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The European Journal of Psychoanalysis

May 26, 2024

<https://www.journal-psychoanalysis.eu/articles/book-review-essay-a-search-for-clarity-science-and-philosophy-in-lacans-oeuvre-by-jean-claude-milner/>

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Book Review Essay: “A Search for Clarity: Science and Philosophy in Lacan’s Oeuvre” by Jean-Claude Milner

Review of Milner, Jean-Claude. *A Search for Clarity: Science and Philosophy in Lacan’s Oeuvre* (Translated by Ed Pluth). Northwestern University Press, 2020. Pp. 160.

Thought (Im-)Passes: Comments on the Translation of Milner’s A Search for Clarity

Jean-Claude Milner is one of the theoretical stars not only of present psychoanalytic – Lacanian – French thought, but also of the political, philosophical, linguistic contemporary France. He played an important role in the *Ecole Freudienne*, a founding role in the *Cahier pour l’Analyse* project[1] and was crucial for the impact of Noam Chomsky’s thought in France. But Milner is a star whose oeuvre and whose central propositions, and in this respect different from some well-known thinkers who shared crucial parts of his trajectory, have not yet received any systematic reception in the English-speaking world. Different from thinkers like Jacques Rancière or Alain Badiou, for example, who like Milner also were educated at the Parisian elite *Ecole Normale Supérieure*, were close to Louis Althusser or once politically engaged in Maoism, Milner has not yet been as widely translated and read. There exists a 1990 translation (with an instructive and critical introduction by the translator) of his *For the Love of Language*, a controversial conversation with Alain Badiou in book form[2], an excellent journal issue devoted to his work, including translations of some additional texts (cf. *S: Journal of the Circle for Lacanian Ideology Critique*[3]) and some articles written for English language publication (inter alia in the journal *Crisis and Critique*[4]). But the English-speaking world (was unaware that it) was waiting for more chances to encounter this thinker and his thought. Now in 2021, Ed Pluth did everyone a huge favor and provided us with a marvelous translation of Jean-Claude Milner’s 1996 book *L’Oeuvre Claire* (appearing with Northwestern University Press and within a series of books edited by Todd McGowan, Adrian Johnston and Slavoj Žižek).

To begin with the title. Pluth renders it as “A Search for Clarity” and its subtitle (from “Lacan, la science et la philosophie”, i.e. “Lacan, Science, and Philosophy”) as “Science and Philosophy in Lacan’s Oeuvre”. Milner’s book thus addresses the concept of Lacan’s oeuvre and links it with the – Cartesian sounding – idea of clarity (recall that Descartes’ notion of truth is that which can clearly and distinctly be identified as true) in a conceptual constellation with science and philosophy. Milner’s French title (literally: the clear oeuvre) has a polemical, or at least surprising ring to it, since Lacan neither has the reputation of being a particularly *clear* author and his works are still often considered to be rather opaque; nor is he considered to have produced a clear(ly identifiable) oeuvre. It is often even regarded as unclear what counts as essential cornerstones of his psychoanalytic work. The English title now clarifies that in engaging with Lacan, Milner is – as most of us are – in search for clarity, not only for clarity about what is being proposed by Lacan, but in search for a clarification about what precisely Lacan’s ultimate position is. And therein, his reading of

Lacan reflects or mimics Lacan's own approach – as we will see – since it can be also considered to be a search for clarity. The subtitle indicates that for Milner Lacan's oeuvre positions itself in relation to science and philosophy.

The book is structured into five chapters, framed by an introduction and an afterword, the latter written especially for the English publication. Milner begins after the introduction with some "Considerations on an Oeuvre", turns to "Science's Core Doctrine", deals with what he terms "The First" and then with "the Second Lacanian Classicism", and ends with "The Deconstruction". I will take the reader in the following through a rather highly condensed and much abbreviated recap of each of the chapters, before ending with some more generic remarks. In the introduction Milner makes it clear that his book does not attempt "to clarify Lacan's thought" (p. vii) – as Lacan is "a crystal-clear author" (p. vii) and hence is in no need of external clarification – but it seeks to affirm and "establish" *that* "there is a thought in Lacan" (p. vii). If the book does not clarify what is already more than clear enough – because like Luther who insisted that the Bible is so unambiguous, that it needs no interpretation, it just needs to be read by someone who is able to read properly, because she believes (it to be entirely clear) – its task is to remind everyone of what is already clear. It reminds us of what is clear (its purpose is to make us remember) by bringing back (and in a sense reproducing or repeating) this clarity and thereby allowing it to work through its object, namely Lacan's oeuvre. It does so by affirming that there is thought in Lacan and that anyone thinking must think that thought when engaging with him. To think it, one must think it in its appropriate form, which is that of the "propositions" (p. viii). They are the form in which Lacan's thought is embodied in such a robust and consistent manner that one could even take them out of context and his thought would nevertheless remain legible or thinkable. Milner's daring project is thus to present Lacan's thought-propositions to the reader and thereby present what thought thinks when it thinks working with and through Lacan, with the thought in Lacan. Milner's approach does lead him to attempt gathering all possible thought-propositions and articulating their relation. Rather, there is a clear thought even when one singles out "some interconnections" (p. viii) between some of the clearly identifiable propositions. In Milner's case, those broadly concern the status of psychoanalysis vis-à-vis science and philosophy.

At the beginning, he distinguishes two ways of reconstructing a thought-position in general: there is an immanent way which derives the contours of an object from certain laws and their interactions, i.e. in a geometrical way; and there is an external way that accounts for the shape of an object by conceiving of its lateral position, how it creates and curves its own space and where it encounters self-produced obstacles therein, i.e. in a way common to psychoanalysis, but also identifiable in Lucretius or Marx. The latter position, which is his own, is what Milner names "discursive materialism" (p. ix). Discursive materialism does not need to know all laws that constitute an object to determine its shape, rather it looks at the space it generated and at its specific obstacles. In this sense, it is a non-totalizing and therefore material approach – since it begins with the material effects of a discursive object, which appears to be even more appropriate when its object is itself fundamentally "non-totalizing" (p. ix). When we are dealing with an oeuvre that is non-total, we only totally get it, if we do not try to totally get it. But what precisely is this oeuvre that is read by means of its discursive effects and impasses? In Lacan's case, the oeuvre seems to appear in the form of written texts and in the form of transcribed and edited seminars.

Milner is quick to remind the reader here that "the notion of an oeuvre is modern" (p. 3), since it essentially describes a form, the "form that organizes" modern "culture" (p. 3). If we venture grandiose formulations that echo the way in which Milner himself here appropriates Marx for his purpose, we can claim that culture in which modern conditions of cultural production prevail "appears as an immense collection of oeuvres." (p. 4) The oeuvre-form is to culture what the commodity-form is to things, and as much as there are no commodities without exchange, there are no oeuvres "without publication" (p. 4). Therefore, what does not appear in the form of an oeuvre does not belong to culture. It might then for example be considered an expression of madness. But it could also just be classified as science. Since science, even when applied, i.e. taking the form of technology, does not appear as an oeuvre. There is thus a dialectic between the oeuvre-form, determining culture, and its outside. There is a dialectic, because there can be transformations. Milner attests that Freud mobilized the oeuvre-form because the prevailing scientific discourse would not let him

articulate psychoanalysis “conform[ing] to normal science.” (p. 6) After WWII however, Lacan found himself in a situation in which psychoanalysis had become part of the universe of ordinary sciences because it had produced its very own technique. Therefore, Lacan took a further step in the dialecticization of the relation between oeuvre and science: an oeuvre always appears in published form, but any publication is ultimately a “poubelliciation” (p. 7), a publication that belongs in the dustbin. Culture forms and produces trash and feces. It deals with it using (toilet-)paper, which thereby becomes the material condition of the oeuvre. “Lacan ... consented to the oeuvre form”, i.e. to be published, i.e. “he consented to the trash bin.” (p. 7). In psychoanalysis, we are thus dealing with two different oeuvres of a different status – as if Freud’s oeuvre was unworked as science and had to be worked through to appear in a different, that is Lacan’s oeuvre-form.

What is Lacan’s oeuvre the name of? This is a real question, since do we only consider his published texts – and Milner accredits all of Lacan’s published texts, “whatever their date or location” (p. 3), the same status – or do we have to include the seminars in the oeuvre, too? Lacan, therein different from Freud, seems to confront us with two sets of teachings: an oral one (the *Seminar(s)*) and a published one (the *Écrits*). Milner argues that the seminars are ultimately an exoteric form of teaching, comparable to “monological and impolite dialogues” (p. 10) and the published texts are the esoteric form of teaching. They demand from the reader “to decode, and often read between the lines, an element of knowledge” (p. 11). This means that the esoteric appears in written and the exoteric in oral (and recorded) form, which leads Milner to the daring thesis that Lacan’s thought exists entirely in written form. This implies that “there is nothing and will never be anything more in the seminars than there is in the *Scripta*” (p. 11), in the *Écrits*. Lacan’s oeuvre is a written oeuvre. The doctrine he sought to transmit can be found entirely in his publications – even though they certainly include claims that are less doctrinal than protreptic and in this sense could also belong to the seminars. The published texts are thus the site to locate the propositions constitutive for Lacan’s oeuvre. Milner considers each of them to function – as if in a secularized version of the Gospels – as *logia* (from *logion*, which in the scriptures described divinely inspired sentences, or in pagan contexts, to which Milner does not refer, described oracles). These propositions are entirely interpretable on their own terms. They are thus not enigmatic, are consistent, complete and repeated throughout Lacan’s oeuvre. Discursive condensations of the art of saying-it-well (*bien dire*), an art practiced by psychoanalysis. To identify thought in Lacan we need to identify his oeuvre which allows to isolate propositions (*logia*) in which materializes this thought.

This labor of isolation, Milner begins with the second chapter. Therein he identifies the first *logion* as: “*there is a subject distinct from any form of empirical individuality*” (p. 17). Starting from here, it becomes crucial to determine this subject. It is not only the subject psychoanalysis works on, but also the subject of a particular form of science. This necessitates to determine the theory of science that allows for this first (and subsequent) propositions to be articulated. We only specify the subject if we specify the type of science that is specific to (and constitutive for it). Science and psychoanalysis, having the same subject, are intimately related. More specifically, science is immanent to psychoanalysis, as the specificity of the subject is determined by a specific type of science, namely by modern science. If the modern notion of the subject, i.e. that which allows us to specify what Lacan thinks psychoanalysis operates on, derives from modern science, it is essential to articulate what makes modern science modern. Milner emphasizes that for Lacan, there is a break constitutive of modernity – a break between the previous organization of knowledge in the ancient world and the modern universe. It is caused by Christianity – which is why both, Kojève and Koyré become crucial for Lacan. There is thus an intimate link between modern science and Christian religion. Yet, Christianity could only break with the ancient world because it mobilized Judaism for its purposes and consequentially “*modern science consists of what is Judaic in Christianity*” (p. 21). Modern science is both, Judaic and Galilean. It operates with a mathematized universe wherein all objects are stripped of all sensible qualities (this is Galilean) and reduced the power of the letter (this is Judaism).

This is the background for Milner to draw nearer to “Lacan’s *radical Cartesianism*” (p. 22). Descartes, the thinker of the cogito without qualities philosophically invents the subject of modern science and thus of psychoanalysis. Because the cogito is “neither self nor reflexivity nor consciousness” (p. 22), Milner can

with Lacan characterize it as a thing without qualities that thinks, and it thinks: “I think therefore I am”. If it holds that where there is thought, there is a subject (cf. p. 24), and if the cogito thinks without self, qualities or consciousness, the cogito can be identified as the subject of the unconscious, i.e. as the subject psychoanalysis works on. This was already Freud’s anti-philosophical provocation, to separate thought and consciousness. But this also opens up the path to what Milner calls the “actual *Core Doctrine of science*” (p. 25). For, Galilean science combines an empirical and a mathematical element. The former is engaged by means of technology (which is why modern science is instrumental), but technology is produced on the basis of the mathematical element. Ancient science, for Milner, aimed at what in its object was eternal and necessary (the soul in man, for example). This is why it used mathematics. In modernity, the very status of mathematics is transformed, because of the modern break. Mathematics now covers and considers all empirical material, the contingent, imperfect and transitory matter without aiming to leave it behind. This is what it is able to do as a literal science, as science that literalizes and converts its material into letters (cf. p. 57). Modern science performs a conversion of contingent matter into letters. This is why ancient science is mathematical, modern science, in the literal (literal) sense is “*mathematized*” (p. 32). It thereby becomes able to treat contingency as object and itself becomes “a science of the contingent” (p. 39).

But why is there such a strong reaction against science – a question that still has quite some pertinence? Because a constitutive part of any modern subject is the Ego. It is “the name for an imaginary function” (p. 35) and this function “*hates science*” as well as it “*hates letters as such.*” (p. 35) Why? According to Milner, because letters are and due to its literalization modern science, is foreign to the imaginary, it even “*dissolves the imaginary*” (p. 35). This is because “modern letters” are able to “grasp the contingent as contingent” (p. 40) – because they are themselves in all aspects contingent (on some other letter) – and do not imagine a stable necessary structure grounding it. That there is a modern struggle between the Ego and science indicates that Milner’s account of Lacan’s account of the emergence of the subject of psychoanalysis relies on a “non-successive concept of breaks” (p. 37). This means that there is a break constitutive of modernity, but it does not do away or annihilate what existed beforehand. There are not only remainders, but there is something of the ancient world in the modern universe. Such a conception of the break is crucial, because otherwise we would conceive of it in the terms of the ancient world and not in those of the modern. So, it is a contingent break, which allows for modern science to become the science of the contingent as contingent. If the subject of modern science is the subject psychoanalysis operates on, this “subject... is a correlate of the contingent” (p. 39). It does not have an eternal and necessary substance. It is contingent and is or can be captured by the letter. What does it mean to appreciate contingency by means of the letter? What is contingency the name of? The very abbreviated answer that Milner gives – and that sometime after him Meillassoux will also give – is that contingency manifest as another name for what is (meant when we think the) infinite. Why? Because if what is contingent is really contingent, it could be infinitely different. To conceive of contingency as contingency by means of the letter must then mean to inscribe the infinite into whatever might appear finite at first sight. If the universe of modern science and thus of the modern subject and thus of psychoanalysis is contingent, it is not only contingent, but also infinite. From this one can derive the propositions that finitude does not exist in the modern universe, because the latter has no outside (cf. p. 41), no other where we would encounter something necessary – a position that to a certain extent is very close to Badiou’s contemporary position.

All these elaborations are instructive to clarify what the concept of the unconscious does in psychoanalysis. It is a way to elucidate in a condensing way the claim that where there is thought, i.e. a subject, i.e. contingency, there is something infinite. This specifies Lacan’s Cartesianism: the infinite, as in Descartes, is primary and is positively qualified (the prefix “in” is not an index of a limitation). It provides the (ontological) basis for an explanation of what appears to be finite (but is not, since there is no finitude). The unconscious (the “un” does then also not indicate a limitation) is also primary and provides the basis for an explanation of consciousness. Consequentially, finitude, paradigmatically: death (cf. p. 44), is irrelevant in and for analysis. Death is nothing but an object of a drive whereby it bears the trace of something infinite. Sexuality, Milner derives from this construction of the core doctrine of science, is nothing but “the mark of infinite contingency on the body” (p. 45). Infinity is inscribed – as if it were in (and by) a letter – into what

(only) appears (to be) finite. Sexuality is thus the mode in which the basis of science and psychoanalysis is registered for the subject of the latter.

Chapter three begins by again returning to and expounding the claim that “there are breaks” as an “axiomatic thesis” (p. 46). This is an axiom of Lacan’s oeuvre. Modernity is identified with the assumption that there exist major or absolute breaks. But how would we be able to account for them? We seem to need an “absolute reference point” (p. 55) that would – because it is immune to breaks – provide us with a standard that allows us to identify a break as a break. Where to find such an absolute reference? There are two obvious candidates: language and mathematics. Milner at this point includes an interesting discussion about how Stalin choses the former, by assuming that language does not know breaks and thus no history. But this appears to be problematic, already because such position essentializes language.[5] Mathematics, on the other hand, because its status changed with the modern break, also does not provide an absolute reference point. But it allows us to conceive of language in another way. This other way Milner identifies with the position of structuralist linguistics in Lacan. Structuralism becomes the paradigm because it derives everything from differential relations that are constitutive of the elements and not from properties of the latter. We thus get objects without qualities that are (as well as their respective properties) intimately linked to his concept of the chain and to that of the signifier. “If “structure” is the term for an unspecified system as such, “chain” is the term for minimal structure” (p. 64), and “signifier” names an unspecified element of this unspecified system. The conception of language that linguists can unfold from the relation between mathematics and language is a formally minimalist and structurally differential one within which everything is based on “pure difference” (p. 65). In other terms: there is only a structure because there is a difference (which is why it only emerges when mathematics operates differently and allows a different relation to language). So, in the modern universe even structure is structure without qualities. Milner calls this unspecified. This is the background against which he reads the famous logion that the unconscious is structured like a language. But Lacan’s structuralism contains a further twist: to maintain that a structure is unspecified, because it springs from pure difference, we nevertheless must determine some properties that distinguish it from what is not a structure. This peculiar distinction is constitutive of what Milner calls Lacan’s “hyper-structural conjecture”, or “the hard kernel of Lacanian doctrine” (p. 66).

This is a crucial move because it implies an elucidation of in what way psychoanalysis as a linguistic structuralism without qualities, in my phrasing, contains in itself a reference to a being that is different from it, without being (and thereby introducing) another difference of the same kind. Within a structure without qualities that starts to determine its own elements, there is thus also a peculiar thing that does not have qualities of own but is different from structure. This is the subject. The subject is thus an intrinsic property of any chain of signifiers that operates according to an unspecified structure, but the subject itself is nothing but a third term emerging through the medium of the pure difference between two signifiers (in a chain that established structure). How to bring this together with the claim that where there is thought, there is a subject? Milner’s answer is that for Lacan a subject appears when thought thinks “I think”, when it thinks: “I think: ‘therefore I am’”. Within the frame of a structure without qualities, we can generate the concept of the chain of signifiers, which is itself without qualities and thereby allows us to generate the most unspecified definition of what thought is, because “*signifiers are thinking without qualities*” (p. 69). Where there is thought, there is a subject and this implies that every subject can be interpreted as a subject of signifiers. Milner: “*the subject of signifiers is the modern metaphysical subject*” (p. 71). What he classifies as the first Lacanian classicism is inferred from the hypothesis of the subject of science that is, by means of the modern function of mathematics, extended beyond the field of mathematics – to linguistics – such that it allows to elaborate the logic of any structure – this is Lacan’s hyper-structuralism – even the logic at work in language. These propositions have far-reaching implications when related to the logion that the unconscious is structured like a language, because they allow us to give an account of how within an unspecified structure wherein the axiom of the subject is verified by accounting for the emergence of the subject within it, which ultimately makes psychoanalysis “possibly synonymous with... classical metaphysics” (p.72).

It is this synonymy that causes, as Milner demonstrates in the fourth chapter, why Lacan was not able to theoretically stabilize this position.[6] Why not? Because the first classicism generated an entire series of

fundamental inconsistencies (cf. pp. 73-77). To single out just two paradigmatic examples: it led to an incompatibility between the claim that the subject is defined as an a-historical element of any structure and the theory of the break that was supposed to account for the (modern) subject's emergence; it also led to an inconsistency inscribed into the concept of mathematization which was based on the assumption that there is a logic grounding mathematical operations, which can be extended to non-mathematical fields, but also on the assumption that mathematics is autonomous and therefore primary in relation to any logical(-technical) application. There are several inconsistencies of this kind in the first classicism. These are impasses that were created due to the way in which Lacanian psychoanalysis shaped and thus determined its own discursive space. For Milner, Lacan was driven by these to reshuffle his oeuvre from the 1970s onwards. This consistency-drive led him to formulate "the *second Lacanian classicism*." (p. 75) At its center stands "an autonomous theory of letters" (p. 76) that transforms previous conceptions: it inter alia endorses the autonomy of mathematics, transforms the concept of the subject, and its possible philosophical, i.e. metaphysical implications. In this way the generated impasses are literally worked through. Letters function like signifiers (both are relational), but they are also positive entities. This is to say, they are not only symbolic like signifiers, but they also knot together the symbolic, the imaginary and the real. The theory of letters allows Lacan to pass through the impasses to the second form of his oeuvre. Milner emphasizes convincingly that the pivotal point of the second classicism is the *matheme* – which "conforms to the mathematical paradigm" (p. 78) and fully endorses the primacy of mathematics over logic. Lacan will state that "mathematical formalization is our goal, our ideal" and only the *matheme* is "capable of being integrally transmitted" (p. 77).

This capacity of the operation of the *matheme* suspends all assumptions of and claims to any wisdom that would not translate into knowledge. If knowledge through the *matheme* is entirely transmissible, then the very existence of the *matheme* suspends the existence of masters or their corresponding disciples. A master is no longer someone endowed with wisdom exceeding knowledge, but only someone who occupies a certain position in knowledge transmission (the master turns professor). This explains for Milner why Bourbaki becomes paradigmatic for Lacan. Because Bourbaki is the proper name of an anonymous intellectual collective and no longer that of an individual. But "Bourbaki is still not Bourbaki enough" (p. 87), it can and must be radicalized. Why? Because Bourbaki believes that literal consistency is homogenous with rational coherence – and hence takes a concept – that of consistency – and uses it as a norm to conceive of literality and knowledge organization. Lacan radicalizes this position by formulating a "*hyper-Bourbakism*" (p. 88) assigning the primacy to literality over consistency (which, in my reading, is a consequence of giving primacy to mathematics over logic). From this it follows that the project of Lacan's second classicism, for Milner, is "to rewrite psychoanalysis "mathematically" (p. 81), which amounts to a mathematization of psychoanalysis. This does not necessarily simply falsify the first classicism and its crucial propositions, but it transforms it radically. Mathematics in Lacan's second classicism is no longer a paradigmatic form of reasoning-structure, but rather powerfully enables for "strictly circumscribed zones of literality" (p. 85). Psychoanalysis is thus not turned into a general mathematics of the letter, but is rather conceived of as a highly local and regional zone of literality (which is the reason why there are so few letters in psychoanalytic theory (p. 86). The regionalization which is constitutive for psychoanalysis is an implication of there being no overarching logic any longer. If there is also no non-mathematical principle of consistency reigning over mathematics, there is primacy of mathematic literality and this operates always regionally, locally. It finds its practical epitome in calculus and leads to the "scandalous" (p. 87) concept of mathematics as an only regionally applicable science.

Yet, this is part of a project that for Milner aims at formulating "a *positive* theory that beyond the imaginary of thought, touches on its real" (p. 88). For this sake, Lacan mobilizes all branches of mathematics. The promise is thus to thereby elaborate a theory which one "could expand... without trembling" (p. 90). And how could universalized regionalization be problematic? For Milner, the second classicism transforms the propositions of the first and derives its *mathemes* from the very act of this transformation. The second doctrine is formulated by Milner in the following way: "*the subject of science is the subject of a signifier*" (p. 93), a hypothesis that did not change from the first to the second classicism, but this subject "*coincides*

with an individual affected by an unconscious” (p. 93), which is why psychoanalysis operates on such an individual – and “*by a coincidence, encounters a subject in its practice*” (p. 93). The move is an impasse-driven self-analysis and immanent but self-transcending auto-critique. This is precisely what Milner calls “clarification”, which he also describes as an *Aufhebung*, a sublation. Why? Because the most radical overcoming of the impasse resolves it in such a way that the position stuck in the impasse also passes itself away in the act of overcoming it. This means that the full realization of the equation of the subject of modern science with the subject of psychoanalysis leads to an undoing of this equation: the moment we understand the subject psychoanalysis operates on in scientific, i.e. mathematized, i.e. literalized terms, the subject of psychoanalysis is addressed in terms of coincidence and encounter, which are properties of the letter. And if science crucially relies on something without qualities, this is now no longer identified as thought, – as the signifier does not think and is “stupid” (p. 94) – but is now conceived of as “work”, “a work without qualities” (p. 94), whereby the “subjects supposed to underlie unconscious knowledge” becomes “the ideal worker” (p. 94). Something works in science. These are obviously reflections which are not only crucial for the linkage between Freud and Lacan, but also between Lacan and Marx and maybe even between Lacan and Heidegger (if the replacement of thought by work makes thought disappear from science or not).

With these conceptual maneuvers, Lacanian psychoanalysis has established itself as discourse of the subject and now, different from the previous classicism, as one that does not need to make any reference to philosophy and metaphysics anymore to articulate what a subject is. In this sense, psychoanalysis has turned antiphilosophy (cf. p. 96f.) – a concept that today still fuels some heated debates. Milner claims that antiphilosophy is just “another name for the matheme” (p. 97), since the matheme and philosophy are mutually exclusive. The reason for this is that philosophy cannot bring itself into sync with modern science, because it constitutively considers itself to be an ideal science, it conceives of itself as the ideal that all other sciences have to aspire to become. Psychoanalysis as antiphilosophy is thus in its relation to philosophy for Milner comparable to the position that the antichrist, for example as conceived of in Nietzsche, plays vis-à-vis Christ, the Messiah. But as there is no final judgement “for antiphilosophy and philosophy... time is infinitely open” (p. 101) and they will endlessly struggle and overthrow one another. It is as if this has become the split transcendental of all discursive history that began in the 1970s.

Therefore, in the final and fifth chapter, Milner elucidates further how the self-sublation of Lacan’s second classicism manifests (crucially it does not manifest so that psychoanalysis becomes philosophy). The matheme will rather be fully realized but so that its realization will lead to a reversal that will consummate it. Its ultimate climax is also its point of vanishing. If the theory of the letter, literality, underpins the matheme and if the letter knots together the symbolic, the imaginary and the real – however precisely this is to be understood – what Lacan for Milner seeks to explore is the theory of knots. Yet, as he states in *Seminar XX*, “there is no theory of knots” (Lacan, 1975/1998, p. 129) that mathematical formulations would allow for. This indicates that there is a path that leads from the operation of the matheme and the theory of letter to the theory of knots, but the knot is nevertheless “antinomical to letters and... to the matheme” (p. 104). It is a path, an exodus without return. The theorizing of knots therefore ultimately leads Lacan to endorse an “antimathematics” (p. 107), which will be linked with to endorsements of strong anti-Galilean formulas (cf. p. 108). For Milner, with Seminar XX the second classicism is completely achieved and precisely thereby undone. But this cannot only be seen in the significance given to the theory knots, but manifests also in what will become the matheme par excellence, namely the homonymy – one might say the poem. Lacan’s deconstruction of his previous two classicist position is thus completed – and his oeuvre thus incomplete – when the only thing that is left is either the knot or the poem, silence or the pun. Lacan, in Milner’s reading, here approximates Wittgenstein. Yet, if the knot (or Wittgenstein – recall his famous slogan that whereof one cannot speak thereof one must be silent) wins, there is no unconscious – since it is structured like a language. That there is no third classicism, but only an accomplished, a complete deconstruction, an undoing through realization, a done undoing, a sublation, means for Milner “that Lacan’s oeuvre is incomplete” (p. 111). There is no final word. No final letter (sent and to be awaited). Only silence.

But in the afterword, written for the English edition, Milner concedes that he now does not only see a deconstruction taking place in late Lacan, after Seminar XX, but he also identifies yet another break, which

manifests in Lacan's engagement with Joyce and his dissatisfaction with working with given homophonies only. This seems to imply that apart from the silence of the missing final word and letter, we also get a radicalization (maybe) of the pun. I do leave a more elaborate reconstruction of these points aside here, since they are nothing but a conceptual frosting on what is clearly an immensely powerful, always productively reductive – Hegel already remarked somewhere that thought is the most powerful epitomizer – impressively clear and without any doubt, truly challenging reading of Lacan's work. Milner admits – referring to what he sees as his own previous ignorance of the Joycean break – that his account of Lacan's work remains partial, or as I would venture to say, incomplete. But this is what it was supposed to be from the beginning. Truth always speaks sideways. The book offers a clearly partial and consciously (as unconsciously) incomplete account of an incomplete oeuvre that is unavoidable reading for anyone working on and with Lacan. As I tried to show, Milner's is a powerful attempt to think through Lacan's thought by periodizing it to the point where this very thought is transformed into something else (work) or brought to the verge of its own vanishing. His approach demonstrates the powers of an immanent (and Euclidean) periodization of thought and raises, for and at least implicitly, the immensely intricate question of what it means to think through such a periodization when it ultimately leads not only to the creation of new impasses, but rather to thought's own completion, to thoughts own self-erasure and eradication. Does this mean that thought fails when it completes itself? When it overcomes the previous impasses and falls short in creating new ones? Or does thought only think what was thought when it thinks this thought to the point where it annihilates itself? Is this the prize of completion or of incompleteness or of an incompleteness so complete that it makes incompleteness and completion indistinguishable (at least in Lacan's case)? Might one therefore need to think a completion of incompleteness and an incompleteness of completion that never coincide? A non-coincidence at the ground, a peculiar, missed encounter that (not) starts it (not-)all?

This book will without any doubt produce disagreements. But it is a majestic intervention that traverses the entirety of Lacan's (in)complete thought. It constructs a diagonal that from now on will be impossible to ignore, even in the English-speaking world. There is no question that it does not erase itself, but that it will rather generate new impasses that would not have existed without it. These might be impasses for (the) generations to come.

Note: All citations in the body of the above text except for the one instance of Lacan refer to Milner (2020) *A Search for Clarity*.

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Notes:

[1] Cf. Hallward, P. & Peden, K. (2012), *Concept and form, volume 1: Selections from the Cahiers Pour L'Analyse* (Verso).

[2] Cf. Badiou, A. & Milner, J.C. (2018). *Controversies: Politics and philosophy in our time* (S. Spitzer, Trans.). Polity. (Original work published 2012).

[3] [Vol 3 \(2010\) \(lineofbeauty.org\)](http://lineofbeauty.org)

[4] Cf. Milner (2019) www.crisiscritique.org

[5] For this, cf. also Lecercle, J. (2009). *A Marxist philosophy of language*. (Haymarket).

[6] It is interesting to also think of how this account of the two classicisms is close to but differs from the periodization of Lacan's oeuvre that one can for example find in Alain Badiou, *Theory of the Subject* (2008/2013).

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Publication Date:

November 30, 2021