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EDITORIAL :

Milner the Obscure

Of the analysts, philosophers, writers and thinkers surrounding Lacan in the 1950s and '60s, Jean-Claude Milner's name is one of the least known in the English-speaking world. A linguist trained in the classical tradition, Milner is renowned for his remarkable engagement with the transformational grammar of Noam Chomsky (whose *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax* he translated into French), for his long involvement in the Ecole Freudienne, and his founding role in the *Cahiers pour l'analyse*. Milner's published works read as a litany of his wide interests, covering the aforementioned linguistics, politics, poetry, and a lifelong entanglement with the thought of Lacan.

As for many of Lacan's circle, the immediate context for Milner's intellectual journey was the ferment that was Paris in the 1960s. Milner's recently published *L'Arrogance du présent* (2009) details his reactions to the political upheavals then convulsing French society, and it is hardly a stretch to describe the intellectual upheavals of that time in similarly cataclysmic terms. French structuralism, the short-lived but tremendously influential paradigm of the 1950s, found itself increasingly under fire from the critiques of Jacques Derrida, Gilles Deleuze, Michel Foucault and others. In the vacuum it left behind, a spiral of proliferating epicycles started to emerge in various fields such as medicine, science, linguistics, and philosophy. Profoundly interested in each of these fields, Milner's work in many ways can be seen to extend and reformulate Lacan's thought to the disciplines of science, politics, poetry and language more generally.

Besides Lacan, Chomsky must be considered one of Milner's abiding and lifelong interlocutors. It is largely through Chomsky's influence that Milner adopts science as the fundamental *organon* for his thought. For both, science lies at the heart of linguistics, taking place in a universe that, since Galileo, is both infinite and contingent. There is for Milner, indeed a "science of language"—if this science itself requires explicit theorization for its proper realm and powers to be identified and deployed. Milner, however, adapts Chomsky's "science" by way of innovative reinterpretations of the work of Karl Popper, Alexandre Koyré, and Foucault. For Milner doesn't agree with Chomsky's "naturalization" of language, which renders language a feature of the human species itself, inscribed in the neurons of the brain. On the contrary, and as a good Lacanian, Milner considers language a parasite upon the animal body, and itself a contingency whose functioning requires a different kind of formalization. In this regard, he reconsiders Galilean science as not

a form of quantification, but as the paradigm of formalization: science reinscribes being as “little letters,” which are, in themselves, meaningless, yet whose “blind functioning” and immanent rules ensure their effectiveness and transmissibility.

As Ann Banfield puts it in her introduction to *For the Love of Language*, “Lacan and Milner represent different workings out of a theory of science where linguistics is the science in question and where the existence of that science presents an explicit challenge to any nominalism with regard to language.”¹ That difference can be summed up as follows: taking seriously the possibility of linguistics as an empirical science, and thus of the limits of science, Milner’s work is a “psychoanalysis of objective knowledge.”

Integral to this “psychoanalysis” is Milner’s thesis, developed in *Introduction to a Science of Language*, that modern science has three major characteristics: 1) it mathematizes empirical phenomena; 2) it is integrally technological (Milner will even speak, hilariously, of an “industrial linguistics”); 3) its propositions are essentially falsifiable.² If, for Milner, the first two characteristics are “extrinsic” but necessary, the third is essential and intrinsic: a falsifiable proposition, following Popper, must itself be further specified. It is necessary that we can enumerate the conditions under which such a proposition will be false, and these conditions must be able to be constructed as observable material conditions. The proposition has to be an epistemological assertion (i.e., either true or false, without any third position available), and the negation of a falsifiable proposition cannot be logically contradictory (i.e., its negation must also be able to be true or false).

With this extraordinary and extraordinarily clear set of distinctions in mind, Milner draws further distinctions. Within linguistics, we can approach language under four headings:

The *factum loquendi*: the fact that there are speaking beings;

The *factum linguae*: that what a being speaks can be called language;

The *factum linguarum*: that language can be discriminated from non-language, and that languages can be discriminated from each other (i.e., languages are at once homogenous and diverse);

The *factum grammaticae*: that language is describable in terms of properties.

For Milner, the first of these, the *factum loquendi*, is explicitly excluded from science itself. This is crucial, because science is necessarily limited—if infinite in its reach. What cannot be treated by science is crucial to Milner. This is where Lacanian doctrines of sexuation and *lalangue* re-emerge. Another countervailing discourse

1. Ann Banfield, “Introduction: What do Linguists Want?” in Jean-Claude Milner, *For the Love of Language*, trans. and intro. Ann Banfield (Basingstoke: Palgrave-Macmillan, 1990) 11.

2. Jean-Claude Milner, *Introduction à une science du langage* (Paris: Seuil, 1989).

for Milner is that of politics—established linguistically, politics also escapes a science, properly speaking and as such requires different sorts of tools for its analysis. Milner draws tools for his study of politics proper from Lacan’s doctrines of sex, at the same time he always in a “scientific fashion” makes clear the methodologies by which he is proceeding.

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. We would add here: and almost impossible to translate. Nonetheless, it seems to us crucial to attempt to introduce this important thinker to the Anglophone world. Milner’s theses on science, language, politics, and psychoanalysis are so strong and so surprising that they seem to us a crucial resource for helping us to think and intervene into the “state of emergency” that is the world today.

The translations and articles brought together in this issue of *S* are an attempt to make the first steps in this undertaking. Drawn from recently published and earlier works, the essays selected for translation exemplify Milner’s “triple” of linguistics, politics and poetry. The articles by Knox Peden, Adrian Johnston, Ed Pluth, Lorenzo Chiesa place Milner’s work thought-provokingly in the context of French contemporary thought—particularly in regard to the work of Alain Badiou and Quentin Meillassoux—while Ann Banfield’s magisterial introduction to *For the Love of Language*, republished in this issue with kind permission, offers an extensive critical overview of the remarkable range and erudition of Milner’s work. Perhaps the best introduction, however, is offered by Milner himself, given here in conversation with two of his most incisive interlocutors in English, Banfield and Daniel Heller-Roazen in an interview conducted for *S* in August 2008.

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