

Wooly Truth

Jonathan Ridley

In the book *Wool Gathering or How I Ended Analysis* Dan Gunn borrows an image from Flann O'Brien's *The Third Policeman*, to describe dreams and their interpretation within his analysis. In O'Brien's novel, a character shows the narrator a chest so beautifully carved, so perfect, that nothing seems worthy to go inside it. His solution to this conundrum is to fill it with ever smaller, equally beautiful chests. Gunn goes on to say:

Nothing gave me as many ready words as my dreams. Nothing confirmed the power of these words, but also their limitations quite so strongly. Very simply: one can solve the puzzle, find the truth about one's dreams; but never the last and most intriguing puzzle; never can one see the smallest and most beautifully intricate chest.¹

For Freud, the dream has a navel, the point at which it is "unplumbable," and for Lacan, the unplumbability has a certain necessity: "saying it all is literally impossible: words fail. Yet it's through this very impossibility that the truth holds onto the real."² Gunn's analyst offers mostly silence, and in the place of this silence Gunn interprets: "fill the Louvre with your diptychs and triptychs and still you won't make a likeness of yourself."³

The term 'wool gathering' has significance for Gunn, beyond the evocation of his native Scotland, it carries several meanings including "purposeless thinking, wandering fancies," and the more literal definition of "gathering fragments of wool torn from sheep by bushes." The gathering of these "fragments of the self, of the tufts which have been snagged on various obstacles encountered", through wandering fancies and purposeless thinking, seems to be the work of Gunn's analysis. However, as he approaches the end, continuing to hope for "some new clarity and sense of wholeness", he instead discovers that "the obstacles were all the more prominent — versions of the barbed wire and the peat bogs", and he found that he was depositing fragments of himself all over the place.⁴

Jacques-Alain Miller distinguishes the contingent real from the real as impossible. The contingent real for Miller is that which "ceases to be impossible, what ceases to not

¹ Gunn, D., *Wool Gathering or How I Ended Analysis*, Brunner-Routledge, 2023, pp. 30-31.

² Lacan, J., "Television", *Television: A Challenge to the Psychoanalytic Establishment*, ed. J. Copjec, New York / London: Norton, 1990, p. 3.

³ Gunn, D., *op.cit.*, p.31.

⁴ *Ibid*, pp.14-15.

write itself - without ones knowing how to predict it, how to calculate it".⁵ And it is the "very articulation of the analytic discourse" that "leads the analysand to construct, to weave a grid of lying truth, [...] a grid that he weaves from past contingencies and daily contingencies."⁶

Wool gathering is Gunn's metaphor for these contingencies: there is what has snagged and what continues to snag: there are past contingencies and daily contingencies. Echoing Miller's weaving of a lying truth, Gunn eventually begins "not just to collect the woolen fragments, but to spin and knit them too, into a garment to keep out cold and be shared."¹⁷ This is the "transmutation of contingency into necessity" that we can call a "lying truth", lying in the sense that the nature of truth is "eminently variable".⁸

⁵ Miller, J.-A. "The Lying Truth", *The Lacanian Review*, 7, 2019, p.151.

⁶ *Ibid*, p.153.

⁷ Gunn, D, *op.cit.*, p.31.

⁸ Miller, J-A., "The Lying Truth", *op.cit.*, p.152.