart all the day?...Light up my eyes, lest I sleep the sleep of death.”

Only a couple lines later...”But I have trusted in your steadfast love; my heart shall rejoice in your salvation.”

It ends with movement toward praise, like forecasting what may come through trust.

Lament-Praise in Psalm 22

“I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint; my heart is like wax; it is melted within me...they have pierced my hands and feet...

I will tell of your name to my brothers; in the midst of the congregation I will praise you...The afflicted shall eat and be satisfied: those who seek him shall praise the Lord!”

And since Jesus is associated with this Psalm, we may be comforted that he lamented too, that we praise a God who laments and still hopes.

George Herbert (1633): “Affliction” (3)

My heart did heave, and there came forth, *O God!*

By that I knew that thou wast in the grief,

To guide and govern it to my relief...

Hadst Thou not had Thy part,

Surely the unruly sigh had broke my heart.”

Yet this poem ends with praise that has been touched my lament.

George Herbert (1633) “Affliction” (5)

Affliction then is ours;

We are the trees, whom shaking fastens more,
While blustering winds destroy the wanton bowres,
And ruffle all their curious knots and store.

My God, so *temper joy and wo*,
That thy bright beams may tame thy bow.

[italics added]

Nature in the Psalms helps the speaker transcend lament-only kind of living into praise. Nature often signifies a transformation of God helping the soul or of transcending mere self focus to see God in creation and even to become a created thing (e.g. “you made my mountain stand strong”).

- Psalm 23, which follows the lamenting language of Psalm 22 referenced earlier, says “He makes me lie down in green pastures.”
- Psalm 30: Just a few lines after “Weeping may tarry for the night, but joy comes with the morning,” we read “By your favor, O Lord, you made my mountain stand strong.”
- Psalm 40: “I waited patiently for the Lord; he inclined to me and heard by cry. He drew me up from the pit of destruction, out of the miry bog, and set my feet upon a rock.”
- Psalm 91 when the speaker needs safety, needs a refuge: “He will cover you with his pinions, and under his wings you will find refuge.”

And toward the end of the Psalms, the voice becomes less about self and more absorbed with delight and praise toward God, often using nature language like in Psalm 104.

- “O Lord you are very great! You are clothed with splendor and majesty, covering yourself with light as with a garment, stretching out the heavens like a tent. He lays the beams of his chambers on the waters: he makes the clouds his chariot; he rides on the wings of the wind.”
- And Psalm 150 culminates: “Let everything that has breath praise the Lord!”

C.S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed*, Ch. 1

“Meanwhile, where is God? This is one of the most disquieting symptoms. When you are happy, so happy that you have no sense of needing Him, so happy that you are tempted to feel His claims upon you as an interruption, of you remember yourself and return to Him with gratitude and praise, you will be—or so it feels—welcomed with open arms. But go Him when your need is desperate, when all other help is in vain, and what do you find? A door slammed in your face, and a sound of bolting and double bolting on the inside. After that, silence. You may as well turn away. The longer you wait, the more emphatic the silence will become. There are no lights in the downs.”

C.S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed*, Ch. 4

But by the last chapter, he begins to use the *language of nature*.

He describes Joy as being like a garden. (He previously described her like a sword.)

He says she is like a “nest of gardens, wall within wall, hedge within hedge, more secret, more full of fragrant and fertile life, the further you entered.’ And then, of her, and every created thing I praise, I should say, ‘In some way, in its unique way, like Him who made it.’ Thus up from the garden to the Gardener...To the life-giving Life and the Beauty that makes beautiful. She is in God’s hands.”

He says he must turn to praise, for he may joy again. In praising, he can enjoy Joy as He is enjoying the one who made her.

