

Gabriele von Arnim **The Consolation of Beauty**



Embracing the present with open awareness. Fearlessly accepting what is. Remembering the past as a part of our journey.

Finding comfort. In a world that can be so overwhelming, frightening, and demanding. Finding solace in the experience of beauty because, as Gabriele von Arnim says, it is nothing less than self-preservation. "I need beauty. The consolation of beauty. Because when I see, hear, read, feel beauty, I believe in possibilities. In paths, spaces, somersaults."

The Consolation of Beauty is a shimmering blend of autobiographical and essayistic storytelling: not a cultural history seeking to confine its subject with theory, but rather a literary search for traces. Gabriele von Arnim explores the forms and effects of what we call beauty, the happiness and dark sides of sensitivity. The search takes

us back to childhood, to a girl from a coldly managed home who must first learn to feel in order to perceive beauty in all its finite abundance.

“The search for beauty is not just a feel-good programme here, but part of a life practice. In a mixture of essay, autobiography and meditation, von Arnim writes his way along beauty with clear and poetic language. The voice of a thoughtful and life-hungry woman.”

Neue Zürcher Zeitung

Gabriele von Arnim, born in Hamburg in 1946, completed her doctorate and spent ten years working in New York as a freelance journalist. She writes reviews for newspapers and radio, presents readings, has published several books and lives in Berlin.

English sample translation by Deborah Langton

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It's blowing a gale, raining too. Really hostile out there, my neighbour had said after taking the dog. She made the outdoors sound like a sullen neighbour. It's November, a time of faded light, self-doubt, gloom, and pandemic coughing. I sit at my small breakfast table, staring dully into the *tristesse*, then glance down at the street where people cower beneath their umbrellas, clinging on to stop the wind snatching them away. They turn up their coat collars and hurry through the pavement puddles. All of a sudden, something on the other side of the road catches my eye, a wonderful coverlet of leaves spanning the length of the playground fence, yellow, brown, reddish and green, now wet and shimmering. No illusion. Just the beauty of reality. Gleaming with rain, a colourful, warm swathe of leaves. A quiet happiness ripples through me and I contentedly get on with my toast.

I need beauty. The consolation of beauty. Whenever I see, hear, feel or read of beauty I sense openness, choices, opportunity and even believe I could turn a somersault or two. Beauty can liberate our feelings, give us courage to dare something new and strength to bear what we can't change. Beauty brings pleasure, according to Euripides. It's not that simple. Beauty is in a glow, in a frisson, in delight but can also be a pang to the heart. Over and over it's the sanctuary I need – a view, a pebble, a rose, a garden of clouds. Evening sunshine gently warming my nape.

I need those passing gestures – the smile of a boy as he holds open the door for me, the warm glance from an unknown woman as she sees me emerge from our Asian food store with a huge bunch of spring tulips.

The consoling impact of beauty is also about shielding our personal reality from global reality. From those night-time assaults on my composure. When snatches of flickering images, fragments of ideas, fantasies, turmoil, terror and time pressure come together in my mind and collide. Everything I've read, heard, experienced, every fear, hope and headline rages at its own incoherence, creating a tumult that leaves my ears ringing. Even the banal looms large in the silence of the night. All manner of padding fills the stressed mind, already unable to take anymore, and yet each day everything it hears, reads and thinks is consciously saved and stored.

We are living in times of extreme political, social, environmental, economic and spiritual challenge. We are destroying our world at breath-taking speed. Growth – this questionable, long disputed economic commandment – spells consumption and yet more consumption. And so we carry on buying stuff we don't need. There's so much I could just throw out.

Climate campaigner and social psychologist, Harald Welzer, writes in 'Aufhören', or 'Stop', that since 2020 the planet has had more 'dead mass' than biomass, so more produced stuff than living stuff. Ever since reading this, I see only a world with more plastic ducks than radishes, more loudspeakers than birds, more chairs than trees. If we continue like this there will be more cars than people. In the United States there are already 650 cars for every 1000 inhabitants. Globally 3.1 cars are being produced every second. Another front garden just got paved over. Should it really be a parking space?

Breathe, breathe deeply. Breathe in. Breathe out. Breathe.

‘Probably every religion teaches that with each breath the spirit of the world – the spirit that binds all creatures – imbues our own souls.’ Navid Kermani.

Breathe, breathe deeply. Breathe in. Breathe out. Breathe.

And what am I doing about this world we live in? What I am suppressing, what am I turning a blind eye to, what am I going along with, how am I part of it all? Is my thinking rigorous enough? Am I taking enough action? How much is enough? How am I actually doing?

There’s a worry deep within me (I’m full of worries) that I no longer have enough time to capture everything that I want to tell. I always want to tell myself everything. It’s as if I can live more calmly with the told than the untold. And of course this is tied up with the ageing process. My face is lined. The glaze on my crockery, too. My kitchen’s worktop is marked. We are worn, we carry on, stressed and fragile.

People might think we harden with age because we’ve seen so much. But the older I get, the more I observe the world and the more I’m haunted by what I see, hear, read and reflect on. The shield between the insanity out there (what place has the word ‘sanity’ in ‘insanity’?) and my own existence here feels increasingly eroded. The protective blinkers are whipped away by the storm. Everything I see, hear, read and reflect on stays with me but not as cold hard facts, frozen in place without feeling, but actually touches me, pierces me, menaces, pervades and oppresses me.

I need consolation. A warm, protective feeling to leave me secure in myself. Whatever affects me also frightens me. What kind of world will my grandchildren and their peers inherit? I wonder whether they’ll be able to be free-spirited. Will they be allowed to say and sing what they want to say and sing? And will they be able to show their own children that caterpillars become butterflies?

I need consolation because the world as it is weighs me down.

I worry about the loss of any concept of community welfare, the way the ‘haves’ condescend towards the ‘have-nots’, the radicalisation of those who can’t tolerate uncertainty or questions and want answers no matter what they are or how erroneous they might be. They want only answers they can shout out to the rest of the world. I worry about the brutalisation of language and behaviour. I worry about the obsession with weapons, about inhumanity, terrorism, racism, sexism, misogyny, all those who look down on others to make themselves feel strong.

I worry about the dusty wastes left by drought, the devastation wrought by floods, about trees dying and cities locked down while all of us – pretty much – just carry on as before. I’m fearful of hollow words, cynical power games and irresponsible greed. The ‘just carry on’ of the mocking, thoughtless powers which are exploiting, poisoning and destroying the earth.

And it’s not just ‘them’. I’m part of it. I’m probably somehow part and parcel of the structural racism, sitting back in my own cosy little reality. Yes, I’ve got a car and occasionally step on a plane. My own ‘world consumption’, as Harald Welzer calls it, is far too high. I live easy, indulge myself with retreats and am still part of the ‘hey guys’ lifestyle.

‘Walking in the rain, bathing in a mountain lake in the Tyrol, a night at the Munich opera. Heavenly, gentle, beautiful, reprehensibly so. Carefully saved and stored so I can withstand the news from the world outside.’ My own diary note.

These are the words of someone who lives a privileged life. But am I not permitted to despair precisely because I’ve got it so good? How to behave in the right way, that’s the question. And what does ‘right’ look like, in any case. How certain is my inner compass.

How inappropriate is it to sip my cappuccino beneath the comforting canopy of lofty trees while in Afghanistan people are living in hiding, in want, in fear for their lives, shamefully abandoned

also by our government. What can it be like to be in your own home, waiting for your killer? We can't even begin to imagine. No lake-bathing to regain strength there.

We can bring about change only by taking action and that requires strength. It's the strength of minority groups' hopes that can change the world, as one of Argentina's 'Madres de Plaza de Mayo' has said. These were the mothers who held long protest vigils for their 'disappeared' sons and daughters, done away with by the government.

Writer and cultural commentator, Silvia Bovenschen, with her infallible feel for the suffering of the world, has said she's taking her leave of the present day because she can no longer find in it any poetry or 'consolation for its suffering creatures'.

A statement like that takes courage. It means allowing in feelings alongside facts and knowledge and letting pain enter our zone of sensitivity. Look at how often we love to shield ourselves with 'don't know', with 'don't want to know' when it comes to social change. Knowledge hurts. Recognition of that hurts all the more so because knowledge is then also being 'felt'.

'Just feel nothing,' said a woman to me years ago. I'd asked her about the mood in Germany during the post-Nazi era. 'Just feel nothing ever again.'

She was of that generation that considered feelings to be shameful and feared the way they permeated the ether, uncontrolled. Germany has a tradition of warding things off. In Fontane's 'Effi Briest', the young woman's mother says, 'We're not in the world to be weak and feeble or show leniency towards anything that goes against law and order.'

During the Nazi period feelings for Hitler got whipped into a quasi-sexual rapture described by exiled writer Hans Sahl as the Germans' 'collective orgasm.'

It left them empty so they busied themselves with the supposedly harmless vacuum that remained.

Just feel nothing.

But if the notion of ‘feel’ did ever crop up, it was only in that charmless homily, ‘If you won’t listen, then you’ll have to feel.’ That meant nothing more than the physical pain of beating. The disobedient got ‘a swipe from the mallet’, a ‘ruler across the fingers’, the ‘belt across the backside’. ‘If you won’t listen, then you’ll have to feel’.

If words can slam doors shut, they can slide them open too. I’ll stand facing the wind and let it blow every word out of my head. Then I’ll feel some internal peace. A blank page. But every blank page wants to be written on. It’s just waiting. Sometimes I hold up a mirror so that I can’t actually decipher the words.

What happens if you hold up a mirror in front of your own childhood? Is there any distortion? Do you actually see more? Maybe I need consolation because I’ve plodded on so often without any. Anyone in need of consolation has to admit to weakness. And where I come from, nobody was weak. To keep up appearances, refrain from being human.

Just feel nothing.

‘Pull yourself together, child,’ my father used to say. ‘Discipline is what matters most in life.’

‘And health!’ added my mother, laughing. She always had to be so bloody cheerful. ‘And health,’ she almost sang it, which I thought unkind because I did not enjoy good health as a child – overweight, slow, ungainly, despondent.

It took a lot to escape the old ‘just feel nothing’ adage. Moving from the outer shell via sheer defiance – that stage in itself draining of one’s energy – towards insight into one’s own weaknesses was a long journey. It is at once liberation and hardship. Whoever admits weaknesses becomes stronger inside, that’s for sure, but to feel one’s own weaknesses can also spell a heightened awareness of what one lacks, both inside and outside. And to live with deprivation the way Silvia

Bovenschen did when she no longer found in the present any consolation for the suffering of living creatures.

Presumably we are all suffering. But many don't perceive this to be a problem and push against the naked truth of admission, encasing their souls with a protective shell. Their development will be nothing more than stunted and they'll fail to take off.

I myself am wounded, fearful, unsettled and yet cheerful, and love being alive. All in one go. All mixed up. I search for consolation in words, images, in sound, in the woods. I desire warmth, closeness, beauty, ever-changing feelings. Sometimes biting into a chunk of salted caramel chocolate is enough. Mostly it takes rather more than one little pleasure. Consolation pushes its way, in layer by layer, deep into the place of inner peace where we breathe in until we gain wings.

The consolation of beauty may be escapism but it's also much needed self-preservation, that's for sure. And writing about it an adventure. As if we're tracing words in the sand even though a storm's approaching and will wipe away every letter. We can't see, hear or read of beauty without sensing the Promised Land and yet at the same time being aware of its transience as well as our own. Solemnity, reverence, fear – beauty can arouse within us such contradictory feelings. Living beauty is not merely beautiful or well-ordered in the traditional sense. It also provokes, overpowers and absorbs unhappiness and decay.

Actress, Angela Winkler, had an enormous stage presence along with an enriching family life of husband, children, and several homes in different countries. In her autobiographical sketches she notes:

‘For me going on stage means shedding the kiddy stuff but retaining the feeling that comes from all the love and responsibility for the small, the messy, the weird. My strength comes from dissonance.’

It takes a while to know what does you good.

It takes a while to know what you need.

That you need beauty too.

It’s certainly taken me a while. A while to reflect on beauty, see, hear and sense it in all its dimensions. And to find consolation there. Something to hold on to and then let go. If I cling too much to consolation, it loses its strength.

Recently a woman friend wrote to me: ‘Let’s enjoy beauty wherever it appears.’ If only we knew where to find it. We often miss it because we’re looking in the wrong place. It’s about sensing beauty and beautiful things in our daily lives, in otherwise unexpected moments – grief, the scent of a lemon, in breathing, in crises and controversies, or in that shimmering coverlet of leaves adorning the playground fence.

Then all of a sudden, just when I am writing about beauty, vivacity, strength and consolation, Putin’s troops attack Ukraine. And all of a sudden, there’s war. War in Europe. A nuclear power waging a war of conquest. Bombs in people’s everyday lives. Dropping on hospitals and kindergartens. Houses and flats burning and collapsing, residents fleeing, wounded, dying. They seek shelter in underground stations, sharpen their shooting skills, create Molotov cocktails, and construct barricades in the rage borne of despair and anger. Queues build outside food shops.

Pharmacies are short of medicines, hospitals are short of everything. An unprovoked war. A war close by.

Still close by. Every time I hear a police siren or notice a fire engine on the main street, I see only images from Ukraine. By night and by day the suffering seeps into our minds and senses like a poison. It's spring. Everywhere there are buds ready to burst, the first leaves, thriving greenery. And then there's a war image: a street lined with trees now charred and dead. No leaves, no reassurance. No spring.

Can I carry on writing about consolation and beauty when something's ablaze not so far from a nuclear power plant? Should I keep my counsel? Or perhaps it is precisely now that I need consolation and beauty, and all because my spirit is wounded.

I'm trying to find my way, as we all are, amid an ongoing pandemic, a war close by, threats to food and power supplies, melting glaciers, wildlife survival. We all recognise the despair that leaves us feeling as if ravaged by a starving wolf. And so we all seek shelter. Rescue. In times of crisis, many need immediate answers and give vent to strong opinions. But for me crises are times of doubt, of questioning, of searching and moments of extreme uncertainty.

I feel like this until it dawns on me that I don't want to respond to the destruction with my own self-destruction.

Despair weakens us, can make us give up, in weary consent. We can't afford to do this. Giving up is running away. If we can believe, as I am learning to believe, that the world is a well-ordered mass of energy that must be kept in balance in order not to destroy itself, then now is the time for all of us to create beauty as an antidote to the destruction, violence, hatred and killing, to breathe kindness, calm, care, if possible even goodness, into everyday life. As Navid Kermani writes:

‘Just by breathing in, you are connecting with the whole world. And each time you breathe out, the world connects with you.’

Right now is the time to be searching for what constitutes beauty and to allow it into our lives in spite of the nearby destruction of so much that is beautiful. Now is the time to shape beauty, to feel and share it in order to create a balance between paralysis and life force, between one truth and another, to help the world heal just a bit. And we, the little people, are trying to do this in our cockleshell on the vast rough seas of uncertainty.

‘Not easy to write about consolation and beauty in these times,’ observes a male friend of mine.

‘But,’ I say to him, ‘anyone writing about consolation and beauty will also be writing about fear and terror.’

Ukrainian street artist, Gamlet, as Sonja Zekri writes in the *Sueddeutsche Zeitung*, painted a picture of a man in body armour with two birds on his right arm.

It’s labelled:

‘Keep your equilibrium’.

The Consolation of Beauty

A quest,

A journey on a great river with a web of tributaries,

A walk across many bridges,

A leap across a ford, a meander,

A rest on islands of words and sentences

A losing oneself in the cries of the world, the wilderness of memory and life

A carrying on along the path,

Into the consolation of beauty and its dragon seeds:

Fragments, vignettes, moments, cloud movement, dreams,

And over and over again that happy smile, full of life.

The beauty of the world is literally a crying out and man replies with all his soul. It is as if the universe, if it can think, is waiting to be expressed by man.

François Cheng (b.1929, poet and calligrapher).

I would have loved to have read and lived this at sixteen. And to have been the one to reply with all her soul.

I've often walked in the garden of my childhood, a magnificent park with broad avenues and expansive lawns bordered by ancient, mighty chestnut trees, elms and copper beech. I have often followed slender sandy pathways winding their way between uneven heathland and misshapen pines then onward down the hill to where there's a little gate in the rusting fence, a gate which I would open before crossing the road to walk by the broad river. I'd skim pebbles over the water then stride past the red and white lighthouse that always stirred in me a feeling I didn't yet recognise as 'longing', then climb the steps back up the bank and make my way through the maze of dunes. Perhaps this unsuspecting child was simply responding to what she saw. Perhaps beauty can pacify us without us realising. But do we then experience consolation with it?

When did I become capable of seeing with appreciation? I have no idea. That shocks me. Have I really lost all those memories along life's road?

Where I grew up there was no seeing, no marvelling and no fantasising. The poetry of intuition and realisation wasn't on the agenda. There was no sense of enquiry, or discovery, no spirit of curiosity. Nobody urged me to bury my nose in a bloom with a cry of 'Smell that!' Nobody ever said, 'See how many different greens there are in the grass. See how smooth the surface of the lazy river is in the morning mist.' Nobody said, 'Imagine you're upside down. You're looking down from the sky towards earth with its trees and meadows. Tell me what you can see.'

In an interview with the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, artist Nairy Baghramian talks about how she was brought up to see. 'It was an unwritten rule at home that we all had to have our own opinions. As children, even if we all liked the look of the same vase of flowers, we each had to think of our own word to describe it.'

Where I came from personal opinions were undesirable. Woe betide anyone breaking the family code of conduct. As a young student, appalled by the assassination attempt on Rudi Dutschke, I once made a measured comment about the way Axel Springer's press had hunted him down. The next morning my father said with a pointed sigh, 'Your mother hasn't had a wink of sleep.'

My life was a small room furnished with the opinions and ideas of others. 'I'll deal with that,' my father would say when it came to any decisions. The message was that this is what's happening. He directed on everything and as a child I didn't express any doubts. I simply stuck with it.

*If you don't doubt,
you have no chance
to discover the true nature of what is.
Thich Nhat Hanh (1926–2022)*

Any individual way forward was closed down and barred. And so for a long time I had no idea of the kind of girl, the kind of young woman I might have wanted to be. I simply functioned and persisted in a state of suspension. A trembling butterfly behind a façade of faultlessness.

As a girl I played guitar and sang for family and friends on birthdays and the like. One day a band that had heard me somewhere asked if I'd like to play with them. Lucky me! At last! But the parents shouted, 'Absolutely not!' They clearly saw the band as their daughter's direct route to a life of debauchery. All I wanted to do was sing.

Maybe the 'longing' within me sensed that here was a route to a life of feeling in which I could slough off the existing skin like a snake as it grows and develops. It was, however, clear that joy in life was not something for a 'good' daughter from a good home. That's precisely what I was. A faint-hearted, good daughter meekly squeezing herself into the family corset, laced in anew each day, breathing not allowed. I remained in this cruel bind of a harsh home and society's own codes, of emotional helplessness and the loneliness of childhood – the stuff of which many a family is made.

'Anyhow,' said my father, 'your singing voice is very strained.'

Breathe, breathe in, breathe out. Breathe.

Mindful breathing is an existential need for me and my buzzing head, a place of rest on the long road. Whenever I lie awake at night listening to the demonic hissing of earth's terror or feeling hounded by memory, I try breathing exercises to calm myself. I've recently discovered a particularly good one whereby I place my fingers on my forehead, let my hand rest lightly on my face and then breathe into the wrist, lips open. Feeling the breath of life directly on the pulse and the radial artery can help you feel sure of your own life force.

In order truly to see beauty, our sense of feeling has to pulse through our veins otherwise the view from a mountain into the snowy valley or from a tower high above a teeming city will be nothing more than magnificent. ‘Wow,’ we might say, as if looking at a picture postcard without deciphering what’s really there or what might take our breath away.

We repeatedly expect hopeful happiness and the consolation of beauty but are surprised when we don’t find it. So we stand on a bridge in Venice, look at *palazzi* and domes, picturesque balconies smothered in plants, battlements reminiscent of the Moors, a church spire pointing to heaven on high. We look at everything we love but nothing inside us responds. The beauty and our senses cannot connect. Maybe we are too weary, too careworn, too protected. Maybe we are dulled by an inner numbness. That’s when it’s time to turn the rusty key of the cage and set free the snapping crocodiles, to expose the fractures, perhaps to cry our eyes out – and let ourselves be surrounded by the healing essence of beauty in all its celebration and its sadness, its calm and its inconsistency. Only once our senses are awake can we see the picture, hear the cadenza, smell the madeleine, feel the existential essence of beauty – whatever it stirs or assuages within us.

Nature has to be felt.

Alexander von Humboldt (1769-1859).

‘That’s so beautiful it’s insane,’ shrieked a friend of mine once during a trip together. A rock face bathed in the light of an autumn sunset had just come into view as we drove along the bank of a mighty river already gently shrouded in the blue shadows of twilight.

Beauty and insanity. The fear of being overpowered, overwhelmed, out of our senses, losing control, or even the fear of something otherworldly, of seeing something divine, not destined for human sight. The fear of an irresistible force. The force of beauty that promises pleasure and adventure. This will always be on people’s lips.

Everyone sees beauty in different ways. Fulfilment. A dream. Sadness. Excess. Longing. An affront. And we all see beauty according to our own circumstances. Seeing is to do with the state of our inner self, for we can enjoy more freely if we are in a good state of mind and will react only sluggishly when restricted and enfeebled.

Beauty and beautiful things can bring joy even when times are tough. It's as if the wind can sweep aside the heavy curtain of sorrow and let us glimpse the beauty behind the pain.

We need pictures, sonatas, trees, poems, thoughts, not merely as a distraction but as the promise of brighter times that may lie ahead, that perhaps will be. We need fantasy, melody, colour and words that will cushion our helplessness and strengthen our resolve.

Beauty as a healing affirmation of life?

At the moment I read poetry every morning in order to get over the news with which I can't help but start my day. May the beauty of language rescue me from news of war, violent death, fear and those shamelessly profiteering from the conflict, perhaps something by Hilde Domin:

Do not become weary

But gently hold out your hand towards wonder

As you might a bird