Vampiric acts and Medusan powers

Oscar Wilde was no vampire even though he undoubtedly became an object and agent of fascination. Some critics, however, claim that he served as the model for Dracula, a figure that came into print two years after Wilde’s trial and epitomises the same Victorian anxieties over homosexuality that were fuelled by the life and works of the controversial writer. The suggested metamorphosis of Wilde’s sexually ‘corrupted’ character, which produced highly seductive and provocative works such as *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890), a novel accused of promoting homoerotic desires, into both Stoker’s monstrous protagonist and the entrapped Jonathan Harker who is taken by a ‘wild[e] desire’, points to an act of artistic vampirism. Insofar as they feed on events, themes and objects that have already received increased public attention, absorbing their energy to bind readers, Stoker, Wilde and several other writers might indeed be accused of artistic vampirism. *Dorian Gray* seems particularly tainted by this ‘disease’. The novel was criticised for its pot-pourri of ideas taken from other authors, including Stevenson, Poe, Balzac, Goethe, Radcliffe and Hawthorne. While some critics lamented that ‘there is so little that is original in it’, others curiously praised ‘the book’s very lack of originality’ as ‘the secret of its power’. According to Wilde’s aesthetics, it was possible to be derivative and original at the same time in that an artist could appropriate the ideas of others to create wholly original impressions and, as he claims in his preface, ‘beautiful things’.

In *Dorian Gray*, in which art itself becomes the life-sucking agent and is described as both enchanting and consumptive, fascination emerges as a driving force. As Seeber argues, the dynamics of attraction and repulsion are closely intertwined with the story’s aesthetic and moral tensions, which arise from a fascination of beauty and of evil. Seeber reads *Dorian Gray* as a key example of the increasing interest in the concept of fascination in fin-de-siècle aesthetic criticism, which was deeply engaged in ‘an aesthetics of

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fascination’. He identifies three factors that explain this increased interest in ‘fascination’ in aesthetic criticism around 1900:

In the first place this amoral category emphasizes the autonomous nature of the aesthetic experience and of the sensual pleasure aimed at by the Decadents in opposition to the dominant system of Victorian moral and social norms. Secondly, ‘fascination’, by borrowing [...] elements of pre-modern magical-occult lore, distinguishes sharply between aesthetic communication and its effect on the one hand, and the presumptions of the dominant scientific-positivist discourse on the other. Then thirdly, this same evocation of the diabolical heritage implicit in ‘fascination’ renders possible an anti-bourgeois provocation, but also [...] a compromise with moralizing discourse.

Seeber suggests that Wilde’s use of the highly ambiguous concept of fascination in *Dorian Gray* ‘blurs the boundaries not only between psychology, aesthetics, and occultism or the esoteric, but also between aesthetics and religion’. Shifting the most intense fascination in the novel from the art object, that is, Dorian Gray, to the artwork, that is, his portrait, Wilde also explores art’s increasing autonomy in eliciting attraction and provides a strong case of the agency of art. Fascination in *Dorian Gray* mainly operates on the aesthetic and erotic level, culminating in a medusamorphosis, which engages in a wide range of different discourses connected to fin-de-siècle anxieties of influence.

The fascination with beauty (virtuous and vile) revolves around the central character, Dorian Gray, who attracts the attention of the painter Basil. Basil preserves Dorian’s ‘extraordinary personal beauty’ (6) in a portrait which, through mimetic or ‘triangular desire’, succeeds in infatuating Lord Henry. The aristocratic aesthete is the first to note the fascinating quality of the painting and its ‘brainless’ (7) beauty: ‘he is a Narcissus [...]. Your mysterious young friend [...] whose picture really fascinated me’ (7). The portrait has captivated the fascinating qualities of Dorian, whose looks immediately enchanted the painter:

I suddenly became conscious that some one was looking at me. I turned half-way round, and saw Dorian Gray for the first time. When our eyes met, I felt that I was growing pale. A curious sensation of terror came over me. I know that I had come face to face with some one whose mere personality was so fascinating that, if I allowed it to do so, it would absorb my whole nature, my whole soul, my very art itself. (10)

The encounter alludes to the inducement of love fascination. The feeling of terror which arises in Basil when he senses Dorian’s enervating forces, unleashed as their eyes interlock, indicates his anxieties at experiencing