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Towards “Poetic Dwelling”—— The Ontological Turn in the Western Concept of Artistic Truth after Impressionism

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Abstract

Since the 19th century, Western art has broken away from the classical representational system and social functions, shifting from the realistic depiction to a modern exploration of the manifesting world. Artistic value has also begun to shift from imitating nature and expressing personal emotions to articulating broader existential experience. The Impressionists’ focus on light and sensations, Cézanne’s reconstruction of viewing structures and spatial relations, and van Gogh’s presentation of life emotions and existential conditions all indicate that modern art concerns how the world manifests itself. Taking the ontological transformation of conceptions of truth in several representative cases of Western modern art after Impressionism as its central thread, this study integrates phenomenology and Heideggerian theory to examine the possible pathways through which Western modern art moved from the truth of objects to the truth of Being. Heidegger’s manifestive view of art also resonates with traditional Chinese artistic concepts such as “vital energy” and “one-stroke”. This paper argues that modern art’s turn toward autonomy and abstract expression is a deep shift in the conception of artistic truth: art is no longer a mirror of the world, but a space in which the world manifests itself, reawakening human beings’ capacity for poetic dwelling in the world.

Key Words

modern art, Heidegger, truth as unconcealment, one-stroke, existential authenticity

Introduction

In traditional Western art, the conception of truth has long been grounded in the representation of objects. From the theory of mimesis in ancient Greece to the representational system established since the Renaissance on the foundations of perspective, anatomy, and light and shadow, painting gradually developed a mode of viewing premised upon stable objects and a fixed vantage point. However, after the 19th century, social issues such as the completion of the Industrial Revolution, economic crises, and

world wars gradually emerged; the invention of photography greatly impacted the field of painting and also triggered a philosophical crisis concerning human existence. The German poet Hölderlin proposed that influential statement: “Full of merit, yet poetically man dwells on this earth.”¹ In his view, although humans toil laboriously, build houses, create divine standards and civilizations, beyond that, there is a deeper connection between man and this earth. Heidegger further developed this statement into “Man, poetically, dwells on this earth.”² He placed this poetic experience at the ontological

height—man always exists in the world.

This paper argues that the transition in art from representation to manifestation signifies not only a transformation in conceptions of artistic ontology, but a change in the ways human beings perceive and dwell in the world of modernity. Focusing on painting practices from the second half of the nineteenth century, it examines through specific works the changing relationship between “seeing” and “truth”, drawing on Heidegger’s phenomenological aesthetics as its theoretical framework. Combining artwork analysis, intellectual history, and cross-cultural comparison, the study brings concepts from traditional Chinese art—including “one-stroke”, “vital energy”, and “roving viewing” into the comparative framework to examine how the two artistic traditions, shaped by distinct historical contexts and intellectual paradigms, developed different understandings of the relationship between human beings and the world. Through processes of differentiation and mutual interpretation, the paper further reflects on how art can transcend objectifying modes of vision and re-establish an ontological connection between human beings and the world.

1. The Fluid Truth of Impressionism

After the 19th century, within Western art there had already begun to emerge a reflection on instrumental rationality and mechanical reproduction. Taine explicitly pointed out that absolutely correct imitation is not the purpose of art.³ Although photography and plaster casting are closer to real objects than painting, they cannot for that reason become higher forms of art. In his view, what art truly needs to express is not all the external details of the object, but rather its principal characteristics and the structural relations among its various parts. This emphasis on structural truth, in fact, had already begun to loosen the traditional representational theory’s dependence on the external appearance of objects, and also provided new possibilities for the subsequent transformation of modern art from objective truth to existential truth.

In the latter half of the 19th century, the

emergence of Impressionism marked a significant turning point in the Western conception of artistic truth. For the Impressionist artists, what humans experience is a world in which light constantly changes, air continuously flows, and time swiftly passes. The world is no longer a stable substance, but rather a fluid perceptual experience. In Monet’s series such as *Water Lilies* (figure 1&figure 2), *Rouen Cathedral*, and *Haystacks*, he repeatedly depicted the same subject, yet each canvas presented different colours, atmospheres, and spatial sensations. The subjects under morning light, dusk, overcast skies, mist, or reflected sunlight differ enormously from one another, which means that the object no longer possesses a fixed and immutable truth. What truly constitutes the object’s state of being is not just the object itself, but light, time, weather, and the viewer’s instantaneous sensations. Thus, what he concerns himself with is no longer what the object is, but rather how the object comes into being in the world. In his pictures, boundaries begin to blur, contours gradually dissolve, and the solidly stable objects are enveloped by flowing light and colour. Painting no longer attempts to freeze the world, but instead begins to express the world’s continuous process of becoming and perpetual transformation.

Bergson holds that “pure duration is not a quantity; as soon as we attempt to measure it, we unwittingly substitute space for it.”⁴ In his view, real time is not mechanical clock-time, but rather a continuous, flowing, indivisible lived duration. The Impressionists’ capture of light changes and instantaneous sensations actually manifests a perception of temporal truth. Monet’s ever-changing *Water Lilies* not only depict natural scenery, but also express how time flows through the world and how the world manifests itself in time. His repeated depictions of the same *Water Lilies*, the same cathedral, and the same haystacks perhaps imply that truth never has a final version, and that the world forever continues to manifest itself. If Impressionism reveals that truth is not fixed within objects but is continuously generated in fluid experience, then the Chinese artistic spirit as elucidated by Xu Fuguan further elevates fluidity into a mode of existence of life. Xu Fuguan believes that the



Figure 1. Claude Monet. *Water Lilies*. Oil on canvas, 89.9 × 94.1 cm, France, 1906, Art Institute of Chicago.



Figure 2. Claude Monet. *Water Lily Pond*. Oil on canvas, 130.2 × 201.9 cm, France, 1917-1919, Art Institute of Chicago.

highest state of Chinese art is what Zhuangzi called “roaming”, a state of roaming beyond things yet not departing from things,⁵ in which the painter, during the process of roaming, brings body, spirit, and mountains and rivers together into the picture. In this sense, both the Impressionist “fluidity” and Zhuangzi’s “roaming” break through fixed ways of seeing; however, Impressionism still grounds itself in sensory experience to depict objects, whereas Zhuangzi’s “roaming” transcends the subject-object dichotomy, understanding humans and all things as a mutually responsive living whole. The Impressionist shift from objective truth to perceptual truth not only changed the language of painting, but also opened the path for later modern art’s exploration of “existential truth.”

2. Cézanne’s Profound Truth

If Impressionism first shook the classical understanding of objective truth in art, then Cézanne further propelled a fundamental turn in the Western conception of artistic truth. Many modern art historians call Cézanne the “father of modern art”. For in his painting, art is no longer content with representing the external appearance of objects or universal truths, but rather explores the existential structure concealed behind perception. He

holds that seeing itself is always in flux—the gaze shifts, the body changes, light flows incessantly, and time perpetually passes. Therefore, truth cannot be merely the manifestation of fixed objective objects or subjective emotions, but should encompass the spatiality, weight, and existential sense of all things as they are situated in the world. Although Impressionism broke through the classical logic of representation, it overemphasized momentary sensations of light. The flowing light and air in Monet’s works are indeed beautiful, yet they also cause the objects to gradually dissolve into colour and light-shadow. The world thus becomes too ephemeral, light, and unstable, lacking a deep existential structure.

Cézanne’s painting both retains the Impressionist sensitivity to perception and colour-light, and attempts to transcend momentary experience, seeking anew the order and structure of the world amid change. In his painting, traditional perspective is broken.” The fruits and utensils that recur in Cézanne’s still lifes are never arranged for the purpose of consumption or use. They distance themselves from human possessiveness and appetite, thereby freeing objects from their subordinate status and allowing them to become self-sustaining, self-sufficient beings that possess life in their own right.”⁶ Whether it is the apples in still lifes or the repeatedly depicted



Figure 3. Paul Cézanne. *Montagne Sainte-Victoire with Large Pine*. Oil on canvas, 66.8 × 92.3 cm, France, The Courtauld, London (Samuel Courtauld Trust).

Mont Sainte-Victoire (figure 3), the tilted tabletops, multiple viewpoints, and unstable spatial structures make his paintings appear seemingly inaccurate. Yet this “inaccuracy” precisely means that he is breaking free from the stable objectifying viewing from a fixed viewpoint. A close reading of Mont Sainte-Victoire reveals that the large pine tree and its branches and foliage in the foreground are constructed through brushstrokes that vary in direction and intersect with one another, with some extending horizontally, others rising diagonally, and still others entering the pictorial field in an almost vertical orientation. As a result, the tree no longer appears as a static object, but rather as a form of being situated within the dynamic interplay of wind, light, and the movement of the gaze. The viewer’s gaze is consequently unable to remain fixed upon a stable contour and must continually move along the directional trajec-

tories of the brushstrokes. This visual “movement” further extends into the chromatic organization of the painting. The blue-green of the mountain, the ochre-yellow of the village, and the dark tones of the foreground trees create a pictorial space that feels expanding outward. The mountain seems to be pushed toward the foreground, while the trees in the foreground direct the gaze toward the distance; space therefore no longer forms the single, continuous depth demanded by traditional linear perspective, but instead repeatedly folds back and forth between different fields of color. With brushstrokes that are fragmented yet directional, color areas that are autonomous yet interactive, and a spatial structure that is compressed and rearranged, the viewer is prevented from grasping the entire world from any single, stationary standpoint. For true seeing is inherently fluid; one cannot remain unchanged at a fixed viewpoint, nor can one

grasp the world in a completely static manner. Thus, he attempts to preserve the very process of seeing within the picture, allowing space to present a state of continuous becoming. For this reason, Cézanne's painting begins to approach the later thought of phenomenology and ontology. He once said, "Through the cylinder, the sphere, the cone, to render nature... Now, nature, for us humans, has great depth to be explored; it is not enough to merely work on the surface."⁷

This exploration of existential truth also provided an important foundation for later modern art and Heidegger's philosophy of art. What Heidegger called "truth as unconcealment" can in fact already be seen in its embryonic form in Cézanne's painting.

3. Heidegger's "Manifestive" Truth

From the historical trajectory of ontology, the self-awareness of being begins with Parmenides, who proposed that "thinking and being are the same."⁸ Aristotle, in turn, incorporated Parmenides' "Being" back into the discourse of first philosophy, and his response to Parmenides was not only an effort to unify the phenomena of motion with the highest reality, but also a "saving of the phenomena" with respect to Parmenides' doctrine.⁹ This tradition, over the long development of metaphysics, gradually moved toward an objectifying mode of thought, and truth was long understood as the correspondence between subjective cognition and objective objects. However, Heidegger traced back to the original Greek meaning of truth and proposed that art is a way of "unconcealment" (aletheia) of truth. Truth here is not the correct answer in a scientific sense, but rather the manifestation of an originally concealed state of being. He holds that the dichotomy between appearance and essence is a form of concealment, and that being can only occur in manifestation. In *The Origin of the Work of Art*, Heidegger proposes that "every great work of art simultaneously opens up a world and sets forth the earth."¹⁰ "World" in his view is not the sum of objective objects but the meaningful whole of life, labour, faith,

and memory; "earth" is the inexhaustible and never fully discloseable aspect that being holds in reserve. The essence of art is the eternal strife sustained in the continuous opening of the world and the continuous concealing of the earth. The strife between them is both a pulling apart and a belonging together; they are neither simply opposed nor simply unified, but through this strife they reveal the complexity and multidimensionality of Being.¹¹ It is under this tension that truth happens. This thought is closely related to Heidegger's theory of Dasein. Human beings do not exist prior to the world, but continuously become themselves in their relation to the world. Nor is the world a collection of objective objects, but rather a web of meaning woven together by rivers, forests, history, faith, and human beings. Heidegger holds that the greatest danger of modern technology lies in the complete objectification of the world's web of meaning. The earth thoroughly annihilates any purely calculative sophistry. Although this sophistry, in the form of the objectification of nature by science and technology, casts upon itself the illusion of domination and progress, this domination remains ever the dizzying impotence of will.¹² Rivers become "waterpower resources," forests become "timber resources," and even human beings themselves become human resources. All natural things are incorporated into a calculable and utilizable system. The originally rich existential relations between humans and the world are thus continuously concealed. Under the compulsion of the "Ge-stell" of modern technology, nature is objectified, set in place, and ordered, and is thereby revealed as a "standing-reserve". As standing-reserve, things no longer abide in themselves nor appear as this or that particular thing; the manifold meaningful relations gathered within them also dissolve, thereby driving away the possibility of a more primordial unconcealment and preventing truth from happening within them.¹³ The importance of art, then, lies precisely in its ability to break through the utilitarian concealment in life, enabling humans to re-perceive their own existential relation to the world.

When Heidegger analyzed Van Gogh's *A Pair of Shoes*, he fully exemplified this manifestive view of art. These peasant shoes

are not merely a testimony to the farmer's toilsome life. From "the dark opening of the worn-out interior of the shoe"¹⁴, he heard the trudging steps, felt the earth's bounty, and touched upon the peasant woman's anxiety, joy, and shudder in the face of life and death. In other words, what the work opens up is a world of soil, labour, seasons, and life. What Heidegger emphasizes is precisely a view of art that shifts from objective truth to existential truth; he holds that the artwork is not merely a disclosure of truth, but rather an event in which truth happens. As he concludes: "The essence of art is the setting into work of the truth of beings."¹⁵ Nor is the world a pre-given substantial entity, but rather it continuously comes into being in human perception. Human beings do not observe from outside the world, but rather always participate in the world with their bodies, co-constituting existential experience with the world. Therefore, seeing itself is not a purely rational activity, but rather a bodily and generative relation. In this sense, Heidegger's "world-opening" in fact forms a deep resonance with the traditional Chinese artistic concepts. Both attempt to break through the concealment of the world caused by objectifying seeing, enabling humans to return to a state of existence in mutual correlation with all things.

4. The Dasein-Space of "Heaven-Earth Coexistence"

Different from Western painting, Chinese landscape painting adopts the "scattered perspective" and "roving viewing" modes, which are deeply rooted in the philosophical tradition represented by Laozi and Zhuangzi. Xu Fuguan interprets this mode through the Daoist notion of "roaming". He argues that the highest state of Chinese art lies in "roaming" beyond things without departing from things, through which the painter brings body, spirit, and mountains and rivers together into the picture. This understanding also resonates with the earlier thought of Shi Tao's "one-stroke", which explains how painters integrate themselves into nature. He emphasizes that "it is one-stroke that is the root of all beings and

the foundation of myriad phenomena"—it is the primal life-state before the separation of man and world, and is the manifestation of life in the movement of brush and ink. These notions are profoundly embodied in Shi Tao's scroll landscapes such as *Pure Sound of Mountains and Rivers* (figure 4).

In this painting, "one-stroke" functions as the fundamental principle underlying the movement of brush and ink, the formation of rocks and mountains, and the unfolding of pictorial space. The mountains and rocks are rendered through highly varied calligraphic brushwork—at times dry, terse, and rapid, at others moist and substantial—through which their texture and sense of volume are continuously generated in the process of brush movement. The gradations of ink range from the dense, almost charred-black tones of the peaks to increasingly subtle washes of pale ink, simultaneously conveying a sense of substantial mass and ethereal emptiness. The pine trees and pavilion in the lower part of the composition are rendered with relatively restrained and controlled brushwork, yet the flowing, cursive-calligraphic resonance within them integrates their vitality with the animated vital energy of the rocks and waterfall above. There is no fixed, overarching vantage point within the composition; instead, the viewer's gaze is guided along a winding trajectory—from the lower right corner, upward through the central valley, and ultimately toward the distant peaks—thereby enacting the mode of viewing known in the Chinese landscape tradition as "roving viewing". The clouds and mist rendered through washes of wet ink do not merely obscure what lies behind them; they constitute the imaginative space of the painting itself, in which the void bears an ontological weight equal to that of material forms. Viewed in this light, "one-stroke" is a dynamic process through which objects are continually brought into being, with every variation in the density, moisture, and turn of the ink opening a new spatial relation to the viewer. Shi Tao's statement that "painting proceeds from the mind" should likewise be understood as a process in which mind, brush, and things collectively generate the image through the act of brushwork.

In the chapter "On the one-stroke" of *Ku*

Gua Monk's Record of Painting Talks, Shi Tao opens with the words: "In the primeval past there was no law; the Great Simplicity did not disperse. When the Great Simplicity dispersed, law was established. How was law established? It was established through the one-stroke".¹⁶ This formulation provides the clearest theoretical basis for understanding the ontological significance of "one-stroke." "Dispersion" does not indicate a fall from unity into fragmentation; rather, it describes the differentiation through which the primordial whole unfolds into the myriad forms of the world. The "one-stroke", precisely, is the generative movement that runs through this process of differentiation. This point indeed resonates with Heidegger's reflections on the "unconcealment of Being to a certain extent." Heidegger's notion of "unconcealment" entails an irreducible structure of tension: beings can appear not because concealment is ultimately and completely eliminated, but because disclosure and concealment always occur simultaneously. Both reject the understanding of truth as a ready-made object that can be grasped exhaustively by the subject in a single act. The former reveals its continuous generativity, while the latter reveals the inexhaustibility of truth. Moreover, the consequences of this ontological difference also extend to art practice.

From Cézanne's reorganization of the structural relations of objects to the gradual suspension of representational forms in Kandinsky, Malevich, and ultimately Abstract Expressionism, one can discern a persistent tendency: once the appearance of an object can no longer serve as the ultimate measure of "truth", art begins to shift the question of truth from "What is the object?" to "How does Being disclose itself?" In this process, color, line, form, and gesture gradually shed their representational functions and become media that directly bear perceptual and existential experience, thereby "releasing" reality from its confinement within concrete objects. However, Chinese literati painting still did not deliberately pursue the expression of line, colour, and form in later periods. Shi Tao particularly emphasizes: "If one fails to penetrate deeply into the principles of things and exhaustively express their configurations,

one will ultimately never attain the great rule of the one-stroke". The importance of art lies not in reproducing the external forms of objects, but in entering into the inner space of things. He further proposes: "This one-stroke encompasses all beyond the primal chaos; even the countless brushstrokes all begin from this and end with this". Here, the "one-stroke" has in fact transcended concrete pictorial forms and become the total source of the generation of all things. It is both the root of the generation of all things and the place to which art returns. This difference is crucial. Western modern art tends to release artistic form from the obligation of referring to stable objects, whereas Chinese literati painting does not primarily seek to highlight form, but to place form within a larger process of generation and resonance. These divergent artistic trajectories ultimately point back to a more fundamental difference in how human beings are situated within the world.

Whether it is Heidegger's "heaven, earth, divinities, and mortals" or the traditional Chinese "unity of heaven and man," both regard humans as participants and responders in the becoming of the world. The difference, however, lies in the fact that the "fourfold" emerged from twentieth-century Western philosophy's renewed interrogation of how "world becomes world" after the profound development of subject-centered philosophy, modern science, and technological rationality. Earth provides the foundation for all beings, sky marks the scales of time and spatial horizon, the divine points toward a dimension of transcendence, and human beings, as mortals, dwell within this constellation. Only through their interconnectedness can these four dimensions jointly constitute a world. By contrast, the concept of the "unity of Heaven and humanity" possesses a complex and diverse indigenous intellectual genealogy. From the pre-Qin assertion that "Heaven, Earth, and I arise together, while the myriad things and I are one," to the Confucian emphasis on the correspondence between human beings and the cosmic order, and further to the elaboration of the principle that "Heaven and humanity share one principle" in Song and Ming Neo-Confucianism, the concept of the "unity of Heaven and humanity" places greater

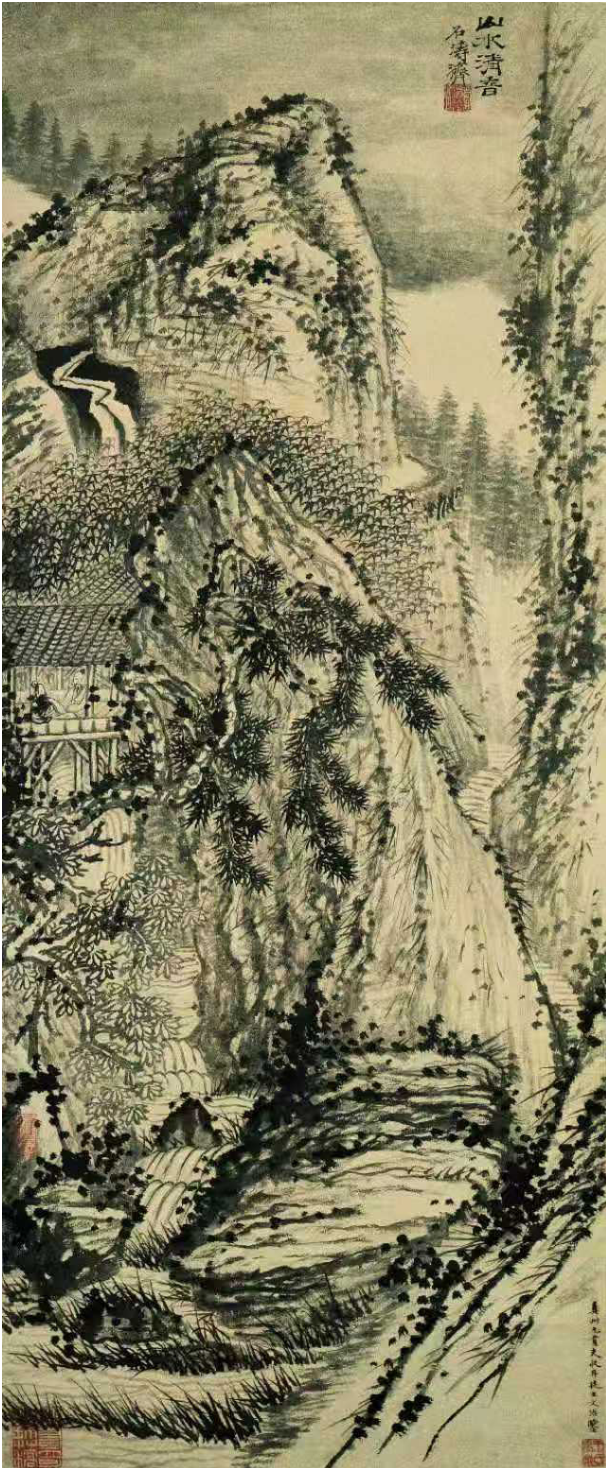


Figure 4. Shi Tao. *Pure Sound of Mountains and Rivers*. Ink on paper, 102.5 × 42.4 cm, China, Qing dynasty, Shanghai Museum

emphasis on the interconnectedness, resonance, and mutual generativity between human beings and Heaven and Earth, focusing on how human beings re-enter the Way of Heaven and Earth

through their own lived practices. Through brush and ink, colour, and form, the artist causes the world to reopen itself to humans, and enables humans and all things to re-enter a state of mutual resonance and dwelling-with-one-another. Heidegger said that “The world is never an object that stands before us and can be looked at. As long as the paths of birth and death, blessing and curse keep us transported into Being, this world remains non-objectual, and we belong to it.”¹⁷ “Poetic dwelling” is man’s authentic way of being-in-the-world, maintaining a harmonious, non-instrumental, non-utilitarian authentic relationship with oneself, with others, with things, and with the fourfold of heaven, earth, divinities, and mortals. Art is important not only because it creates works, but above all because it can reawaken in humans the capacity for “poetic dwelling” that has been gradually lost in the modern world.

Conclusion

If we still judge modern art by the standards of classical art, then the Impressionists’ instantaneous perceptions, Cézanne’s tilted and deformed still lifes, and van Gogh’s distorted starry night seem to imply that art is deviating from reality. However, it can be argued that what modern art has changed is not so much its concern with reality as its understanding of “truth.” Modern art need not be seen as distancing itself from reality; rather, it might be understood as moving from representation toward a spatiotemporal mode of manifestation. Heidegger holds that art is not a simple copy of reality, but rather the happening of truth as unconcealment. The significance of art, from this perspective, may lie less in its accuracy of representation than in its capacity to open up a world and to bring the originally concealed state of being back into unconcealment.

From Hölderlin’s poetry, “the poetic” is a free space of artistic imagination that soars above reality, yet humans must dwell on “the earth.” Poetic creation cannot detach itself from reality and the world; rather, it exists in a state of “suspension.” Art should not merely

be a mirror of the world nor completely detach itself from this earth, but rather it should dwell within the earth rather than outside it. Since the 19th century, modern art's gradual movement toward abstraction has witnessed a profound turn in the conception of artistic truth. Art moves from "likeness" to "manifestation," and it is precisely in this process that humans re-perceive the world and rediscover the relation between themselves and Being. And "poetic dwelling" is exactly what opens up a realm of

freedom and meaning for human existence in the modern world inundated by technological rationality.

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