

**review of jean-claude milner,
a search for clarity: science
and philosophy in lacan's
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He was never the clearest writer. Reading Jacques Lacan's written works is a lot like listening to a free-associating analysand, whose stammering speech is replete with unexpected twists and turns. But for those who defend his singular style, the virtue of Lacan's prose is that it helps sharpen the act of interpretation, demanding that readers make their own cuts, punctuations, and scansion in order to make sense of it. One reason for Lacan's notoriously difficult prose style may very well be that its lack of clarity helps spark the desire of the reader, providing them with the motivation to keep turning the pages, to move on to the next seminar, to make meaning, all in the name of a fantasy that, one day, everything will become

clear. The kernel of this fantasy, however, is that such a day never arrives. Instead, Lacan's prose style is there to make the reader work, allowing them to access a kind of thinking-in-motion that resists ready-made knowledge—or worse, psychological advice.

So the truism about Lacan's style goes. But for the French linguist Jean-Claude Milner, Lacan was in fact a *crystal clear* writer whose long psychoanalytic career was underwritten by a set of rational epistemological propositions. In his recently translated *The Search for Clarity: Science and Philosophy in Lacan's Oeuvre* (2021), originally published with Éditions du Seuil in Alain Badiou's *L'Ordre philosophique* series in 1996, Milner reads Lacan in the same way that Martial Gueroult read Descartes in *Descartes' Philosophy Interpreted According to the Order of Reasons, Vol I & II* (1984). In other words, Milner does not seek to “clarify,” “correct” or interpret the psychoanalyst's supposedly opaque work, showing how his key ideas shifted throughout his career. Instead, Milner offers a structuralist interpretation of the psychoanalyst's work, articulating the core principles that condition Lacan's conceptions of science, modernity, education and the subject of psychoanalysis. As Milner himself puts it, his work aims “to establish clearly, for the record, that there is a thought in Lacan. A thought—that is to say, something whose existence imposes itself on those who have not thought it” (vii).¹ This austere hermetic approach may seem counter-intuitive. But, ingeniously, Milner reverses the standard approach to deciphering the psychoanalyst's opaque writing. For Milner, Lacan was never so complex as when he was at his clearest: citing his reference to the French historian of science Alexandre Koyré in “Science and Truth”—“Koyré is our guide here”—Milner notes that “the apparent simplicity of the phrase must give us pause. Precisely because its syntax and wording are simple, the reader must be careful” (114).

The idea that Lacan was neither difficult nor obscure, and that his own thought can be reduced to a number of plainly stated propositions, is emblematic of Milner's own counter-intuitive, occasionally reactionary and deeply under-appreciated reading style. As Justin Clemens and Sigi Jottkandt write in “Milner the Obscure,”

“it is perhaps due to his rigour, his range, and—as almost every reader of Milner has remarked—his extraordinary style, which is at once unparalleled in its stringent perspicuity and baroque in its very minimalism, that has rendered him ‘obscure’ as a thinker.”²² Having been introduced to Lacan by Jacques-Alain Miller in the mid-1960s, Milner’s philosophical work began with the *Cahiers pour l’analyse*, an experimental journal from the pre-’68 era dedicated to articulating a minimalist rationalist epistemology. But when Milner read Noam Chomsky’s *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax* (1965) in 1966, he distanced himself from the *Cahiers*, citing the lure of the maximalist epistemology that he thought Chomsky’s work made possible. When May ’68 struck, Milner broke with Badiou and many other of his former comrades, going on to author numerous critiques of French philosophical radicalism (his revisionist history of May ’68, *L’Arrogance du présent* (2009), was published in part as a reply to Badiou’s earlier *The Century* (2005)). In fact, in the title of the final chapter of *Les noms indistincts* (1983), a complex book that interprets various philosophical concepts through the lens of Lacan’s RSI, Milner invokes Jakobson’s essay on the death of Mayakovsky and other Russian poets entitled “For a Generation which Squandered its Poets.” The May ’68 generation was, for Milner, one that had similarly “squandered itself.”

In the years between his break from the *Cahiers* and the publication of *The Search for Clarity*, Milner authored a series of linguistic studies that set about refining his conception of a rigorous and consistent scientific epistemology. In the yet untranslated *Introduction à une science du langage* (1989), he developed an idea of “extended Galileanism,” arguing that although linguistics was not strictly speaking a quantitative science, it still attempted to embody the ideals of a post-Galilean scientific epistemology. Basing this argument in part on Koyré’s magisterial *From the Closed World to the Infinite Universe* (1957), as well as Karl Popper’s principle of demarcation, Milner notes that Galileo’s mathematisation of the empirical radically broke with the previous scientific *épistèmè*. With Galileo, as Milner elsewhere puts it, “we no longer have a cosmos, but a universe; the paradigm of science is mathematical physics; precision becomes a requirement; mathematics

is no longer reserved for the perfection and incorruptibility of celestial bodies.”³ The Galilean break was thus an absolute break, redistributing the sensible away from the subject, shattering the ideal of a finite cosmos and replacing it with a non-hierarchical, radically decentered *universe* divested of any telos. For Koyré, mathematics gave this universe a language, not because it captured something eternal about it—after all, the post-Galilean universe is one constantly in flux, teeming with transitory and contingent phenomena. Rather because, as Milner puts it, mathematics can “cover *all* of the empirical realm, without regard to any hierarchy of being” (31). “‘The book of nature is written in geometrical characters’ declared Galileo,” Koyré writes, “this implies that in order to reach its goal modern science is bound to replace the system of flexible and semi-qualitative concepts of the Aristotelian science by a system of rigid and strictly quantitative ones.”⁴ Yet Milner argued that linguistic science—in the form of structuralism—could *also* be considered Galilean. While linguistics is not a quantitative science that employs quantitative concepts, it still relies on a formalisation of linguistic matter, crucially removing all *quality* from its subject matter. Extended Galileanism is thus defined not simply by a mathematisation, but rather by what Milner calls a *literalisation*: the ability to render an object of study intelligible by turning the properties of that object into opposing and opposed letters, of which mathematical literalisation is merely one (albeit paradigmatic) instance.

In the 1990s, Milner began to wonder about Lacanian psychoanalysis, which had once had a profound impact on him and whose insights he had previously brought to bear on linguistics in his earlier work *For the Love of Language* (1978). With literalisation, Milner gave Galilean science a precise contour; what he now called *ideal science*. But how was psychoanalysis, whose founder Freud had been seduced at various points in his career by scientism, affected by this ideal? Although Lacan spent much time asking “what would be a science that includes psychoanalysis,” in the 1990s Milner interrogated whether his “attachment to Lacan’s oeuvre was anything other than loyalty? Anything other than a refusal—a stubborn refusal to renounce something that had dazzled me as a youth?” (114). Indeed, *The Search*

for Clarity is an attempt to find out whether Lacan's own work was marked by this ideal science (as opposed to Freud's *ideal of science*)—a question to which Milner provides an emphatic answer. Yes, Milner argues, there *is* thought in Lacan, as his work is undoubtedly conditioned by Koyré and Alexandre Kojève's strong interpretations of Galilean science: Lacan's work was *marked* by ideal science.

Milner calls this Lacan's "core doctrine" of science—the subject of the first, and by far the longest, chapter of *The Search for Clarity*. As Lacan himself writes in "Science and Truth," "the subject upon which we operate in psychoanalysis can only be the subject of science," an equation which suggests that the subject theorised by psychoanalysis is the same one birthed by Galilean science (17). And that subject of science is also the modern subject too—the subject of modernity—insofar as it is "in sync with Galilean science and there is nothing modern except that which is in sync with Galilean science" (21). For Milner, this equation of psychoanalysis, modern science and modernity is at the heart of Lacan's reading of Descartes's *cogito*. For Lacan, Descartes represents the first philosopher whose thought had been affected by modern science and whose *cogito* represents precisely a subject without quality, "neither mortal nor immortal, pure nor impure, just or unjust, sinner or saint, damned or saved" (22). Descartes's modern subject is thus the very same that Freud would also establish, though with one crucial distinction. The Cartesian subject is not just modern and Galilean; it is also self-conscious, continually doubting in order to affirm itself. But for Freud, self-consciousness is merely "one aspect of empirical individuality," unduly "introduced into the subject" by a megalomaniacal philosophical desire (24). For Freud and Lacan, self-consciousness is a property of the Ego and thus tied to the imaginary, registers that are actually antithetical to the literalising and anti-qualitative impulses of Galilean science. In fact, through literalisation, modern science "dissolves the imaginary" (35), providing the ground with which to theorise the subject of science.

Lacan's doctrine of science is thus modern, literal and non-historicist, rebuking the Ego as a narcissistic exception to the Galilean universe in favour of the unconscious (Milner offers a stunning interpretation of Lacan's well-known

aphorism “God is unconscious,” suggesting that “the triumph of the modern universe over the worlds of antiquity is thus that the unconscious even wins out over God” (42)). By accepting that there are no exceptions to the universe, the doctrine of science also implies a rejection of the theme of finitude: as Milner comments, if psychoanalysis is interested in death—the marker of finitude *par excellence*—then it is only insofar as death is an object of a drive. For all the comparisons between Lacanian psychoanalysis and Heideggerian phenomenology, Milner argues: “if being towards death is being towards finitude, then, despite the exchanges of letters and private visits, despite even the importance that the definition of truth as unveiling has for the doctrine of the cure, Lacan’s doctrine, as a doctrine of psychoanalysis, is contradictory to Heidegger’s philosophy” (44). Lastly, this core doctrine is also a doctrine of contingency. Unlike the ancient *epistémè*, where mathematics captured the eternal and the unchanging, “what is essential to modern letters,” Milner writes, “consists of grasping the contingent as contingent, the primary motto of the age of science would be: no letter will ever abolish chance. And its secondary motto would be: every letter is a throw of dice” (40).

Throughout Lacan’s long career, this core doctrine was subjected to differing interpretations and configurations, which Milner calls the first and second Lacanian classicisms. Outlined in the manifesto-like Rome Discourse from 1953 and then fully-realised in his “great masterpiece” the *Écrits* (72), Lacan’s first classicism is defined by a period of “hyper-structuralism.” As Milner had clarified before he wrote *The Search for Clarity*, structuralism applies ideal science to a human object—like language or systems of kinship—by “rendering” that object “into letters” and engaging in a “nonquantitative dissolution of the quantitative” (57). In his first classicism, Lacan’s account of structural linguistics adheres to this minimalist structuralist epistemology, articulating an “object-minimalism” (whereby a language is known only through “the minimal properties that make it into a system” (61)) and a “property-minimalism” (meaning that “the only properties that an element of a system has are those that are determined by the

system” (61)). Indeed, as Lacan famously stated, the unconscious is structured like a language, “conceived as a chain” (68) and literalised only through the insights of structuralist linguistics. But where the classical structuralist thesis suggests that a structure is only knowable through its particular realisation (through, for example, a *particular* language like English or a particular kinship system), Lacan’s hyperstructuralist position rests on the following “conjecture”: “Any unspecified structure has some properties that are not unspecified” (66). For Milner, the specified element of Lacan’s hyperstructuralism is nothing less than the existence of the subject itself. As he writes, “Since signifiers are nothing other than the minimal elements of any structure whatsoever, the definition of the signifier must include this emergence. Whence the *logion* ‘a signifier is what represents the subject to another signifier’” (67).

But the first classicism suffered from a number of instabilities, of which Lacan grew increasingly cognisant in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Although he did not renounce science’s “Core Doctrine,” Lacan became uneasy about the trajectory of linguistics: by the time of 1972-1973’s Seminar XX, one of the clearest statements of his second classicism, Lacan spoke of “linguistricks,” believing that after “its golden age in Geneva, Moscow, and Prague [...] there is nothing to expect from it anymore” (75). At the same time, the psychoanalyst began to articulate a more refined concept of the letter and its relationship to mathematisation, one based on his new concept of the *matheme*. In Seminar XX, Lacan invests in the unsullied transmissibility of the *matheme*. However, far from relying on the resources of the signifier—which operate relationally, representing the subject *for* another signifier—*mathemes* are constructed out of letters, which by contrast are univocal, utterly self-reflexive and material, governed only by a set of logically determined rules. In fact, mathematics, for Lacan, is not at all a deductive enterprise; it is rather the manipulation of letters, the “very essence of mathematicity” (87). This “new and scandalous definition” (87) of mathematics—of “what makes it the case that mathematics is mathematics” (87)—does “not renounce Galileo at all” (85). As Milner comments, Lacan’s position

reaffirms science's Core Doctrine. Except, however, the mathematics implicated in its mathematisation is entirely purified of whatever it might still contain of Euclid and the *more geometrico* [...] Mathematics is important not because of how it chains together lines of reasoning, but because of the strictly circumscribed zones of literality that it authorises—what we can call a 'calculus' (85).

What results from this second classicism is a new, more radicalised capacity to reject the imaginary determinations that have, for Lacan, marked the history of the philosophical thinking of the subject. Since Aristotle, the thinking of the subject has been tied to a set of imaginary qualities: as Lacan himself put it, “man thinks with his soul’ means that man thinks with Aristotle’s thought.”⁵ However, through the transmissibility of the *matheme*, psychoanalysis succeeds in establishing a thought without qualities—in other words, a thought of that which lies on the other side of thinking itself, namely, the unconscious.

This is where Milner’s reading of Lacan concludes—or so it seems. In an extraordinary but truncated conclusion entitled “The Deconstruction,” Milner hones in on another of Lacan’s obsessions: Borromean knots and their theory, something also discussed at length in Seminar XX—the supposed manifesto of the second classicism. Unlike the *matheme*, which exposes the mathematicity of mathematics itself, Milner argues that Lacan actually saw the Borromean knot as a dissolution of the doctrine of the *matheme* and its relationship to the letter. For just as Lacan articulates this classicism, so he also writes in Seminar XX, “[...] as of our point in time today, there is no theory of knots. Currently, there is no mathematical formalisation applicable to knots.”⁶ Knots, as Milner reads them, provide an exception to mathematisation; yet they retain a kind of literality that is at odds with the doctrine of the *matheme*. As Milner points out, Lacan assigned to the knot the letters RSI, each one representing the real, the symbolic and the imaginary. So while the knot retains its literalised status, it paradoxically cannot be formalised—that is, its own letters cannot be rendered into the very letters that are the hallmarks of mathematical formalisation. “This means,” Milner

concludes, “that a nonliteral object is given the task of revealing what the essence of the literal is. In letters themselves there is nothing to be found that lets it be sufficiently rendered into letters” (104). Indeed, for Milner, “the second classicism was over at the very moment it seemed to be accomplished” (108), as Seminar XX contains its clearest statement as well as its dissolution. This is a stunning conclusion to a stunning book. Lacan’s work ends in an impasse, a theoretical construction that dissolves under its own internal pressure, like climbing to the top of a ladder only in order to throw it away. Although Milner is sensitive to later moves in Lacan’s career—“New places take over from mathematics,” he writes, ‘and the curiosities that it offered; the roads led to Joyce, the poem... *Literature*, in a word” (105-106)—*The Search for Clarity* does not end with another classicism. Rather, Lacan’s life ends in a “deconstruction.”

This conclusion satisfied Milner for 30 years—that is, until he encountered Èric Laurent’s *L’Envers de la biopolitique* (2016). “Reading, line by line, the text and the notes of *L’Envers de la biopolitique*,” he writes in an afterword to this edition, “I realised that I had totally misrecognised the nature and importance of the Joycean turn. In no way did it have to be reduced to a deconstruction; quite the contrary, it had to be understood in positive terms” (118). There, as well as in another recently published essay, Milner outlines a final moment in Lacan’s teachings, a moment where the impasse outlined above finds its resolution in the primacy of homophony.⁷ Noting his own “resistance” (118) to Lacan’s work on Joyce and the sinthome in Seminar XXIII, Milner considers the importance of homophony to the psychoanalyst’s work: homophonies, for Lacan, become “the *matheme par excellence*. They are the means of its transmissibility,” pure and literal actualisations of the disorienting and estranging powers of *lalangue* itself (119). *The Search for Clarity* thus ends in a peculiar and oddly moving place. As Milner notes, to engage seriously with homophony is to ignore one of the foundational scientific elements of structuralist linguistics: namely, that the sonic material which makes *d’eux* (those) and *deux* (two) sound the same is in fact arbitrarily determined, nothing more than a mere accident of language. To take homophony

as the paradigm of literality—to say, as Lacan did, that it is “not purely by chance” that *d’eux* and *deux* sound the same (122)—is to reject the very ideal science which first sparked Lacan’s investigation into the literalisation of psychoanalysis. As for Milner, who spent so many years of his life refining the contours of ideal science, he ends *The Search for Clarity* by quietly but definitely announcing his fidelity to Lacan, that thinker which had so profoundly “dazzled” him in his youth: “The Lacanian orientation [of homophony] thus establishes a research program for itself. I would be happy to take part in it, but it is out of the question that I work on it alone” (123). Whether this means that Milner will renounce his own vision of ideal science in his future work is unclear, but reading this outstanding work does go some way toward making “Milner the obscure” a little clearer.

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NOTES

1. This and all parenthetical references are taken from Jean-Claude Milner, *The Search for Clarity: Science and Philosophy in Lacan's Oeuvre*. Trans. Ed Pluth. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2021.
2. Justin Clemens and Sigi Jöttkandt, "Milner the Obscure", *S: Journal for the Circle of Lacanian Ideology Critique* 3 (2010, 1).
3. Jean-Claude Milner, Ann Banfield and Daniel Heller-Roazen, "Interview with Jean-Claude Milner", trans. Chris Gernerchak, *S: Journal for the Circle of Lacanian Ideology Critique*, 3 (2010, 4).
4. Alexandre Koyré, 'An Experiment in Measurement', *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, 97.2 (April 1953), 222–237 (p. 223).
5. Jacques Lacan, *On Feminine Sexuality, The Limits of Love and Knowledge: Book XX, Encore 1972-1973*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1975), 111.
6. *Ibid.*, 129.
7. See Jean-Claude Milner, "Back and Forth from Letter to Homophony", *Problemi International* 1.1 (2017): 81-98.