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# Environmental Art and Wilderness: The Stakes of Beauty

*Pascale Weber*

## Abstract

In the field of environmental art, the concept of beauty is linked to the history of wilderness and Romanticism. The beautiful and the sublime arouse a debate that opposes the defenders of a pragmatic ecological commitment against the partisans of a subjective and sensitive creation. In reality, these debates are nothing but old quarrels over the engagement of art, the recognition or rejection of its autonomy towards other disciplines, especially regarding scientific expertise. Approaching creation from the angle of beauty is a way of updating our principles of taste, the ability to judge and also to raise once again what is considered a risk for the individual and for the collective, the exacerbation of the senses, the passions and seduction. Finally, it is about subjecting art to principle of utility that neglects all subjective creation when we are collectively and daily subjected to a regime of guilt and anxiety which orchestrates in turn a form of political and existential resignation. But what remains of aesthetic and artistic experience in such conditions? Does not the rationality of this approach confuse art and communication, denying the emotional connect of art and the fact that beauty is defined by emotional reactions?

**Keywords:** aesthetic, art, performing arts, beauty, emotion, environmental ethics, perception, presence, representation, romanticism, wilderness

## 1. Introduction

Like Caspar David Friedrich's famous painting "Wanderer above the sea of fog", the romantic representations of landscapes that have marked the history of Western art bear witness to an immersive experience in rural or wilderness settings, in no human's land. These paintings depict a strange, sometimes hostile setting, escaping from all human power, and in which other forms of animal, plant and magical life flourish. This unknown world arouses strong and contradictory feelings: attraction and repulsion, admiration and fear, serene meditation and morbid fascination. It is necessary to distinguish Romanticism, marked with a capital letter and referring to a nineteenth century artistic movement, to which I have just referred, and romanticism, marked with a lowercase letter, referring to an aesthetic and poetic posture that is not related to a particular era (**Figure 1**).

What is beauty for an artist? There are probably as many answers as there are individuals, I express myself as a performer: for the last fifteen years or so, I have performed within the duo Hantu (weber + delsaux) in non-urban, not very accessible and sparsely populated spaces (Indonesian equatorial forest, Labrador and Canadian Arctic, Northern Norway, Soufriere of Manzianna-Italy, Dartmoor-England ...). In these "experiential" works, it is a question of thinking of the place



**Figure 1.**

Caspar David Friedrich, “Wanderer above the sea of fog”, 1817, 98 × 74 cm, oil on canvas, Hamburger Kunsthalle, Hamburg, Germany [Public domain].

from the perspective of the body and conversely of thinking of the body from the perspective of the place in which it is immersed. To describe these performances, I insist on the functioning of our duo: by immersing my body in an unfamiliar space (testing the cold water of a river, a particular brightness or darkness, extreme temperatures, the presence of animals, insects, geographical misapprehension, various dangers and loss of landmarks) I seek to exacerbate my senses and create fictions that reveal a displacement as much as an awareness of my representations of the body and territory. Jean Delsaux records images—photographic or video—that attest to the ecology of our perception revealed by these unusual environments. Thus we work together in the same place and the same context but from two diametrically opposed points of view: the presence of the body in representation and the representation of the body in presence. The feeling of beauty manifests itself for our duo on these two levels: that of presence and that of representation.

## 2. What is the feeling of beauty?

The feeling of beauty is a construction. It is developed from different emotions (such as fear of danger, appeasement, astonishment, the joy of discovery) that manifest themselves instantly, temporarily and physically (agitation, speeding up the heartbeat and breathing rate, perspiration, etc.) and psychologically (negative or positive thoughts, change of mood).

The feeling of beauty is built from spontaneous emotional reactions. It belongs to each perceiving subject: a performer listening to what the place does to their



**Figure 2.**  
*Hantu (#19), “Caldara Di Manziana” (Soufriere/Soufrière), performance n°63, diptych, Italy, 2019. A performing body (a) in a desert place with springs of sulfurous water (b) [©Hantu (weber + delsaux)].*

body, or a performer who seeks to represent the experience of presence by putting in motion their gaze but also their own body (reacting to the presence and movements of their partner, which they must accompany with empathy): it is only possible to represent presence by being oneself present to the presence (**Figure 2**).

From the feeling of beauty felt by two people can emerge a deeper emotional construction, implying the overcoming of individual experience and the accession of a new scale of perception. The common experience of a full and indescribable emotional manifestation probably refers to what Kant calls the perception of the sublime. This experience designates a higher level in the graduation of the sensible, I call this feeling of totality aesthetic ecstasy. Aesthetic ecstasy first manifests itself in the encounter between two full artistic experiences, in the subsequent materialization and synchronicity of these two irreducible events, in the framework of a single representation.

Let us clarify. Being present in one's environment consists of an introspective re-centering: it is not a matter of making a “selfie” in an amusement park or on a “remarkable” site along a tourist route. It is often more about locating “neutral” spaces in territories that are already historically or culturally loaded, so as not to have to struggle with the place as a “spectacle”. In this space that welcomes emotion, the meditating body then tries to forget the other who is looking at it. Performing presence is to become blind to the image we offer, it is to gradually withdraw oneself from the visible world, to be only present to oneself: to no longer be in representation but to be in one's body, to repatriate the gaze we carry of ourselves from an imaginary external point of view, to become a body of pure sensation. My heart slows down, I hear the blood in my temples beating in rhythm with sounds that I discover, more and more subtle.

This experience is a form of trance and would put me in real danger if Jean Delsaux was not present to monitor the potential risks around me. This shift in attention is necessarily linked to a relationship of trust that confers a sufficient sense of security for my body to deactivate its surveillance functions, to “lose sight” of the surrounding environment. It allows me to focus on the emotional energy manifesting itself in an internal movement of my body. To finish on this point, I add that trusting one's partner first of all means they are the one who sees, lending their eyes, but they are also the one who remembers and constructs the story, lending their memory. Because the particular state in which the performance puts me does not allow me to restore the experience with hindsight. It is the story and image made by my partner I trust to build my own memory afterwards. By changing the values of the scale of sensitivity, part of the immediate reality comes out of the field of our perception: I am no longer more than a set of cells, a constellation of



immediate sensations, without intention, therefore without project, that is to say, without memory. When I perform, I lose my identity, I lose all resemblance of what I ordinarily think I am.

Returning to the question, what is beauty for an artist? On the one hand, beauty consists of a harmonious continuity between the body and the space, and on the other hand on a synchronicity between inner experience and the possibility of transmission through the narrative (verbal, iconographic, gestural?) of the feeling inspired by the place in which the body is immersed. The two experiences—presence and representation—are both based on emotions experienced by the body.

## 2.1 Beauty, the projection of an inner state on a space

*“perceiving is an act of attention, not a triggered impression.”*

James J. Gibson [1]

Perception is an active action, not passive. For the romantic artists of the nineteenth century, the feeling of beauty results from a set of emotions experienced in a body caught in a chaotic environment, in which overpowering natural elements (storms, cataclysms, apocalypse) are expressed, involving a non-human relationship to time (either it unfolds cyclically at the rhythm of the seasons or at the infinite scale of the founding narratives). The contemplation provoked by nineteenth century landscapes is strongly criticized by environmental ecology because the poetics proposed by the experience of the sublime celebrates a wild and authentic nature that could only exist as a fantasy of a lost Eden, and because by ignoring the reality of the industrial world such an aesthetic would be totally inoperative as a form of militant action for the protection of the environment. Landscape, as conceived by Romanticism and as it can still be perceived today, can be seen as a projection of human emotion on a contemplated space: in this sense, it is only a symbolic construction, blind and harmful, arousing and then neutralizing emotions, it has less to do with real spaces threatened by human activity, than with a morbid mental space of consumption and spectacle.

In the romantic posture that prolongs the ideal of the eponymous movement there is indeed a form of meditation that resists pragmatic collective action, just as there is an emotional exacerbation that seeks to subtract the body from a scientific or discursive expertise that is both rationalized and ideological. It is also true that the beauty of the landscape is a projection of an inner state onto a space that stimulates the body and the imagination. Nevertheless, this phenomenological experience is essential for our identity construction because it makes us feel part of a place. Like Realism, Romanticism has developed a sensitive and symbolic lexicon that has changed the way both city dwellers and non-city dwellers see the territory.

However, Romanticism was not so much used to document the reality of nature for its contemporaries, to which specific qualities are conferred, but rather to recognize the lived sensorial experience, and not the theorized experience, of the artist. These representations, the purpose of which is not precisely educational, then infuse all layers of society, inviting them to walk, build and appropriate the landscape.

This point is important, without education about the aesthetic experience of the landscape the state of our roadways would be different: in Southeast Asia for example where I lived as a child and where I went again as an adult, the plastic waste that did not yet exist, is accumulating today, thrown on the side of roads, in the jungle or along the coast as if it were vegetables peels that can decompose. It is representation that changes behavior. Grandiose landscape paintings show the exaltation of the painter confronted with the excessiveness of space. It is a visual

shock for the spectator, who thanks to the spectacular scale of the image is invited to reconsider the representation he has of the body, its strength, its ability to act on the course of its existence. In this reversal appears the beauty of the living. And this beauty calls humility. This reversal also shows that the artistic act is only fully realized as a transmissible experience.

Annie Le Brun, a surrealism specialist, speaks about the commodification of art as a “new disfigurement of the world.” She considers beauty and ugliness as real political issues, vivid and incisive, that allow us to lead our lives and thoughts with vigilance, when “cynicism makes it possible to neutralize the appearance of true protest” [2]. Oneirism and the supernatural are thus antidotes to anxiety-provoking hysteria, moral guilt and the programmatic modeling of our behavior in the name of the common interest.

The concept of beauty refers to a form of knowledge that is not directly accessible, to which we might—since it is rooted in the intimate and individual experience of the body—blame for being proselyte with difficulty. For this reason working as a duo is important for me, because it rests between the experience of presence and the experience of representation, an unbridgeable gap, even in the case of aesthetic ecstasy, which allows two irreducible experiences to be brought together without being confused as two ascetic regimes, each based on empirical work, separated from the human world, in silence, as two exercises of meditation, vision, revelation. Performing without a public is a permanent re-centering exercise of reviving our expectations, reminding us of what is priceless and preventing our consciousness from being captivated by multiple models: performing becomes a way of dreaming with the body and revealing a world that is not immediately seizable in reality.

Our mental representations are as much affective as they are societal and cultural. They allow us to revisit the infinite complexity of the empirical world. The relationship we develop with the environment and the place we plan to occupy in the biosphere derives from our relationship with knowledge and our ability to see the world around us; for knowledge is first of all a vision. This can be confirmed by classical pedagogical theories involving vision in a form of cathartic knowledge, by the “encyclopaedist” approach of the humanists, or by the passage attributed to the development of information networks from a civilization of language to a civilization of the image. Not only is all knowledge first of all a vision, but also vision is nothing more than knowledge. I would add that any vision cannot be made without a real experience of the landscape, in-situ experience, meditative, immersive experience, before being impressed in our memory by the emotion that this experience arouses.

Beauty is the expression of a total experience, it is a construction and a cognitive representation insofar as it is the image an individual creates of a situation, for example about their presence in a particular place. This representation is at the confluence of sensations and memory: the sensations present are exacerbated by images of past experiences and memory regenerates and feeds on new sensations. According to a cognitivist approach, it is from the image formed in the retina that a first coding takes place, followed by transmission to the brain, from which point a mental representation is generated, upon which symbolic treatments are performed. James J. Gibson criticizes this conception and substitutes it with an ecological approach to perception. According to him one cannot analyze behavior by subtracting the individual from the world, it is necessary on the contrary to consider the being who perceives in relation to their environment and the constraints imposed by this environment.

Beauty is a total experience made up of sensitive knowledge.

In his *Manifesto of Romanticism* (in the preface to *Cromwell*), Victor Hugo says that:

*“Humanly speaking, not everything in creation is beautiful, that the ugly exists beside the beautiful, the deformed near the gracious, the grotesque as the reverse of the sublime, evil with good, shadow with light.” [3]*

Hugo goes on to say that “the starting point of religion is always the starting point of poetry. It is all related” [4] which is eventually reiterated by Ernst Cassirer, for whom the human being is essentially a symbolic animal. According to Cassirer, we constantly create symbols to liberate ourselves from pure sensation: to place the body at a distance, to give a word for a sensation in order to exorcise or domesticate it. This is where academic knowledge is unable to find the body that art seeks to achieve. Only artistic language manages to sometimes seize pure sensation. Cassirer dreamed of a general systematics of symbolic forms:

*“We must, without any prejudice or dogmatic theory of knowledge, seek to understand the particularities of each type of language: scientific language, artistic language, religious language, etc.; we must determine the importance of their contribution to building a ‘common world’.” [5]*

The meta-symbolic system of Cassirer operates at the meeting point of all spiritual domains: religion, art, science, metaphysics. It proposes a totalizing experience identical to that which constitutes the act of creation. An experience that aims for nothing other than the desire to access and find ways to access spiritualities and modalities of existence that partially evade contemporary thought: the instant of creation is a moment of synthesis of all thoughts and visions—spatial and temporal—that the artist experiences. The artist seeks nothing more than to renew and enrich their sensitive impressions where globalized culture renounces diversity, impoverishing it through the sole concern of maintaining the political order by neutralizing everything that could challenge it and claiming innovations or revolutions are mere reformulations of this order.

## 2.2 Emotion, perception and sensation

*“The image is a plant that needs earth and sky, substance and forms”*

Gaston Bachelard [6]

It is through my body that I am present in the world. Immersed in a space that reveals my inner space to me, I wonder what is the nature of the bond that attaches me to my body: what constitutes, nourishes and comes out of both my sensitive knowledge and my perceptible existence. There are different perceptible existences, that of the I and subjectivity, which puts forward a form of pure interiority, and that of being, which aims at a form of universality of existence: a presence of the body to itself. I exist in the presence of my body (**Figure 3**).

It is not a matter of objectifying the body: I can identify with my body to the point of saying I am my body, that is to say that my body is not something external to myself, of which I would have control and ownership and yet I am not only my body. An embodied being is more than a body. I am, I exist only in connection with an action in a given place, even if, in the case of performance, the action sometimes consists of standing still for hours on a branch.

Action refers to a commitment and participation in the world as a body, as part of nature and as a means, in a way that action ends up being confused with existence. One could wonder what drives the artist to continually give birth to new images, to call forth new visions. These representations of nature and the meaning of the body's work in an environment, whether mental or material, directly affect





**Figure 3.**  
 Hantu (#12), “The Drift”, performance n°23, Plymouth-UK, 2014. Performance supported by the research group for Land-Water and the Visual Arts, the Marine Institute, the Hydrography Group [©Hantu (weber + delsaux)].

our conception of the body, our connection to a territory, and the idea we have of our place among the living. The artist expresses the need to feel a sense of beauty because it is their emotions that weave links of continuity between trivial gestures, performance and various commitments: social, moral, poetic, ideological and spiritual. Through these emotions, the artist confirms their presence and participation in the world that faces them.

Curiously, there are two types of information provided by our visual perceptual system, the first are exteroceptive and they concern the environment, the second are proprioceptive and they concern the moving body. The distinction the Hantu duo has intuitively made between presence and representation seems to have been validated by Gibson, I will develop this point in the next paragraph. Empirically, we have learned to make these two types of information interact by associating the first with the contextual shooting of Jean Delsaux and the second with my physical performance.

Gibson distinguishes the environment of a person (from an animal or a species) that he associates with a point of view (individual or shared) and the private world of an individual related to the biological properties of their perception and to their mode of existence (what is significant for one person is not for another). Perception and point of view would only be adaptive reactions, resulting from conditioning and co-evolution, and from an interaction with their environment. For example, performing in a foreign space is a way of renewing and extending one's own world. Space is not merely an empty container to be filled with matter, but rather overlapping and successive inclusions of places, as time is an intermingling of events that follow and cover each other by introducing modifications in the environment shared by individuals. For the American psychologist, changing the point of view of a person who moves is not an event, but the different stages of the ebb tide, the arrival of the night... modify the environment.

Alphonse De Waelhens tells us:

*“Most classical theories propose to explain sensation to us by representing our body ‘as an apparatus that is at the same time receiver, transmitter, emitter’. However, this image is enough to scramble everything. As soon as the body compares itself to*



*a wireless telegraph station, sensation is inevitably reduced to a transcribable message. It would be raw data to which I have to make a sign by deciphering it according to a particular code. But this transcription is pure mythology. We never feel that we interpret qualities; we do not see vibrations but red. The notion of vibration comes from scientific explanation and has been developed according to the specific requirements of color physics or the physiology of the senses. It does not correspond to lived experience and plays no role on this level. In addition, the mechanism it implies forces us to radically separate what is felt from the one who feels.” [7]*

Yet, precisely the feeling of beauty, without limiting it to the art world, is a construction developed from sensations experienced by a body that has an ability to make itself available to open to what surrounds it. Today, we still have a hard time defining sensations beyond a positivist conception that associates physiological considerations to each of our sensations, by dividing our anatomy into quasi-autonomous sensory organs that are supposed to record and translate information for the brain which manages it. But above all, sensation appears here as an exchange between two objects: sensation (color and its vibration for example) and that which allows for the recording of it: the objectified organ of perception. The experience, the sensitive experience, the felt subjectivity and affectivity of the body are totally forgotten.

### 2.3 Aestheticization, oneirism and storytelling

*“In this context, memory is awkward because it assumes a distance with what we live. [...] Yet the computerization of the world abolishes this distance because it constantly seeks the attention of subjects.”*

Annie Le Brun [2]

As a form of aestheticization, beauty is reproached for not being in actual contact with the environment, not taking sufficient account of reality, in the urgency of what the experts are telling us of changes in a world in which living species are disappearing and the survival of humanity is threatened, and without any obvious steps being taken to change our way of life. I have opposed this pragmatic conception of “too much reality” that prevents us from changing the order of things, in particular the globalized capitalist logic. The gap with reality is at the very foundation of aestheticization, it enforces a distance, frames our perspective, creates an anticipatory fiction. Without a gap we are condemned to a neutralization of all thought and action: there can be no revolt, no reversal of situation, no change of paradigm. The neutralization of imagination and aesthetic feeling makes censorship useless, all control superfluous, if we understand the ideological stakes, we also understand it leads our society to undergo a consensual force condemning it to inertia.

The gap that art constitutes is the most obvious manifestation of our memorial and imaginative cognitive functions. An artwork is the materialization of a vision of our memory, a memory more or less fantasized (our childhood home...), or a vision of our imagination, arriving in a dream, a day dream, through thought... in resonance or in apparent disconnection with current events. What is important to understand is that we cannot have a perspective on the present or reality, without an aesthetic, cultural, spatial or temporal gap.

Dreamlike beauty is so exploited for the purposes of consumption that we might be tempted to wonder in what spaces of desire and sensation could our dreams unfold today. But why would we be led to believe that in our postmodern societies the dream would have lost its capacity to constitute a gap? For this is how the artistic fictions of

our duo come into play. These nocturnal or awakened images intermingle with the images the place of the performance inspire in us. For Philippe Descola, there is no difference between travel stories and fiction. It is a matter of incorporated knowledge, which is a part of the logic of sensible, subjective and concrete qualities at the same time. There is no need to separate the thought experiment of the poet, artist or philosopher from the life experience offered by the curiosity of the traveler, which the different peoples of the world sometimes share with them. Travel stories and fiction tell the story of what keeps people together, today and in different places. For Descola, the dream is the experience of another modality of existence, made of transformation, metamorphosis, and role exchange. The dream is an encounter with the other, and that is what creation intends to offer: creation is the continuation of dream, it takes its source in the dream that it prolongs and allows to last (**Figure 4**).

The waking dream and exchanges with ghosts [8] solicit our faculties of imagination and representation in a unified and multi-dimensional personal cosmogony, unlimited in space or time. From the observation of the divisions and partitions between the different fields of the natural and cultural sciences—which ended up being established at the end of the nineteenth century and which includes anthropology—Philippe Descola proposes an ecology of the other. His research on the different ways of apprehending and perceiving the world, decrypting and describing the environment, allows him to classify and identify, then to recompose an ecology of relations between humans and non-humans:

*“[...] for each of us, wherever we are, inventing and cultivating modes of reconciliation and types of pressure that can lead to a new universality, open to all components of the world and respectful of some of their particularities, in the hope of warding off the distant deadline to which, with the extinction of our species, the price of passivity would be paid in another way: by abandoning to the cosmos a nature become orphaned by its rapporteurs because they had not been able to grant it any real means of expression.” [9]*

“The new universality” that Descola calls for is as reminiscent of Cassirer’s ethics, emancipation, and metasymbolic as it is of ‘aesthetic ecstasy’. However, in



**Figure 4.**  
Hantu (#5) “Body and Trees/Corps et Arbres”, performance n°13, Puy-de-Dôme, France, 2014 [©Hantu (weber + delsaux)].

the sense of beauty where creation is at work there exists a powerfully subversive dimension to which the artist cannot renounce, not even for fear of the extinction of our species: art is the search for a complicity in the refusal of consensus, feeling together from a unique point of view.

For Jacques Darriulat:

*“To meet, you have to be at least two. At the source of imaginary maieutics, in the atomic moment of astonishment, consciousness intersects the world and the subject intersects the object. [...] Aesthetic encounter is an experience of subversion, and the artwork is engendered by the original coupling of the spirit intoxicated by the ecstasy of sensation and reality which suddenly makes a sign.” [10]*

With emancipatory and provocative avant-gardes, the role of art has been to sweep away moral prejudices with violence, to question the very order of things and to confront us with a dark, dizzying nothingness... Have ecological and economic changes along with the amplification of the migration crisis directly and permanently changed the role of art by subordinating it to more pressing questions? Once again in art history it is a question of interrogating the utility of creation and aesthetic feeling: admitting that Ethics is the ultimate form of development for human intelligence that remains for the radicality of the aesthetic experience. As a consequence what sense should I give to the performances we perform in the wilderness?

Influenced by Thoreau, Leopold or Carson, the generation of Naess and Callicot wanted to break with the anthropocentric conception of nature, which manifests itself in a game of projecting the human being through our psychology and aesthetic feelings ... on the space we contemplated. The concept of environmental ethics, formalized in the 1960s and 1970s, emphasizes the moral value of nature degraded by the deregulation of mercantile human activities and defends the principle that from now on any thought or action, artistic endeavor included, should be submitted to this ethical principle. But what place can ethics give to the gap and subversion underpinning aesthetic shock?

I return to the manifesto of Romanticism, in which Hugo poses the stakes of creation:

*“the modern muse [...] will wonder if the artist's narrow and relative reason must succeed on the infinite, absolute reason of the creator; if it is for man to rectify God; if mutilated nature will be more beautiful; if art has the right to split, so to speak, man, life, creation; if every thing will work better when we have removed its muscle and its spring; if, finally, it is the means to be harmonious more than to be incomplete.” [11]*

### 3. Conclusion

*“What is priceless are the things that make us live.”*

Annie Le Brun [2]

We know the beauty that ethics offers can only be moral when the beauty sought by the artist is anchored in a narrow and relative reason, an inalienable desire submitted to the other. The dialogue that the artist has with the visible is not measured. In its authoritarian developments, dictated by the urgency and the desire for efficiency, the moral conception defended by environmental ethics imposes expertise, specialized policies, an order that both prohibits any holistic approach and



substitutes the expression of a consensus for a diversity of languages, which can only weaken our ability to imagine apparatuses that would reinvent political order (and disorder). Creation inscribes a continuity of feelings that ethics will probably judge irreconcilable (beauty/ugliness, attraction/repulsion, adhesion/opposition ...). In a way that the artist suffers from a misunderstanding of their contradictory posture: at the same time marked by great humility and even greater pride.

By allowing opposites to meet, artistic representations and fictions reveal our existential condition. They change the perception we have of our place in the biosphere. There can be no change of thought and behavior without first projecting them into our imagination and body, without assembling them in a cubist collage or in a polysemic narrative of emotions, which would be obstinate, contradictory and paradoxical: synthesis in art is not a simplification with the aim of modeling, it is not coherent, it is the possibility of a heterogeneous and contradictory juxtaposition. Aesthetic expression, feeling, and ecstasy are contradictory experiences, generating both disgust and attraction, fear and anger, admiration and repulsion.

Beauty remains that towards which creation inexorably tends, stubbornly refusing the fragmentation of knowledge. No subversive pretensions of art are justified if the artist must defend the vision of a world cut by the lens of a scientific apparatus of measurement, or defend the objectification and relegation of the human body, quantifiable and transparent, extracted from a sensible world common to all forms of life.

Hence beauty is not, as our mercantile society in crisis claims, a surface reflection, it is the emergence of a deeper reality, affirming the body as subject and not as property, tool or means: I am not my body, the body is the biological seat of all our fabulations, all feelings that allow us to live our human condition, without drying us out or exhausting our desire to live.

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