

# Beauty in Simplicity: Walter Pater and Diaphaneité

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**F**or many, the late nineteenth century aestheticist Walter Pater has typically been regarded as an obscure and somewhat confused thinker whose writings are difficult to penetrate and whose true intentions are apparently debatable. Beginning with the controversy surrounding his motivation in *The Renaissance*, and evidenced by the disparate opinions of his work from the likes of Oscar Wilde and T. S. Elliot, Pater's writing can often inspire and sometimes revolt, but always, it seems, for some reason other than he intended. R. V. Johnson has summarized this universally pessimistic sentiment in the preface of his book, *Walter Pater: A study of his critical outlook and achievement*, most aptly.

During the present century, certain unfavorable preconceptions have arisen about Walter Pater as critic and aesthetic theorist. His criticism is often regarded as a classic instance of uncontrolled sensibility. He lacks, it is said, the discipline necessary for a true apprehension of works of literature and graphic art, and the standards by which to form an unequivocal and firm estimate of them. His approach is merely appreciative or impressionist; he represents the sort of critic who rhapsodizes and says nothing – or nothing to the purpose.<sup>1</sup>

This view of Pater often buckles today, as Johnson points out, when we consider how infrequently it has been subjected to thorough examination. In particular, one finds reason for optimism in the legacy of those who have sought to reveal a far greater beauty in Pater than many of his contemporaries were able to discover. Yet, even today this corrective measure has hardly produced an overabundance in aesthetic and literary circles. Pater's legacy is still relegated to that of a "dusty school classic,"

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<sup>1</sup> Johnson, R. V. *Walter Pater: A Study of his Critical Outlook and Achievement*. (London: Cambridge University Press, 1961), v.

as Nathan Scott once resentfully described it.<sup>2</sup> In our aesthetic and moral parlance “Diaphaneité” and “the clear crystal nature” have little or no meaning. What is more, the real nuance of Pater’s epitomical genius has hardly been introduced.

It is not my intention here to portray the breadth of Pater’s insight, since thus far we have only come to know the apparent rhapsodist in Pater and without much understanding even of that. Rather, I wish to return to the moral and intellectual themes that make his early work much more than an aesthetic theory. Specifically, I am interested in Pater’s essay “Diaphaneité.”<sup>3</sup>

Insofar as Pater’s work was intended to describe a kind of excellence in our aesthetic and moral character, one finds these ideas fused most directly in his earliest known work. It is apparent that “Diaphaneité” has normative and existential importance in that it signifies one possible course for our aesthetic and moral existence. It is far from clear, however, what this must have entailed and how we can begin to claim it.

Even Pater admits of this difficulty when he speaks of his culminating aesthetic and moral type as one that “does not take the eye by breadth of color.”<sup>4</sup> In their renderings of his earliest known work, it is therefore understandable why many scholars have tended to discount Pater’s essay for its rather strange tone and fanciful description in what Anne Varty once described as “most inward in [its] utterance.”<sup>5</sup> It is clear that the type Pater describes is much like himself; shadowy, hidden, and yet privately bursting.

In spite of this difficulty with the essay, however, it is clear that “Diaphaneité” was important to Pater’s thinking. He occasionally reproduced passages from it in some of his published essays.<sup>6</sup> Moreover,

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<sup>2</sup> Scott, Nathan. “Pater’s Imperative – to dwell poetically.” *New Literary History* 15 (1983).

<sup>3</sup> The meaning of the word ‘Diaphaneité’ is seemingly as hard to penetrate as Pater’s essay. It is not technically an English word, nor is it French, although there are similar French derivatives. In fact, the specific spelling Pater chose cannot be found in any known language. ‘Diaphaneité’ can be found as a Greek verb form where it is a second person future indicative meaning “You shall cause [something] to appear” or perhaps more appropriately, “You shall allow [something] to shine through you.” It has been speculated that Pater subtly included the diacritical mark for a number of reasons. It may have been a reminder on how to pronounce the word properly; i.e. in sounding the final ‘e’. It may also have been intended to alert his reader that his topic was a Greek verb and not a French noun. In either case, that it appeals to a future renaissance in human development would fit with the direction of the essay. See especially John J. Conlon’s “Walter Pater’s ‘Diaphaneité.’” *English Language Notes* 17, no. 3 (1980): 195-197 and Varty, Anne. “The Crystal Man: A study of ‘Diaphaneité’” in *Pater in the 1990s*, ed. Laurel Brake & Ian Small, (Greensboro N.C.: ELT Press, 1991).

<sup>4</sup> Pater, Walter. *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry (Diaphaneité)*. (Berkshire: Cox & Wyman, 1873; reprint, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998) 154.

<sup>5</sup> Varty, Anne. “The Crystal Man: A study of ‘Diaphaneité’” in *Pater in the 1990s*, ed. Laurel Brake & Ian Small, (Greensboro N.C.: ELT Press, 1991).

<sup>6</sup> For an excellent account of Pater’s tendency to borrow passages see William F. Shuter’s “Pater’s Reshuffled text.” *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 43, no. 4 (Mar., 1989): 500-525.

many of Pater's most important papers are thematically consistent with "Diaphaneité" in the aesthetic ideal they represent and in the type of individual anticipated for their fulfillment. Otherwise known as "the crystal man," the type described in Pater's "Diaphaneité" has often been seen as the unspoken hero of Pater's *Marius the Epicurean* and the true exemplar of Pater's aesthetic theory from *The Renaissance*.<sup>7</sup>

Thus, despite its problems, "Diaphaneité" has become a work of greater interest because it appeals to a future renaissance in our human development; one that appears to fit with the general direction of much of his other work. It is obvious from the beginning of "Diaphaneité" that Pater is describing a type of character that is both unworldly and inestimable. Unlike the saint, the artist, or the speculative thinker, beings who also remain "out of the world's order" but who are still capable of being appreciated by it, the type Pater is interested in here constitutes such a rarity of character that it is difficult for the world to even recognize its appearance. According to him,

There are some unworldly types of character which the world is able to estimate. It recognizes certain moral types, or categories, and regards whatever falls within them as having a right to exist. The saint, the artist, even the speculative thinker, out of the world's order as they are, yet work, so far as they work at all, in and by means of the main current of the world's energy. Often it gives them late, or scanty, or mistaken acknowledgement; still it has room for them in its scheme of life, a place made ready for them in its affections. ... To constitute one of these categories or types, a breadth and generality of character is required. There is another type of character, which is not broad and general, rare, precious above all to the artist, a character which seems to have been the supreme moral charm in the Beatrice of the *Commedia*. It does not take the eye by breadth of color; rather it is that fine edge of light, where the elements of our moral nature refine themselves to the burning point. It crosses rather than follows the main current of the world's life. The world has no sense fine enough for those evanescent shades, which fill up the blanks between contrasted types of character ... For this nature there is no place ready in its affections. This colorless, unclassified purity of life it can neither use for its service, nor contemplate as an ideal.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> See especially Scott's "Pater's Imperative – to dwell poetically."

<sup>8</sup> Pater, "Diaphaneité," 154

For Pater, the colorless and unclassified purity of the diaphanous individual suggests an almost unheard of integrity. The world cannot grasp it, has little appreciation of it, and yet it is the finest refinement of our texture, purified right to what Pater calls its “burning point” – that point at which our moral, intellectual, or artistic life becomes inspired, while other elements of our life begin to burn away.

It is not coincidental that Pater’s flame metaphor necessitates a twofold condition of refinement and destruction. Pater saw, for instance, in the *Imitatio Christi* (the imitators of Christ) a temperament that does not come without paying a great price. What they and every other type of diaphanous exemplar lack, according to Pater, are those superfluous elements that divert, lessen, and corrupt. When these elements “burn away,” what is left is a luminous unity of spirit that will regard the world at its eternal worth, as it is, and without pretension or airs for a less authentic way of being.

‘*Sibi unius et simplicatus esse,*’ that is the long struggle of the *Imitatio Christi*. The spirit which it forms is the very opposite of that which regards life as a game of skill, and values things and persons as marks or counters of something to be gained, or achieved, beyond them. It seeks to value everything at its eternal worth, not adding to it, or taking from it, the amount of influence it may have for or against its own special scheme of life. It is the spirit that sees external circumstances as they are, its own power and tendencies as they are, and realizes the given conditions of its life, not disquieted by the desire for change, or the preference of one part in life rather than another, or passion, or opinion.<sup>9</sup>

Through its tendency for honest apprehension, Pater’s diaphanous individual, his moral hero, becomes distinguished, at least initially, for its power of insight and in the ability to accept the world at face value. While this produces one who is not “disquieted by the desire for change,” it would be malapropos to consider this a kind of contentedness with one’s place. Nor is Pater suggesting that one be resigned to his fate in the manner of a Stoic. Rather, what is implied here is a connection between what one sees, in himself or in the world, and how honestly he can live with this truth without needing to mask it. This apparent “openness” implies a candid and deliberate type whose purpose in life is firm and unyielding such that for Pater’s crystal man, the distinction between an inner, private self and an outer, public self begins to break down in the approach to the burning point. According to Pater,

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<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 154-155.

The artist and he who has treated life in the spirit of art desires only to be shown to the world as he really is; as he comes nearer and nearer to perfection, the veil of an outer life not simply expressive of the inward becomes thinner and thinner. This intellectual throne is rarely won. Like the religious life, it is a paradox in the world, denying the first conditions of man's ordinary existence, cutting obliquely the spontaneous order of things. But the character we have before us is a kind of prophecy of this repose and simplicity, coming as it were in the order of grace, not of nature, by some happy gift, or accident of birth or constitution, showing that it is indeed within the limits of man's destiny.<sup>10</sup>

By achieving what looks to be a kind of harmony between our inner self and the outer, a transparency, one becomes diaphanous in character. This entails a sincere desire to deny the first conditions of humanity's existence – its egotism and apparent privileging of the inner self over the outer. For by learning to lessen this veil we become united in a singular moral, intellectual, or spiritual purpose. In a Kierkegaardian sense, we become who we are.

Through the fulfillment of this simplicity of character, Pater thought that a uniquely expressive individual would result – one that he considered unparalleled in the beauty it brings to the world. Hence, in its transparency and its openness, Pater saw that the type of character he sought to describe was “engendered here less by wisdom than by innocence.”<sup>11</sup> Yet, the innocence Pater speaks of is grounded primarily in the grace of being diaphanous, in the purity and simplicity of one's purpose. Pater's crystal man is not intellectually naïve, but austere and effortless.

It has scarcely been observed that simplicity of character distinguishes Pater's clear crystal nature in “Diaphanéité.” Rather, it has usually been taken to reinforce the notion of aesthetic vision so important to *The Renaissance* and *Marius the Epicurean*. Nathan Scott, for instance, believes that reading Pater's published work in light of the ideas expressed in “Diaphanéité” is instructive, because through it one finds a very rough, yet revealing sketch of what it means to be an aesthetically attuned individual. In short, “Diaphanéité” represents a key of sorts to understanding Pater's other texts and for seeing that the virtue of receptivity best captures Pater's intentions.

According to Scott, the diaphanous individual is distinguished by his *disponibilité* or receptivity to things. For through his attentiveness to the

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<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 155.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 156.

“dignity” of creation, Pater’s aesthetically attuned individual learns to think and act in a manner that cannot be considered predatory in the desire to master, control, or manipulate. For Scott,

It [the diaphanous individual] ... is untainted by any kind of predatoriness or desire to master and control and manipulate: it is an adept in the discipline of what the late Martin Heidegger called “letting-be,” and it does not value “things and persons as marks or counters of something to be gained, or achieved, beyond them.” The “guilelessness” of this “clear crystal nature” is sometimes mistakenly thought to be merely a sort of “indifferentism,” but its guiding motive is *disponibilité*, or what Pater terms “receptivity”: it wants to be open and intransitively attentive to all the things and creatures of earth, not just as so many appurtenances of the human enterprise but as having, each in its own way ... an inherent dignity.<sup>12</sup>

As Scott reads him, there is a very conscientious insight available in the work of Pater – one that views things with attentiveness because of a kinship felt with the world. As equal and co-existing beings, Pater “invest[s] the things of earth with a radical kind of holiness.”<sup>13</sup> Accordingly, Scott’s reading of “Diaphaneité” is based upon a seeming imperative to “dwell poetically.” For by becoming open and attentive to the things around us, the diaphanous individual learns to see the world anew and enriched.

The emphasis on receptivity and aesthetic vision that Scott finds has usually been considered the most noteworthy aspect to “Diaphaneité.” In effect, we are to see that aesthetic vision presupposes a certain way of being in the world, and through this way of being we, in fact, become worthy of receiving beauty. Accordingly, there can be little doubt that to some degree Pater has provided his own kind of answer to what has usually been called the problem of taste in aesthetics. Ultimately we come to appreciate beauty by learning to dwell in a world where each thing is understood for its particular dignity.

The guilelessness of Pater’s *Marius the Epicurean* makes this point perhaps most convincingly. But are we to see Pater’s notion of aesthetic vision as *the* prevailing feature of the crystal man? I would like to suggest that we should not. It is clear that Pater intends something more in “Diaphaneité” beyond the idea of perceptual receptivity. In virtually every passage where he speaks of the diaphanous nature, Pater can be found

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<sup>12</sup> Scott, “Pater’s Imperative – To Dwell Poetically,” 94-95.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 98.

describing a character that is also notable for its lack of uneasiness and the absence of strain in its manner of expression. Beyond mere openness, the type Pater describes exemplifies a certain grace that makes his genius even rare among the gifted. For Pater,

The character we mean to indicate here achieves this perfect life by a happy gift of nature, without any struggle at all. Not the saint only, the artist also, and the speculative thinker, confused, jarred, disintegrated in the world, as sometimes they inevitably are, aspire for this simplicity to the last.<sup>14</sup>

Outside of the call for attentiveness that Scott considered central to “Diaphaneité,” in various places Pater refers to the diaphanous individual as someone who exists without excessive struggle. Even the great unworldly types Pater classifies, the saint, the artist, the thinker, sometimes fail to achieve the kind of inner unity requisite to being diaphanous. While they each strive for this simplicity of being, says Pater, they all too often fail in their strained geniuses. For as “confused,” “jarred,” and “disintegrated” as they often are, the one thing that leaves even their gifts wanting is the ability to express them with complete grace.

Among those who realize this gift of unconstrained expression, Pater says that a kind of straightforwardness will result. Since the crystal man’s thoughts and actions perfectly reflect his intentions, he achieves a kind of “transparency” such that the separation between himself and his purpose becomes less and less. As we have seen, his life is transformed into the ultimate expression of his inspiration.

When we reexamine “Diaphaneité” in this light, it is clear that an alternative dimension to being diaphanous is revealed, one separate from Scott’s analysis. For by achieving this kind of transparency the artist, the saint, the thinker, all realize a truer form of self-expression in their character and in the quality of their work. For each, they are no longer merely the authors of some discrete work or act. Rather, through this simplicity one’s life is made into a medium of expression intended to make a single life’s purpose manifest. In short, the diaphanous individual becomes fully inspired. According to Pater,

Simplicity in purpose and act is a kind of determinate expression in dexterous outline of one’s personality. It is a kind of moral expressiveness; there is an intellectual triumph implied in it. Such a simplicity is characteristic of the repose of perfect intellectual culture.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Pater, “Diaphaneité,” 155.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 155.

It is apparent that Pater's crystal man possesses a quality that seems to make him unlike most others. By attending to the world in the manner of "Diaphanéité," it is implied that seeing (and also being) "without ... strain and over consciousness" is paramount. In this respect, certain geniuses have distinguished themselves for their grace insofar as they regard the world and their work without nervous tension, overexertion, or struggle. Pater saw this feature, what he often referred to as an inner light, especially in Raffacello Sanzio (Raphael) due to the wonderful grace and boyish genius that seemed almost unconscious in him. Specifically, it was the manner in which Raphael's genius was able to shine through without a sick, excessive consciousness that made him exceptional. Because Raphael was able to paint with complete transparency, it is clear why he serves as the exemplar for Pater's diaphanous ideal – through him the clear crystal nature is made obvious. For Pater,

It is not the guise of Luther or Spinoza; rather it is that of Raphael, who in the midst of the Reformation and the Renaissance, himself lighted up by them, yielded himself to neither, but stood still to live upon himself, even in outward form a youth, almost an infant, yet surprising all the world.<sup>16</sup>

Undoubtedly, it was the clarity of Raphael's spirit, his unburdened consciousness, that made him the model for Pater's ideal. This perfect simplicity and transparency of the soul marked a kind of vision that was "life giving" in Pater's view. Thus, by seeing with an untainted consciousness, one that will not find self-expression a burden, we realize what Pater considered as a higher spiritual and moral order. For this reason, Pater's clear crystal nature is much more than an attentive, aesthetically receptive individual – he is possessed with a rare ability for expression that exists quite independent from the virtue of insight.

This dimension to Pater's thought in "Diaphanéité" was frequently an important theme elsewhere. Consider Pater's "Denys L'Auxerrois" as one such example where the intentions of "Diaphanéité" seem directly manifest. In "Denys L'Auxerrois" Pater literally asks us to imagine not only a golden age, but also a return to the simplicity of consciousness that would allow us to really accept it in the imagination. In short, Pater recognizes that the proper "childish consciousness" is necessary as a precondition for our understanding of his thought.

Almost every people, as we know, has had its legend of a "golden age" and of its return – legends which will hardly be forgotten, however prosaic the world may become, while man himself

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<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 157.

remains the aspiring, never quite contented being he is. And yet in truth, since we are no longer children, we might well question the advantage of the return to us of a condition of life in which, by the nature of the case, the values of things would, so to speak, lie wholly on their surfaces, unless we could regain also the childish consciousness, or rather unconsciousness, in ourselves, to take all that adroitly and with the appropriate lightness of heart.<sup>17</sup>

"Denys L'Auxerrois" is an imaginative portrait of a return to such a golden age. Yet it is readable, says Pater, only with an open consciousness, marked by simplicity and the ability to value things with a lightness of heart. For in regaining our "childish consciousness, or rather unconsciousness ... to take [things] adroitly and with the appropriate lightness of heart"<sup>18</sup> we attain the requisite straightforwardness to understand the main character, Denys L'Auxerrois, as Pater intended him.

By doing so, one sees that Denys L'Auxerrois's life and his character are strangely at odds with most storybook heroes. He was a man well remembered in the town of Auxerre long after his death, not only due to his genius as a craftsman but also for his integrity. Denys was a man whose joy in life was said to be almost child-like. Known originally as a simple gardener to the town's people, Denys was a man who always attracted the affection of others for, "the sight of him made old people feel young again."<sup>19</sup> And it was through this joyous influence that the town of Auxerre realized its golden age; a time when the music of laughter was said to shrill everywhere.

Denys' "seeming idleness" made it feel as if winter would appear in Auxerre no more. His influence spurred a time of considerable joy for most people, and for a time Denys' example became a model for reform. Yet, for all his earnest charm and the straightforwardness of his appeal, tragedy came to Denys' life because of the town people's ignorance and old-world superstition.

Due to Denys' open and attentive demeanor to all things, he would soon become an object of suspicion and hate. This is because his fondness for "oddly grown or even misshapen, yet potentially happy, children; for odd animals also" eventually caused the people of Auxerre to turn on him.<sup>20</sup> As one whose sympathy ran deep even for these creatures, and as one skillful in healing their maladies, Denys learned to love what others feared. His onetime taming of a wolf and his rescue of a lamb from the butcher created

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<sup>17</sup> Pater, Walter. *Imaginary Portraits (Denys L'Auxerrois)*, (London, MacMillan & Co, 1914), 47.

<sup>18</sup> Pater. "Denys L'Auxerrois," 47.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 60.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.

a suspicion in most people that Denys was an odd and somehow mysterious soul.

Yet, despite their initial suspicions, no one could deny the manner in which Denys had seemed to master life "not by magic, as some said, but by a natural simplicity in his living."<sup>21</sup> Denys' virtue lay most strikingly in the ease with which he was able to live and work. However, eventually the inexplicable and strange circumstances of his life were too disconcerting for most people to ignore. Thus, when the murder of a child in Auxerre was vaguely attributed to him, his hold upon the people of the town quickly came to be regarded as the fascinations of witchcraft or some other magic.

As the town's golden age quickly waned and hunger could easily be found everywhere in Auxerre, Denys' presumed wickedness and oddity were to blame. To lift the town of its curse, the people built a shrine to a patron saint whose remains had been neglected over the years, and so while the curse had been thought lifted, Denys was left "subdued, silent, melancholy."<sup>22</sup> The intimacy of his relationship to the town's people had been shattered as he became an object of suspicion.

Eventually their fear of Denys reached a pitch when, during the course of an annual religious ceremony in which Denys' usual role was to play a sacrificial victim, the mad rage of the town's people turned this enactment into a reality. Through his murder, which seemed to bring out the town's "evil passions," a more fitting sacrifice had now been made - one that, coincidentally, seemed a fitting end for someone of Denys' type insofar as Pater felt that his crystal man was perhaps the only sacrifice humanity deemed worthy to send. As Pater says of the crystal man in "Diaphaneité,"

Poetry and poetical history have dreamed of a crisis, where it must needs be that some human victim be sent down into the grave. These are they whom in its profound emotion humanity might choose to send.<sup>23</sup>

Once Denys became associated with that which seemed strange or malformed, he became a victim of the ignorance and misunderstanding of the people who once loved him. Their fear of his compassion and the effortlessness of his ways, which seemed almost like magic, were the source for the town's superstition and ultimately Auxerre's decline.

"Denys L'Auxerrois" is a very strange story about shortsightedness in the face of genius. However, what is most striking about it is its obvious parallel to the thoughts of "Diaphaneité." As a character whose unburdened consciousness and purity were the causes for his success in

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<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 69.

<sup>23</sup> Pater, "Diaphaneité," 158.

life, it is clear that Denys was meant to exemplify the virtue of simplicity for Pater. Particularly, it was the purity of his purpose in helping others that made Denys diaphanous in character. Denys was a man in possession of great nerve. He was fearless and unrestrained by superstition – a quality the town's people clearly lacked. Moreover, for most of his life, Denys' consciousness was found to be "clear" and "unstrained."

Only later does his soul darken, while gaining a kind of tension that seemed to erode the quality of his thought in the anxious period before his murder. For this reason, Pater seems to have intended that Denys' early life should approximate the "lightness of heart" he spoke of at the beginning of the story. Considering this, and given that Denys remains a figure without guise or semblance throughout his life, it would appear as if Denys represents an extension of Pater's thoughts on simplicity from "Diaphaneité."

Both works appear to illustrate that Pater's ideal and what he called success in life are intimately connected to the idea that the expression of genius is ideally uncomplicated – as it once was with Raphael. In this regard, the great beauty of "Diaphaneité" has often been overlooked. Specifically, it is the way in which Pater's crystal man finds expression without a heavy or burdened consciousness that makes him unique. Raphael, Denys, and Pater's crystal man have mastered their craft, yet without being tortured by it as Pater felt was so common. They have managed to do so, according to Pater, by transforming their lives into an unvarying expression inspired by a single purpose – a perfect transparency.

It may seem surprising that Pater would embrace an ideal of this nature given that his relatively sparse body of work is hardly known for its clarity and ease. However, where Pater realized his own limitations as a writer, and was often sympathetic when he saw the same problems in others, it seems understandable that he might postulate a genius more inborn and that shows itself in the manner of a prodigy.

The difference, I believe, lay in the form of one's expression. There are some of us that manage to create with a sharp, discerning acuity, yet not without great pains (or pangs) in the manner of expression. This form of genius is indeed rare and is not without a merit of its own in the art or breadth of thought it produces, or in the magnanimity of its deeds, labored as they are. But there have also been those who seem to escape the weight of this gravity. These imponderous few say and do with a spontaneity that can never be acquired for those of us who lack it. Their genius is perhaps the most rare of all because it is difficult for us to recognize or even fully understand. This, I believe, was Pater's clear crystal nature and the true subject of "Diaphaneité."