In Love with the Abject – John Cowper Powys's *Weymouth Sands*[1]

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> "the man who hung there, like a cadaver in a straight waistcoat, was analysing Lucinda as if he were embracing a vivisected, half-anaesthetized, snarling panther"[2]

Jeremy Robinson in his introduction to a relatively new collection of articles on Powys's novels, while enlarging on how much his oeuvre is neglected by major characters of literary criticism, casually remarks that "[o]ne could imagine essays on the Kristevan abject in Powys's use of vivisection in *Weymouth Sands*" ("Introduction," iv). His comment seems to be rather provocative and fanciful at first sight: vivisection, though a recurrent motif in the novel, is apparently located at its periphery. One of the major characters, Magnus Muir, is deeply concerned with the inhumanity of the vivisection of dogs going on in the local asylum called the Brush Home, and later on Sylvanus Cobbold, who is forced to become an inhabitant of the same institution, launches a heroic fight to stop it. However, the novel is far from being centred on the issue of vivisection – in fact, the notion of any centre seems to be hardly applicable to either its plot or the perspectives filtered through the narrative consciousness implied by the apparently non-intrusive third person narrative voice. No wonder that Janina Nordius, an excellent expert of Powys's novels, pushes aside the whole issue of vivisection with one passing remark, which relegates it to other images of "universal suffering" (Nordius 52–53) in Powys's works: "But the more specific images of suffering seem to have been replaced by the frequent but fairly general references to vivisection said to go on in the Brush asylum" (132). On closer inspection, however, vivisection in *Weymouth Sands* proves

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[2] Powys, *Weymouth Sands,* 448-449. From now on all quotes from *Weymouth Sands* are indicated only by *WS* and the page numbers.

to be a highly significant metaphor for psychoanalysis and, by analogy, science, which underlies Powys's vision of humanity in the novel. This, in turn, reveals a curious – perverted? – fascination with the abject, which might be regarded as the dominant shaping factor of Powys's choice of characters, structuring of plot and narrative technique in *Weymouth Sands*.

Vivisection and Psychoanalysis – Images of the Abject

Though locating vivisection in an asylum might seem arbitrary today, it serves as a starting point for the gradually evolving identification of vivisection and psychoanalysis, which finally becomes a firmly established metaphor in *Weymouth Sands*. The originally – questionably – metonymical relationship of the two concepts acquires its metaphorical quality through the repeated comparison of the vivisected animals with the human patients of the institution, while the vivisector and the analyst are actually the same person, Dr. Brush. The association of the vivisected dogs with Dr. Brush's mental patients is introduced by Magnus Muir:

> […] he suddenly began telling himself a story about the spirits of the old tribes who had raised this huge earth-fortress [of Maiden Castle], and how the captive souls from the Brush Home might at least in the liberation of sleep come flocking out through the night to Maiden Castle and be there protected and safe, along with a great ghostly pack of crouching, whimpering, fawning, cringing, torture-released dogs, all crowding close behind these phantom-warriors, as wave after wave of their enemies poured up the slope, trying in vain to repossess themselves of them. (*WS* 115)

This association is further underlined by Marret, who relates the impressions of an eye-witness of vivisection, and points out that the dog "screamed like a human being" (*WS* 401). The metaphor gains an almost authoritative power when the "vivisector", Dr. Brush himself establishes the same analogy. He admits to himself that in the name of hunting for scientific truth he is a torturer, keeping dogs in utter pain on the verge of life and death, and figuratively doing the same to human beings like Lucinda Cobbold:

> "I don't know which is the most exciting: cutting truth out of dogs or coaxing it out of men. But this I know: that I would help every dog in the world to die howling and reduce every woman in the world to a cold sepulchral pulp, like Mrs. Cobbold, if I could add only a page to the great Folio of *verified and verifiable truth!* How lovely, how exquisite are this man's self-deceptions! God! I could watch him and experiment on him for a hundred years! Oh, how I wish I could buy a cartload of healthy Dogberries as easily as Murphy can buy healthy Dogs! And Murphy himself. How beautifully complicated his sadism is, with its delicate feelers

> and its subtle arts of self-protective concealment! Murphy was drawn to the vivisection-laboratory as inevitably as […] those holy torturers to their castle-prisons." (*WS* 440)

In the same scene one of the narrator's comments on Dr. Brush also underpins the metaphor:

> […] that ghastly Lemur hanging there opposite him, that corpse-man, sweating the wise sweat of the cunning of corpses […] sat up so erect in his new over-coat, just as if he had a rope under his expressionless face […] the man who hung there, like a cadaver in a straight waistcoat, was analysing Lucinda as if he were embracing a vivisected, half-anaesthetized, snarling panther. (*WS* 448–449)

Finally, at the very end of the novel, the metaphor is literally given by Dr. Brush himself, though he only poses it as the question of "whether in delving into [Lucinda Cobbold's] secret life and humouring her morbidities, he was not practising vivisection upon her rather than psychiatry" (*WS* 566).

To indicate the proper weight of the implications of this metaphor in terms of the Kristevan abject, first let me contextualise vivisection and psychoanalysis in Powysian art and highlight their relationship with thematic and narrative concerns in his texts. Vivisection is an obsessively recurring image of "Powys's worst evil – scientific cruelty" (Knight 99–100), against which he launches an obstinate fight and formulates his Rabelaisian philosophy. It features as a more or less emphatic motif in three of his other novels (*Morwyn* – Knight 63; *The Inmates* – Knight 82; *Up and Out* – Knight 108) apart from *Weymouth Sands* as a form of the sadistic and thus the physically repellent in mankind (Knight 21). "Vivisectional" is almost an "epitheton ornans" of contemporary science, seen as fundamentally "inhuman" in his essay on Dostoevsky (Powys, *Dostoievsky* 189). Notably, vivisection also appears in his lengthy essayistic work on Rabelais, first published in 1948, fourteen years after *Weymouth Sands*: it is in Rabelais's attitude to nature, including the most excremental aspects of human existence, that Powys detects an approach "diametrically opposed to the unphilosophical inhumanity of Vivisection" (Powys, *Rabelais* 42). In Powys's reading of Rabelais this is the basis of "Pantagruelism", the philosophy formulated in the books of *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, which he rather likes to read as a new "Gospel". Though his treatment of the French writer, with special reference to such chapters as "Rabelais as a Prophet", must be taken with certain reservations, his understanding of the Renaissance text, though far from being so academic, bears comparison with Bakhtin's interpretation. Powys identifies roughly nine major components of Rabelaisian philosophy, namely "the ataraxia of the Stoics", parody,

"farcical and sardonic humour", "considerate humanity and pity", "shameless realism and gross bawdiness", a "Christian element", a "magical and *almost occult* hero-worship", "endurance, enjoyment, and unlimited toleration" and "a *metaphysical* element" (Powys, *Rabelais* 368-369). It must be noted that Powys, totally independently from Bakhtin's train of thought[3], emphasises some of the poetic dimensions of Rabelais' works – parody (Bahtyin, *François Rabelais* 16, 19–22, Bahtyin, *Dosztojevszkij* 159–160, 239–240), realism/materialism, sardonic humour and bawdiness/comic treatment of the excremental and sexual, carnivalesque laughter (Bahtyin, *François Rabelais* 27–34), tolerance/suspension of official hierarchy (Bahtyin, *François Rabelais* 30–37, 12, 18, 15–16) – which Bakhtin, on the one hand, brought in the foreground of analysis, on the other hand, used as points of reference for his concept of polyphony formulated in his interpretation of Dostoevsky's poetics (Bahtyin, *Dosztojevszkij* 10–11, 159–160, 239–240). Translated into Bakhtinian terms, Powys, expressing a distrust in science so typical of mythologically orientated Modernists, poses against the monological "truth" of reason a dialogic or polyphonic vision of his Rabelaisian "Multiverse" (Powys, *Rabelais* 370). Powys's personal Rabelaisian philosophy, aiming at a "mastery of the repellent" which is "a step […] to a mastery of the horror of death" (Knight 85-86), on the one hand, is formulated in opposition to a crudely scientific approach manifested in such horrors as vivisection, on the other hand, it results in a pluralistic vision of the world (Knight 85)[4].

Just like the image of vivisection in his art, Powys's idea of psychoanalysis, most directly elaborated in his essay *Psychoanalysis and Morality*, is also inseparably intertwined with his notions of ethics and his personal philosophy. The short text, traditionally published as a separate booklet since its first edition in 1923, preceded the publication of *Weymouth Sands* by eleven years, but – as its title itself also suggests – it gives a direct and actually often didactic elaboration of several issues related to psychoanalysis in the novel. In the essay Powys, who is conversant with the theories of Freud, Jung and Adler (9), hails psychoanalysis as the new

[3] Jacqueline Peltier in her comprehensive study comparing Powys's different interpretations of Rabelais, also emphasises that Bakhtin's and Powys's works were written approximately at the same time and that Powys would probably have been highly interested in the Russian critic's interpretation, finding a kindred spirit in him. Though she follows the developments of Powys's interpretation only in his non-belletristic works, she also takes it for granted that Rabelais' extremely deep influence on Powys's personal philosophy also surfaces in his novels (http://www.powys-lannion.net/Powys/LettrePowysienne/number7.htm).

[4] Cf. also Joe Boulter's two comprehensive studies on pluralism in Powys's *Porius* in his volume *Postmodern Powys – New Essays on John Cowper Powys* (Kidderminster, Crescent Moon, 2000).

science which is to liberate mankind from the burden of having to think of socially stigmatised sexual practices, such as homosexuality and incest, in terms of sin (10–11). Powys's viewpoint is partly anti-Christian, partly feminist: he locates the source of the traditional attitude to sexuality in Western Christianity, more concretely the Christian notion of sin (13) and considers it a basically masculine innovation (20–22), a part of "man-made customs" (36). He even arrives at the point of criticising psychoanalysis itself for being a part of the establishment in a sense, since it remains within the boundaries of "man-made language" by relegating women exclusively to the role of the mother and not "articulating […] the real nature of woman's un-hypnotised reaction to the mystery of life" (38). As it can be expected from Powys's rejection of Christian morality, there is a strong metaphysical strain in his argument: with a rather Blakean turn he connects "ethical austerity in the matter of sex" with "philosophical austerity in the matter of the cosmic mystery" – with a restriction on the freedom of individual thought in the domain of the sacred (23). Psychoanalysis, by opening up the unfathomable depths of the human soul, seems to be liberating in this respect, as well: it facilitates pluralism, ironic criticism and "humorous indulgence" (23–32). Powys even comes to define art and literature in psychoanalytic terms when he claims that not only the creation of texts and their reception are erotic in nature (31), but also the individual's attitude to the world, since he "possesses, devours, and aesthetically digests, as much of the unfathomable universe as he is able to appropriate to his desire" (33). The eroticism of this "aesthetic digestion", however, is fundamentally Narcissistic, because everybody "seeks […] a diffused reproduction in the objective world of what they are subjectively in themselves" (33). In fact, *Psychoanalysis and Morality* suggests that psychoanalysis – and literature, being both its forerunner and the user of its achievements – facilitates an intrusion of the pluralistic (Rabelaisian?) vision of the world into such most hostile territories as science, Christian ethics and metaphysics.

Far from intending to simplify the analysis of *Weymouth Sands* into its reading as a direct realisation of Powys's sometimes vague and heuristic theoretical notions, let me use the two texts mentioned above as prioritised intertexts which throw into relief the subtleties of the metaphorical identification of vivisection and psychoanalysis. The first, most surprising and obvious superficial conclusion can be that the very identification of the two terms in *Weymouth Sands* is in fundamental opposition with Powys's notions expressed in his essays. The fact that the metaphor evolves into a network of motifs which finely interlace the whole texture of the novel, encourages a reading which strives to go behind the passionate and suspect gospel of the two essayistic texts partly containing Powys's own

interpretation of his writing practice via his personal philosophy. In *Weymouth Sands* both vivisection and psychoanalysis are instances of the abject, metaphorically linked to most characters in the novel and thus drawing into their field of force almost the entire text. Let me explore this network of images and characters to demonstrate how Powys's "multiverse" is built on a simultaneous repulsion from and fascination with several aspects of human existence depicted as abject, not by any chance restricted to such particular phenomena as vivisection – or psychoanalysis, for that matter. Going beyond the platitude of repeating the Kristevan claims that the analyst "drawing perverse jouissance" from "displaying the abject" can easily confuse himself for it (210) and that if not all literature (207) than at least "[g]reat modern literature unfolds over [the] terrain [of the abject]" (18), one can claim that Powys's position turns out to be a very special one in Modernist literature. His constant fight with "the repellent", culminating in his Rabelaisian philosophy, in fact means consciously posing the carnivalesque spirit against abjection – two notions which are hardly separable, as Kristeva's exposition of Céline's oeuvre also indicates[5]. How far such a division is practicable remains one of the major dilemmas of *Weymouth Sands*.

To demonstrate how the abject seems to be appropriate the whole texture of the novel, let me start with the core of the metaphorical network related to it, that is, with the metaphorical identification of vivisection and psychoanalysis revealing that both belong to the domain of the Kristevan abject in *Weymouth Sands*. For the sake of clarity two aspects of these phenomena can be differentiated and treated separately: the representation of the analyst as a vivisector and the analysand as a vivisected animal, with interwoven remarks on the relationship of the two. The related metaphors feature some of the motifs prioritised by Kristeva as appearances of the abject, such as the corpse (Kristeva 3–4), the living dead, the ghost[6], the

[5] Carnival and its related terms, such as the grotesque, ambiguity and the apocalyptic make repeated appearances in Kristeva's analysis of Céline's texts (especially 138-195), let alone the fact that most of the thematic elements she analyses in terms of the abject could be as handily interpreted within the scope of the carnivalesque. Unfortunately, she does not clarify the relationship of the two notions – carnival seems to be a facet of abjection in literature at best – though her theory draws on Bakhtinian notions quite obviously. Such an incorporation of the carnivalesque under the umbrella term of the abject deprives it of the liberating optimism not only Bakhtin's more professional and Powys's lay reading, but also Kristeva's own early interpretations ascribe to it (Томсон 125). The clarification of the relationship of the two terms, however, is beyond the scope of the present paper.

[6] For an analysis of abject bodies, among them ghosts in fantastic, more specifically in Gothic stories cf. Réka Mónika Cristian's "The Fantastic Abject as Bodies in Mirrors"

ambiguous border (Kristeva 4) and lead on to more general issues, such as abjection of the self (Kristeva 5–6), the ambiguous feelings attached to the abject (9–10), the ethics of psychoanalysis, the location of the speaking subject (Kristeva 11–12), the structuring of plot and the specific aspects of narrative consciousness in the novel.

Dr. Brush, the analyst and vivisector, who is repeatedly described as a corpse, who despises himself, his own science and the whole of humanity, who feels unsurpassable pleasure while interminably experimenting with his patients without the faintest hope of cure, readily lends himself to interpretation as the psychoanalyst who not only "confuses himself for the abject" but in fact is abject. The first aspect of this complex phenomenon to be mentioned is that Daniel Brush is apostrophised as a corpse in various ways: he is a "corpse-man", "a cadaver" and he is compared to a hanged man making love to a half-dead panther (*WS* 448–449)[7]. Julia Kristeva assigns a definitive role to the corpse (cadaver) as the embodiment of the border (death) against which the subject defines itself and to which all other forms of waste are related:

> The corpse (or cadaver: *cadere,* to fall), that which has irremediably come a cropper, a cesspool, and death; it upsets even more violently the one who confronts it as fragile and fallacious chance. […] If dung signifies the other side of the border, the place where I am not and which permits me to be, the corpse, the most sickening of wastes, is a border that has encroached upon everything. […] the corpse, seen without God and outside of science, is the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life. Abject. It is something rejected from which one does not part. Imaginary uncanniness and real threat, it beckons to us and ends up engulfing us. (Kristeva 3–4)

Powys assigns to vivisection and the psychologist the role of the very border mentioned here that defines not only the individual human being, but, in the case of *Weymouth Sands*, humanity as such. It gains force partly through the spatial symbolism of the novel, partly through the more than questionable ethical stance embodied by Dr. Brush.

While the location of the institution clearly situates it as a metaphorical border, the characters' emotional reaction to the building, a metonymy for

(*Proceedings of the 2nd Tempus Mini-Conference – English Studies and the Curriculum,* Debrecen, Kossuth University, 1997), 94–107.

[7] The metaphor of the "ghastly Lemur" (*WS* 448) complicates the image by almost tautologically introducing the notion of the living dead: lemurs are actually ghosts, evil spirits in Roman mythology (Hamilton 48), and the etymologically related "ghastly" (Neufeldt 568) partly repeats and thereby emphasises the same information. Since the ghost is a common metaphor of both analyst and analysand in *Weymouth Sands*, let me return to it in the analysis of the latter.

vivisection and psychological treatment, interprets it more specifically as a psychological border – of horror, madness and death – against which the subject defines himself. Since "[w]hat was now the Brush Home was hidden away in so out of the world spot, that very few among what Homer calls 'articulately-speaking men' who lived in Weymouth had ever been near it, though most people had heard of it" (*WS* 109–110), the institution is figuratively placed at the border of the (known) human world – in a horizontal dimension, it is like a terra incognita, in a vertical one, more specifically, it is like the underworld. Later the Brush Home is actually compared to Hades (*WS* 518). This is the psychological Hell's Museum (*WS* 86) against which characters in the novel, by rejecting vivisection and madness, can define themselves as live, sane and moral, thereby establishing their own identity and humanity. This is the case with such relatively less complicated minor characters as Marret (*WS* 401), Chant (*WS* 111–112) or even the neurotic child Benny Cattistock, who makes his first appearance in the novel with a dog in his arms just rescued from vivisection (*WS* 100). In fact, it is popular wisdom that has given the place the name "Hell's Museum" (*WS* 111–112), which thus expresses the self-definition of the community of the people living in its vicinity through rejecting it and placing it beyond, or rather below the limits of the human world. It is only Dogberry Cattistock, "the man of action" (Knight 46), a representative of a spirit totally alien from Weymouth, who appreciates the scientific practices of Dr. Brush to the extent that he finances his "experimental laboratory". Even he finds vivisection "devilish queer" (*WS* 437), though, when on his wedding day he ends up watching the doctor the whole day instead of making his appearance at church.

However, in the exemplary cases of Magnus Muir and Sylvanus Cobbold vivisection, though clearly forming a border, also exposes something unbearable *within* the human psyche that actually threatens identity. Magnus Muir's impressions play a definitive role in establishing the function of vivisection as border. Just like he finds it difficult even to look at Daniel Brush "without an obscure horror" (*WS* 102), and at the thought that "[t]his man is a vivisector […] a sickening sensation of anger and disgust [takes] possession of him" (*WS* 101), the sight of the very building provokes "sick aversion and distaste" (*WS* 110) in him. His emphatically bodily reaction is a perfect example of the "loathing" and "repugnance" one feels for the abject (Kristeva 2). His aversion soon takes on the form of the fear of death – he senses "an atmosphere of such horror that he fidgeted in his seat and felt sick in his stomach as if he were going to see an execution" (*WS* 110) – and the fear of losing his sanity. The latter, however, becomes

intertwined with his desire for Curly, so that the two affects are intermixed in the same bodily sensation:

> "How can any one of us have a single moment of happiness […] when there's such a thing as vivisection in the world? And yet would I, to stop it once and for all, and to burn all their operating tables and all their straps and all their instruments, be prepared to sacrifice Curly?"
>
> The coming together of these two electrified nerves in Magnus' nature, his erotic passion and his sickening twinge over vivisection, threw him […] into a series of jumpy contortions. He kept experiencing a twitching in his long legs, and every now and then with a muscular contraction that corresponded to what he visioned was happening under Mr. Murphy's devotion to science he would draw up one of his heels along the floor of the car.
>
> "I suppose," he thought, "the only thing to do is to *assume* that life contains cruelties so unspeakable that if you think about them you go mad! That's what it is! To think about Murphy and Dr. Brush's dogs brings you into the care of Dr. Brush!" (*WS* 306)

It is in combination with sexuality and unavowable pleasure that vivisection – and psychoanalysis – really play the threatening role of the abject, which is "[o]n the edge of non-existence and hallucination, of a reality that, if I acknowledge it, annihilates me" (Kristeva 2). Sylvanus Cobbold undergoes a much more amplified version of a similar experience during his "analysis" in the asylum. When forcibly hospitalised in the Brush Home for the alleged seduction of young girls – a crude simplification of his mystical and physically asexual relationship with women – he undertakes something like a crusade against vivisection and to stop it he figuratively loses his life and becomes a Christ-like figure. Grotesquely, his reaching out to the Absolute via an embodiment of the feminine is replaced by the perverted eroticism of the analytical situation: the impersonalised, passive personality of the analyst makes the impression of his ideal listener, a woman on Sylvanus and he is "seized with a mysterious spasm of turbulent erotic emotion" (*WS* 537), which he consciously rejects as perverted. Desire, the need to fill in a lack, whether physical or metaphysical, and rejection are mixed in the characters' attitude to vivisection and psychoanalysis, in their "fascinated start that leads them toward it and separates them from it" (Kristeva 2); it becomes an ambiguous, ever-moving border that forces the subject to keep "straying" (Kristeva 8).

The intrapersonal tensions of such a "straying" subject reach a culmination in Dr. Brush's abjection of the self generalised as misanthropy in *Weymouth Sands*: fully aware of the fact that his medical practices – both vivisectional and psychoanalytic – are morally unacceptable, he also admits

to finding his only pleasure in them, that is, he finds the abject, "the impossible within" (Kristeva 5), as the core of his very integrity. His notion of psychoanalysis – actually a crude version of Freudism – is briefly outlined at the moment of its dramatic change during his "treatment" of Sylvanus Cobbold:

> The grand difference between his old system and his new one lay in the hypotheses they respectively assumed with regard to the *locality* of all those dark, disturbing impulses, manias, shock-bruises, neuroses, complexes that he regarded as both the causes and the symptoms of human derangement. In his old system these volcanic neuroses were resident in an entirely subliminal region, a permanent underworld of the human ego from which they broke forth to cause unhappiness and anguish. This region was out of reach, and possessed locked, adamantine gates, as far as our ordinary processes of mental introspection went. To isolate and analyse these peculiarities *as aberrations* it was necessary to assume some kind of well-balanced norm, some measure of well-constituted functioning, from which all such "complexes" could be regarded as lapses. (*WS* 513–514)

In this concept of psychoanalysis the analyst identifies with the "norm", the "measure" which "isolates" the abnormal from the normal. The full ironies of this stance can be realised through the representation of the self-same norm-giver as a corpse, quoted above. In the openly sexualised game of analysis with the doctor sitting as if he was wearing a "straight waistcoat" and indulging himself in his perversion of "embracing a vivisected, half-anaesthetized, snarling panther" (*WS* 448-449), the erotic desire of the analyst is satisfied by an object kept constantly on the verge of life and death and the analyst is totally interchangeable with the analysand, whom he defines as aberrant. In Dr. Brush's fundamental revision of his earlier scientific theories under the impact of Sylvanus Cobbold's analysis he actually comes to redefine the conscious and the unconscious along a continuum (*WS* 514). What he does – in fact, still adhering to his role as a "norm-giver" – is a redefinition of the human norm based on the analysis of a "borderline patient", whose speech "constitute[s] propitious ground for a sublimating discourse" - in this case rather "mystic" than "aesthetic"-, since he "make[s] the conscious/unconscious distinction irrelevant" (Kristeva 7). However, the only result is that the vivisection of dogs becomes redundant (he actually gives it up for financial reasons) when he has found a human being to "vivisect" in the person of Sylvanus, the ideal analysand, who seems to be in constant communication with his unconscious:

> Sylvanus had been in Hell's Museum now for over three months and the diagnosing of his "case" had proved the most interesting piece of analysis that Daniel Brush, in all his long experience as a psychiatrist, had ever

> undertaken. For one thing, Sylvanus turned out to be a well-nigh perfect patient. He became so interested in Dr. Brush's de-personalised personality that he was ready to humour it to the utmost. And since the essence of this man's identity was to eliminate his identity and to become a pure, unblurred mirror in which reality could reflect itself, what Sylvanus constantly aimed at was to furnish the doctor with an increasing series of new layers, new levels, new strata of his precious objective truth. As a result of this, Daniel Brush had never known such persistent, unalloyed mental excitement as he experienced during these autumn months. The more he analysed Sylvanus the more he found to analyse. And what was so extremely satisfactory about it, from Brush's point of view, was that *the question of cure* never emerged at all. The Doctor could in fact drop the "doctor" and give himself up to experiment with Sylvanus as he had never dared to experiment with anyone, no, not even with Mrs. Cobbold! (*WS* 512)

The effect of the doctor's analysis is rather similar to that of vivisection, since under the figurative knife of the doctor's cold-blooded irony Sylvanus stops being human: it "made him howl like a famished wolf" (*WS* 540) and he "gave vent to a cry that seemed hardly human" (*WS* 540). His "analysis" produces similar results as Mrs. Cobbold's, whom, in Dr. Brush's own words, he has "reduce[d] […] to a cold sepulchral pulp" (*WS* 440). The metaphor applied to her emphasises the condition of being at a limbo, stuck between life and death, but belonging more to the latter, like ghosts. The condition of these patients – metaphorically vivisected animals and living dead – is abject in itself because it represents an ambiguous, in-between situation, which "disturbs identity, system, order" (Kristeva 4) and "does not respect borders, positions, rules" (Kristeva 4). Their cases imply that if the psychoanalyst represents a border or measure, it is rather in the sense that like death, he "has encroached upon everything" (Kristeva 4) and assimilates his patients – his objects – to himself to make them abject.

If there is one person in the novel who faces vivisection and psychoanalysis as abject in the novel, it is Dr. Brush himself:

> "When I hear my sweet hypocritical colleagues," he thought, "like so many clever politicians, defending experimentation as a humane duty for the curing of disease, I feel that the human race is so contemptible that the sooner some totally different creation takes its place, the better for the universe! Man is a loathsome animal, prodigious in his capacity for a particular kind of disgusting cruelty, covered up with ideal excuses. If I were allowed – as no doubt we *shall* be in half-a-century – to vivisect *men*, I'd gladly let the dogs alone. Comical, comical! It's comical but it's also a little ghastly! I wonder if our sentimental devotees comprehend what we real scientists are like. Mad! That's what we're like. It's a vice. *I know what*

> *it is*. And I know what I am. I am a madman with a vice for which I'd vivisect Jesus Christ." (*WS* 444–445)

Dr. Brush's clear-sighted and disillusioned vision of himself also widens the scope of abjection in the novel: psychoanalysis becomes generalised as science, and the vivisector-analyst becomes an exemplary representative of the human species which is abject exactly because of its ability to carry out such practices. He also emphasises the ambiguous nature of this practice, since, as an excellent example of the abject, it cunningly covers its inhumanity with the interests of the human kind (Kristeva 4). It questions the Enlightenment vision of the man of Reason, of which late 19th-century positivism generating outstanding scientific results and defining the basic approach of even such sciences as psychoanalysis was a logical continuation. Dr. Brush's vision of psychoanalysis, thriving on the abject, and of mankind, loathsome for sanctioning it, is at the same time apocalyptic: full of pessimism, he predicts the well-deserved and unavoidable end of such a race.

What offers an obvious but apparently weak counterpoint to this vision is the promise of a new kind of science – and morality – heralded by the arrival of the new physician at the end of the novel. The tentative indication of a new approach to science and life represented by Dr. Mabon is related in terms of the myth of the Golden Fleece and a retrieval of the Golden Age of mankind, though apart from Magnus's intuitive attraction to the man there is not much else to support it. After the narrator's introduction claiming that "this day there did happen to be a sort of oracle delivered, though its utterer […] was a complete stranger to the town" (*WS* 499) it is the Latin tutor who, on their first meeting – and the new doctor's last appearance in the novel – attaches outstanding importance to Dr. Mabon: "I'd like to know this chap's philosophy. He's in advance of all of us. He sees far. He's like the Pilot of the Argo. God! I hope he stays here!" (*WS* 503) The doctor, the writer of a "purely *biological*" (*WS* 504) book on ethics, of which he thinks that it is "barbarous" (*WS* 502), is also a conchologist, who looks "as if he would willingly have exchanged his present incarnation for the life of a Solen [a species of shells]" (*WS* 502). He "seemed to have a special look for everyone, with its own humorous commentary upon the world, but a *different* commentary for each separate person in a group" (*WS* 503). It is his short dialogue with Magnus which gives the promise of a new science beyond psychoanalysis:

> '[…] how do you go to work with your neurotic cases, now that you've dropped psychoanalysis?'
> […]

> 'I do nothing but listen … and … move … perhaps … a few things that have got in the way!'
> Having been persecuted till he uttered this oracle, Dr. Mabon did not retire into sulky silence the moment he had spoken. (*WS* 504-505)

It is the slightly modified repetition of the expression "to utter an oracle" on the narrator's part that underpins the exceptional importance of Dr. Mabon's rather general comment. His whole personality and approach poses a sharp contrast to Dr. Brush's: a lover and admirer of nature, he is an advocate of non-intrusion and benevolent, humorous, tolerant passivity. His "dropping" of psychoanalysis together with the representation of its practice in *Weymouth Sands* as vivisection marks Powys's disappointment in his extremely optimistic expectations concerning psychoanalysis. What he presents here seems to be nothing else but the Rabelaisian alternative – in the Powysian sense outlined in his *Rabelais* – to the experimental cruelty and jouissance of psychoanalysis as abject.

In the Lure of the Abject – the Speaking Subject, Characters and Plot

If going beyond psychoanalysis as vivisection is represented directly in *Weymouth Sands* only as a passing glimpse of a Rabelaisian Golden Age, indirectly it permeates practically all the levels of the text, though inseparably tied to the abject. The tracking down of another facet of the original metaphor, the image of the ghost for the analysand reappearing throughout the text of the novel in a more generalised sense reveals that the fascination with the abject in the whole of *Weymouth Sands* is far from being restricted to Dr. Brush. In fact, abjection is the position from which the speaking subject seems to formulate an enunciation of being – the only proper location worth writing about at all. The novel is teeming with abject characters and scenes – psychic health seems to be the exception that proves the rule. Their treatment, however, is dominated by light-hearted indulgence and non-critical tolerance on the narrator's part, resulting in a polyphonic multiverse of several colliding perspectives filtered through the narrative voice with equal power and "truth-value". Last but not least, Powys's fascination with the abject, this "'something' that I do not recognize as a thing", but which is "not nothing, either" (Kristeva 2) might shed light on the fundamentally bathetic nature of the plot of *Weymouth Sands*, the conspicuously empty centre of the novel.

The metaphor of the ghost for the analysand mentioned above is merged in the text of the novel with the leitmotif of the "Homeric dead" applied to all the inhabitants of Weymouth – in fact, to the whole of mankind. While the patients of the Brush Home are, as mentioned above, associated with the

vivisected dogs from the very beginning, the metaphorical parallel for the condition of the suffering animals, neither dead nor living, is that of the ghost. Ghosts, as an extension of the notion of the corpse, are by definition abject. The patients of the asylum, the "brain-tortured unresting ghosts who could neither realise their dolorous identities nor forget them" (*WS* 518) become more specifically associated with the inhabitants of the Homeric underworld when they are compared to Sylvanus Cobbold: "And like Teiresias in Hades it seemed to be the destiny of Sylvanus to find rational articulation, if nothing else, for the blind gibberings of these poor ghosts" (*WS* 518). The context implies a connection of the unconscious, language and identity exemplified by the image of the Homeric dead, which, though the idea allegedly comes from Magnus Muir, is elaborated on by Sylvanus Cobbold[8]:

> "That tragic half-life of the dead in Homer, that I heard Mr. Muir talk about once at High House, lies behind everything. […] If you," he went on, "take that half-life as if it were the bottom of the sea you give the sweet light of the sun its true meaning. Unhappiness comes from not realising that life is two-sided. The other side of life is always death. The dead in Homer are tragic and pitiful, but they are not *nothing*. Their muted half-life is like the watery light at the bottom of the sea. […] That Homeric death-life is tragically sad, but it has a beauty like the dying away of music when instead of becoming *nothing* music carries us in its ebb-flow down to this sea-bottom of the world – […] – where it's all echo and reflection, where it's all memory and mirrors of memory and brooding upon what is and is not." (*WS* 258–259)

[8] It is at this point that the acknowledged autobiographical nature of these two characters (*WS* "Note by Author") becomes rather obvious. Powys himself was fascinated with the motif of the descent to the underworld represented in "Book XI" of *The Odyssey*. His conclusions about the "pessimistic" Homeric attitude to death, which is "a pitiful half-life", are strikingly similar to the more mystically elaborated notions of Sylvanus Cobbold:

> Some would say, "Why should we try to realise and to appropriate to our imaginations this Homeric view, if it be so dark and tragic?" Because it is not the tragedy of the general human fate that debases our spirit and lowers the temper of our lives; it is the burden of our private griefs, our private wrongs, and the weight of ills "that flesh is heir to". […]
>
> Granting that the Homeric view of the fate of the dead is the darkest […] it remains that it saves a man from that irrational fear of vengeance of the Creator, which, while it has kept few cruel ones from their cruelty, has driven insane so many sensitive and gentle natures.
>
> And what most of us suffer from is our absorption in our own cares and worries and afflictions, not any indignant spiritual protest against the general fate of the human race. (Powys, *The Pleasures of Literature* 73–74)

At this point the image of vivisection becomes related to the metaphysical dimensions of the novel: life and identity are defined and only definable against death, against nothing, while the Homeric dead become the image of the human condition of being at a limbo. It is not by chance that Sylvanus's face becomes comparable to that of the Homeric dead, "who, while they can remember and forget, are completely deprived of all the creative energy of the power of thought", as a "result of his metaphysical struggles" (*WS* 408). The rational language of science – the approach of the analyst comparable only to vivisection – is helpless in the face of the "ocean of human experience" (*WS* 514). Since the ocean, another leitmotif of the novel (Robinson, *Sensualism* 28), among other things, is also a metaphor for the psyche, Sylvanus's mystical preaching can also be read as his definition of being – based on the constant awareness of nothing, of a lack, of death *within*. Thus the metaphor of the ghost for the analysand, on the one hand, is a perfect embodiment of the abject, since "all abjection is in fact recognition of the *want* on which any being, meaning, language, or desire is founded" (Kristeva 5). On the other hand, it is also an attempt to resolve the irresolvable dichotomy of life and death, being and nothing, and as such, it is positively opposed to the solution offered by psychoanalysis and science – the image of the vivisected animal. It is not Dr. Brush who can facilitate his patients' (re)entrance into the Symbolic and self-definition but Sylvanus Cobbold, their "Teiresias", "the ghost of the blind Theban prophet […] whose reason is still unshaken" (Homer). Sylvanus is different from the other patients, "the other ghosts [who] flit about aimlessly" (Homer), "the sad troops of the enfeebled Dead, who were sub-conscious, sub-sensitive, sub-normal, sub-substantial" (*WS* 479), exactly because of his ability to verbalise much deeper layers of his psyche and thereby to establish an identity of his own. In *Weymouth Sands* the hyper-consciousness of Sylvanus Cobbold – the "'mystical' sublimating discourse" of the "borderline subject" (Kristeva 7) – embodies the most extreme potentials of the ghostly/ghastly human condition, a self-analysis and self-definition opposed to psychoanalysis represented as vivisection while carrying on the implications of the same metaphor.

While the motif of vivisection, as outlined above, leads to a fundamentally misanthropic approach to mankind seen as abject, *Weymouth Sands* actually abounds in "ghosts" and in "improper/unclean" characters (Kristeva 2) who transgress officially accepted social norms usually because of their more or less serious psychic disturbances and/or unusual sexual inclinations and who are treated neutrally, in a lightsome manner or even with fascination. Let me give only a few examples in a rather sketchy

manner – relevant features are so abundant in *Weymouth Sands* that to do otherwise would amount to retelling the whole novel.

Adam Skald is obsessed with killing Dog Cattistock, which he also sees as the only way to keep his personal integrity, as the core of his identity (*WS* 360–361). This is exactly the reason for which his newly found love, Perdita, leaves him – she finds him abject. By the end of the novel the forsaken man is so devastated, both spiritually and bodily, that he becomes physically repulsive, looking as if "he had already joined the ranks of those Homeric […] Dead" (*WS* 479). When the lovers are reunited at the end of the novel, after Perdita's long absence, presumable mental breakdown and physical illness – her own special descent to hell –, both of them are described as "skeletons", his face is "positively ghastly in its disfigurement" and hers is "the face of the dead come to life" (*WS* 577).

Magnus Muir is haunted by the ghost of his dead father to such an extent that he sometimes ceases to have a separate identity of his own. During the lifetime of the elder Muir it was Magnus's "fear of his father […] that made his love-affairs come to nothing" (*WS* 19). *Weymouth Sands* is partly about the forty-five-year-old tutor's attempt to wrestle himself free from this fear five years after his father's death. The interiorised prohibition on bonding with women reappears in a slightly veiled form as his fear that his marriage with Curly will force him to leave the security of the maternal lap/womb associated with Miss Le Fleau's house [with its atmosphere dominated by the elder Muir's furniture (*WS* 95)] and push him into the horrors of a life described in terms of a (vivisectional) industrial torture-chamber:

> He felt it now as a menacing engine-house that he was entering – a place full of cogs and pistons and wheels and screws and prodding spikes – and full of people with bleeding limbs. A vague horror, like that of extreme physical pain, oppressed him. He felt as if all the hidden places where sensitive life was tortured had opened their back-doors to him, and the moans from within were groping at his vitals. (*WS* 95)

Curly, standing for sexual relationship and the feminine, becomes the luring but also horrifying object of his desire. This contradiction surfaces in Magnus's inability to consummate his desire and counteract Curly's manoeuvres to postpone their wedding, and is sublimated in his positioning Curly against vivisection, as the sacrifice he could – or should? – make in the name of humanity to stop this unbearable cruelty (cf. the quote from *WS* 306 above). Ironically, this is what literally happens at the end of the novel: Curly, cheating on both her lovers, leaves with the laughing third, Dog Cattistock for Italy, the expenses of which make the miser stop financing Dr. Brush's laboratory and thereby bring vivisection to its end. Magnus goes on

heartbroken, but not without a sense of relief. His narrative lends itself up to interpretation most easily as a story of the feminine and sexuality treated as abject under the influence of the Law of the Father (Kristeva 2). His sacred horror of the feminine, based on the incest taboo, the prohibition on the maternal (Kristeva 71) might shed light on the conspicuous absence of mothers from the novel: *Weymouth Sands* is teeming with orphans (both infant and adult), childless mother-aged women and careless, malfunctioning mothers. Powys's rejection of Christian morality is almost literally translated here into fictional terms, since his view of the punishing God with His ban on sexuality – "to each superego its abject" (Kristeva 2) – predestines the feminine as abject. It also explains to a certain extent why he finds the Christian notion of sin totally unsatisfactory in coping with the abject (Kristeva 90-112) and tries to come up with alternative solutions represented as the philosophies of the individual characters in the novel.

Among the other characters, Dog Cattistock is a miser to a pathological extent, which makes him unable to bond with women (*WS* 446–448). Captain Poxwell and his daughter Lucinda play out a scenario of incest which drives the father practically mad (*WS* 302) and leaves the daughter not much saner, either. James Loder perversely theatralises his physical pain and tortures his children with his illness (*WS* 297). Rodney Loder consciously wishes his father's death and is afraid of going mad like his uncle (178). Daniel Brush is probably a latent homosexual (*WS* 537) and definitely an overt misanthrope. Larry Zed is a charming fugitive from the Brush Home and not without a good cause. The sisters Tissty and Tossty have a most curious Lesbian and incestuous relationship with each other (*WS* 472). Peg Frampton has nymphomaniac inclinations (*WS* 476). The only proper mother in the novel, Ellen Gadget, is reputed to live in an incestuous relationship with her husband, who is also her half-brother (*WS* 249). Last but not least, almost every old family in Weymouth has had some member who was, is, or could have been a patient in the Brush Home (*WS* 487), among them the Loders (*WS* 178) and the Cobbolds (*WS* 270).

The most conspicuous examples of abjection are the brothers Jerry and Sylvanus Cobbold. "The world-famous clown" (*WS* 8) of a thousand masks and the "born prophet" (*WS* 6) function as a pair of – sometimes interchangeable – carnivalesque doubles whose identity is defined along the lines of forming two seemingly diametrically opposed versions of coping with the abject. What they share, though, is their obsession with the excremental aspects of life and a more or less morbid femininity – the abject.

In Jerry's case this fascination is overtly connected to a Rabelaisian – carnivalesque? – attitude that is much more complicated than "subsuming Rabelais' sex/excrement reverence" (Robinson, *Sensualism* 18):

> Jerry had indeed something in him that went beyond Rabelaisianism, in that he not only could get an ecstasy of curious satisfaction from the most drab, ordinary, homely, realistic aspects of what might be called the excremental under-tides of existence but he could slough off his loathing for humanity in this contemplation and grow gay, child-like, guileless. (*WS* 217)

His wife, Lucinda is one of Dr. Brush's out-patients, the "vivisected, half-anaesthetized, snarling panther" (*WS* 449), who has driven her father mad by making up a story – of course, with Powys one can never tell how fictitious – of their child born of incest. Jerry's lover, Tossty, is fatally attracted to her own sister, the beautiful Tissty. The narrator's comments place these relationships far beyond the limits of "normality": "normal sex-appeals had not the least effect upon [Jerry]. What had drawn him to Lucinda […] was a queer pathological attraction; and the same was true […] of his interest in Tossty" (*WS* 218). At the end of the novel he establishes an adulterous – and in a sense incestuous – relationship with his sister-in-law. The tainted nature of this love is already predicted half-way through the plot, much before Hortensia Lily is actually jilted on her wedding-day by Cattistock, when Jerry imagines that he would respond to her love for him only if "Cattistock ill-used her" and "if she were outraged and *abject*" (*WS* 219, italics mine).

Sylvanus Cobbold's fascination with excrement is part of his ritualistic, mystical adoration of every aspect of nature, and is probably best exemplified by his kissing the prongs of a fork freshly taken from a dung heap (*WS* 529). Though women are mysteriously attracted by his preaching, and he even shares his house (and bed) with two of them in the course of the novel, he does not have a sexual relationship with them. His "friends" (*WS* 489) are queer figures themselves: social outcasts (Gipsy May and Marret, the Punch-and-Judy girl); neurotics, Peg Frampton, and the hysterical Gipsy, who symbolically castrates (*WS* 412, 416–417) Sylvanus by cutting off his moustaches in his sleep out of jealousy; or somehow even not totally human (Marret is like a puppet, a long broomstick in black with the head of a china doll). But while Jerry's loathing is directed against others – he is a misanthrope – Sylvanus feels "spasmodic body-shame" (WS 385), he is repelled only by his own body and sees himself as abject.

Their abjection results in two different "sublimating discourses". Though Janina Nordius claims that "[Jerry Cobbold's] misanthropy is not there to shield some precious thought-world; it is only cynical and full of contempt, devoid, it seems, of any redeeming features" (124), in the novel his abjection is sublimated in his clowning, his "artistic discourse" (Kristeva 7) that is not bound by the limits of the stage:

> […] Jerry's loathing for humanity was even deeper than that of Mr. Witchit […] and the only pleasure he got from his fellows was a monstrous

> Rabelaisian gusto for their grossest animalities, excesses, lapses, shames! These things it was, the beast-necessity in human life, that he exploited in the humours of his stage-fooling; and because he loathed his fellow-men he was able to throw into his treatment of their slavery to material filth an irresistible hilarity as well as a convincing realism, a combination that always enchanted the crowd. (*WS* 218)

His "acting *sans cesse*" (*WS* 204), also continued in the conspicuously theatrical environment of his private life (*WS* 41), even seems to serve "humanitarian" purposes for example in Perdita's eyes, who "saw the man as a sort of fragile Atlas, perpetually holding up the weight of other people's destinies and aiming above all, as he did with Lucinda, at keeping people from going mad, by an everlasting process of distraction!" (*WS* 218) In contrast, Sylvanus Cobbold's "mystical sublimating discourse" (Kristeva 7) is embodied in his rather vague philosophy of the Absolute. His efforts to come up with an acceptable version of the unbearable contradictions of the human condition demonstrate how death, cruelty and the repellent are just different facets of the abject against which the individual tries to enunciate his identity in Powys's art: "his mind gave up the struggle to reconcile his Absolute with the cruelty of things, for this began to seem beyond his power; and in place he wrestled with the Spirit in a frantic effort to make it include the Gross, the Repulsive, the Disgusting" (*WS* 384-385). His personal philosophy results in such grotesque phenomena, as his calling himself "Caput-anus" in his dialogues with the Absolute, while he carefully avoids any references to himself as "I" (*WS* 385). His idealisation of femininity – the sublimation of the abject he cannot handle – brings his relationships with both Gipsy May and Marret to a crisis since he manages to ignore their personal feelings totally. As opposed to the professional jester, it is, however, Sylvanus who can produce "a fit of Gargantuan laughter" when facing such an ironic twist of fate as Cattistock's risking his life to rescue a probably empty cask in a storm at sea and thus to become the local hero instead of Adam Skald (*WS* 285–286). At the end of the novel both Rabelaisianism without indulgence and the vision of a carnivalesque Absolute without a proper incorporation of femininity – sexuality – fail to prove satisfactory alternatives: Jerry's scheming is unmasked in the face of "authentic passion" (*WS* 570) and Sylvanus, locked up permanently in Hell's Museum, is brought to such a breakdown by Dr. Brush's cold-blooded irony and his final loss of Marret that his Absolute has to struggle back to life in a phoenix-like manner (*WS* 542).

Even such a sketchy overview of the novel's cast seems to justify A. N. Wilson's ironic summary of the case of *Weymouth Sands*: the novel "had to be retitled *Jobber Skald* since the mayor and the good people of Weymouth

threatened legal action at [Powys's] depiction of the genteel seaside town as seething with evil, populated by brothel-keepers, vivisectionists and lunatics"(3)[9]. The new title is especially misleading because it veils one of the most important features of the novel: if it has a main character at all, it is definitely not the Jobber – however "impressive" he is (Knight 43) – but Weymouth itself, with all its symbolic dimensions. Though *Weymouth Sands* has, by necessity, more and less elaborated and complex characters, the major ones – Magnus Muir, the Jobber, Dog Cattistock, Perdita Wane, Jerry and Sylvanus Cobbold, Richard Gaul, Rodney Loder, Daniel Brush etc. – are so numerous, that it is hardly possible to identify one main plot with a restricted number of major characters. What *Weymouth Sands* provides instead, is a collection of snapshots – of personal philosophies and visions of the world, as if to demonstrate Powys's utterly subjectivist[10] standpoint that "the thing that conceives life and absorbs life, is nothing less than the mind itself; the mind and the imagination!" (*Psychoanalysis* 28) Though there is an omniscient third person narrator in the novel, his all-knowing reveals itself rather in an ability to enter all the characters' consciousness – and letting their different perspectives collide. It becomes most obvious in such instances when the same event is interpreted from two different characters' viewpoint, but always without the intrusion of the narrator's "final" judgment. For example, in the ominous case of Sylvanus Cobbold's kissing the fork out of a dung heap, the narrator's comments, dominated by Sylvanus' perspective and permeated by his ritualistic and pathetic nature-worship, are suddenly interrupted by the rather disillusioning remark that "it would have fatally lent itself to Perdita's impression of him, as one who, even when alone, was forever acting and showing off. Perdita's view of his character, and indeed the Jobber's view, too, would have been accentuated had they witnessed the sequel" (*WS* 529). The more complex characters are introduced through each other's perspectives, which often contrast each other – most notably in Sylvanus's case, but even the "villain" of the novel, Dog Cattistock is totally humanised through Magnus Muir's vision of him and through a glimpse into his self-reflections on his disastrous wedding day. The result is a typical Powysian "multiverse" of different consciousnesses, which are in dialogic[11] relationship with each other – a

[9] The novel has been released with the original title since its 1963 edition (Nordius 103).

[10] On subjectivist pluralism in Powys's *Porius* cf. Joe Boulter, *Postmodern Powys – New Essays on John Cowper Powys*, 8–9.

[11] In Joe Boulter's analysis of pluralism in *Porius*, whose many aspects and conclusions are also highly relevant in terms of *Weymouth Sands* – cf. the collision of different perspectives (32–33), the representation of different consciousnesses on equal footing as "many world versions" existing independently from each other (e.g. 28–30) - his

"dehierarchised" (Boulter 13), polyphonic, amoral multiverse, in which the repellent, the abject is shown through an indulgent, humorous narrative voice, as if Dr. Mabon was listening with his own "humorous commentary upon the world" (*WS* 503) while his patients reveal themselves as abject.

In comparison with this multiverse of subjective visions the relative insignificance of the plot is probably indicated by its bathetic nature, so characteristic of Powys (Robinson, "Introduction," v). The focus on characters and symbolic locations is well-reflected in the chapter titles: out of the fifteen all but one are nominal, containing mostly either simply a character's name (5) or a place-name (4), as if nothing actually *happened* in the novel. The plot lines seem to converge in Dog Cattistock and Mrs. Lily's wedding day, the day when the Jobber intends to kill Cattistock. The description of the wedding, however, is substituted on the one hand by the stories of Sylvanus and Marret's breaking up and of the man's symbolic castration, on the other hand by the meeting of the old gossips of Weymouth, who try to puzzle together the story of Hortensia Lily's jilting – an event of which none of them were eye-witnesses. It is only casually related that the Jobber could not carry out his murderous intentions because Cattistock, to run away from his bride in time, left his house at daybreak and the Jobber was simply too late – ironically, jilting Hortensia Lily maybe saved Cattistock's life. The day, which Cattistock has spent watching vivisection instead of consummating his desire for Captain Poxwell's younger daughter, culminates in the horribly shaken father's "abject confession"[12] of (fictitious?) incest with his other daughter and Lizzy Chant's passing out allegedly at the sight of the late Mrs Cattistock's ghost. The two chapters covering the day of the cancelled wedding thus actually abound in moments of castration in the epistemological sense of the word (Weber 1111–1112): moments, when not exactly *nothing* happens, but something which fundamentally undermines the subject's position by questioning the possibility of believing his eyes and revealing the gap between the signifier

philosophical conception of pluralism adopted from postmodernist theory for the purposes of analysis (7) actually excludes the notion of any dialogue (25–30). Probably for this reason he does not incorporate in his studies the Bakhtinian approach, though he makes a reference to his *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* by applying the term "'double-voiced' style" to Powys's text (34) without any sense of running into a self-contradiction. He also discards "carnival" as a relevant term in his frame of reference relying on Juliet Mitchell – but not on Bakhtin – who associates it with simple inversion instead of dehierarchisation (13–14). My reading, rather moving in the frame of reference of Bakhtinian poetics than postmodernist philosophy, obviously diverges from Boulter's at this point.

[12] I have borrowed the expression form Peter Brooks, who uses it to describe Fyodor Pavlovich Karamazov's "whole mode […] of both calculated and uncontrollable self-abasement" (Brooks, *Troubling Confessions* 73).

and the signified, thereby shaking forever his trust in signification. Sylvanus Cobbold experiences his symbolic castration as a moment of utter shame, after which he needs to redefine his identity (*WS* 418–419). Captain Poxwell's madness is the result of his inability to decide whether his daughter really had a child fathered by him – a story that is tentatively represented through Lucinda's consciousness as a malicious attack against her father's masculinity (*WS* 144–145): castration. The Jobber's inability to carry out the intended murder, talk of which has already come to be the narrative of his identity, results in his rapid physical and spiritual disintegration and calls for a fundamental redefinition of his identity which only becomes possible after his reunion with Perdita. And last but not least, the experience of the uncanny, exemplified by the appearance of Mrs. Cattistock's ghost, is actually built on the moment of castration (Weber 1111–1114). The anticlimactic structure of the plot opens up the epistemological and ontological uncertainties behind the Powysian multiverse built on ironic twists of fate, uncertainties, which are just as directly related to the problematic nature of the speaking subject enunciating his being from the ambiguous position of abjection. If the dynamics of plot are really structured by desire[13], a plot structured around the ambiguous affects surrounding the abject – a simultaneous fascination and repulsion – in fact, can hardly be anything else but bathetic: repeating the constant "placing and displacing [of] abjection" by laughter (Kristeva 8) it does not really proceed, but rather "strays" (Kristeva 8) in permanent fear of and constantly desiring the end of the journey, the abject.

In conclusion, in *Weymouth Sands* the fascination with the abject has proved to be a dominant shaping factor of the novel's extremely rich and complicated system of metaphors, its characters and themes, and its plot. It is not only Dr. Brush "embracing a vivisected, half-anaesthetized, snarling panther" (*WS* 448–449) who seems to be "in love with the abject", but the whole text revolves around formulating sublimating discourses of the abject – the "artistic" sublimating discourse realised in the narrative of *Weymouth Sands* probably being the most successful one of them. Rabelaisianism and carnivalesque laughter – with or without the optimism both Bakhtin and Powys attach to them in their non-belletristic works – are unalienable elements in either the philosophical solutions or the narratological approach to the problem. Consequently, its representation in *Weymouth Sands*, though it ambitiously includes epistemological and ontological aspects sometimes beyond Powys's potentials, is both free from the sometimes didactic one-

[13] Cf. the chapter "Narrative Desire" in Peter Brooks' *Reading for the Plot* (37–61).

sidedness of Powys's critical essays, and is at least far from being tragic. Janina Nordius points out the "divided response" to *Weymouth Sands* in this respect: "While some critics are anxious to state that they find this a predominantly 'happy' book [among them Wilson Knight (47)], others, on the contrary, find it permeated with a sense of loss and failure" (105). Its ambiguities, however, can be easily linked with the fascination with the abject dominating the themes of the novel and Powys's bias for a Rabelaisian, carnivalesque approach to literature – and life.

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