

KNOX PEDEN

THE RIGHTS OF THE IMAGINARY:

On Jean-Claude Milner

In 2002, Jean-Claude Milner published a short tract titled *Existe-t-il une vie intellectuelle en France?*, a question to which he responded with an emphatic no.¹ Against conventional wisdom, Milner suggests that the image of the French intellectual bequeathed by the Dreyfus affair reflects a moment of exception rather than evidence of a norm. In a clipped survey of nineteenth- and twentieth-century German and French intellectual history, Milner argues that the efforts of Third Republic France to borrow from “Protestant and Jewish Germany certain of its forms”² resulted in the imposition of a Republic in a land that did not want it. In Milner’s words, “the professor, and especially the *normalien*, is the laicized and willfully agnostic analogue of the German pastor and clergyman.”³ For Milner, it is no coincidence that the high point of French intellectual life coincided with this Republican imposition, which resulted in a fundamental disjuncture between society and the institutionally produced knowledge of that society according to the ideals of a *Wissenschaft* translated into those of *savoir*.

Milner describes this historical moment as an “oasis.”⁴ The condition of possibility for the brief flowering of “French intellectual life” was the dissonance between those committed to the Republican ideal and the rest of society who, in Milner’s view, were intrinsically hostile to it, steeped in centuries of French Catholic provincialism and conservatism. What is more, the intellectual history of postwar France is the history of the eclipse of this moment. After Vichy, the Republic became the indisputable horizon for French social life, which meant there was no longer any operative tension between educational institutions and their object, i.e. French youth. This tension was further weakened by the full centralization of the educa-

1. I owe a special word of thanks to Tracy McNulty for inviting me to present a version of this article to the Psychoanalysis Colloquium at Cornell University in April 2010. The feedback that resulted from this event was essential to its improvement.

2. Jean-Claude Milner, *Existe-t-il une vie intellectuelle en France?* (Paris: Verdier, 2002) 13. Hereafter cited as Milner, *Existe-t-il?*

3. Milner, *Existe-t-il?*, 15.

4. Milner, *Existe-t-il?*, 19.

tional system in a bureaucracy that denied the autonomous status of “knowledge” produced in educational institutions. Finally, and most crucially, the ubiquity of a bureaucratized Republicanism gave rise to a new “political axiom” which stated that “every apparatus of governmentality can and must reflect society.”⁵ In other words, the gap opened in the Third Republic between “society” and “*savoir*” has been closed.

Many things are striking about Milner’s position here, chief among them the embrace of elitism and his evident contempt for society. Indeed, he writes, “The Republic did not reflect society, and it has been reproached for it, previously from the Right, and more recently from the Left. Today it does reflect it and the result is obvious: the disappearance of all intellectual life.”⁶ Despite its hysterical conclusion, Milner’s tract resonates with a much venerated European tradition that ties Hannah Arendt and Leo Strauss to Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno and can be summarized as a massive distrust of the social and a concern for the decline of genuine political activity. But since publishing this essay, Milner has pursued a line of reflection that, on the one hand, seems designed to belie his own arguments about the death of intellectual life, and on the other, does his German forbears one better by taking his contempt for the social to its logical conclusion, captured in the title of Jacques Rancière’s polemical response to Milner: *Hatred of Democracy*.⁷ Indeed, the term democracy was already derided in his 2002 essay, but it received its full opprobrium in 2003 with the publication of Milner’s *Les Penchants criminels de l’Europe démocratique*.⁸

With his hostility to the slogan of democracy, Milner appears to make common cause with Alain Badiou and Slavoj Žižek. Where he distinguishes himself, at least in his recent work, is in his wholesale disparagement of the *concept* of democracy, which for Milner involves the closure of the gap, momentarily opened in the Third Republic, between the “social” and the “scientific,” between social existence and scientific or indeed political knowledge. For Milner, the “criminal inclination” of democracy as such is its denial of any exception, whether that be a knowledge that is irreducible to socially mediated desires, or indeed a political stance that goes against the thrust of society’s “natural” tendency. “Democracy” is a wholly formal concept, then, tantamount to a vision of human existence that portends the end of politics in that it portends the excision of any distance opened within the “social” that might escape its reductive and assimilatory clutches. Where Badiou and Žižek also valorize the gap—the fleeting moment of indeterminacy or contingency that acquires necessity through the Žižekian act or Badiouian fidelity to an event—their position is distinct from Milner’s in several important ways. For Badiou and Žižek, the gap in question is the result of an equally historical and ontological rup-

5. Milner, *Existe-t-il?*, 21.

6. Milner, *Existe-t-il?*, 23.

7. Jacques Rancière, *Hatred of Democracy*, trans. Steve Corcoran (London: Verso, 2009).

8. Milner, *Les Penchants criminels de l’Europe démocratique* (Paris: Verdier). Hereafter cited as *Penchants*.

ture that has a preexisting obstacle as its condition. In other words, for Badiou the hard kernel of a given situation is the site wherein the void of that situation will be made manifest. The impasse gives way to the Lacanian “pass” in the gestation of a new situation. By contrast, for Milner, the impasse is irremediable and permanent. Indeed, the “obstacle” ought always to remain an obstacle; its function is a deeply problematic one, and its virtue is precisely in its problematization of the social field. Any attempt to treat it as a condition to be overcome is chimerical at best, and horrifying at worst.

In this regard, the difference between Milner and Badiou has coalesced over the past decade in a specific “name” in Milner’s rubric and a “word” in Badiou’s: the name or word Jew.⁹ Developing an argument first articulated by François Regnault in 1979 that presented the “Jew” as the *objet petit a* of European civilization,¹⁰ Milner has recently suggested that a line of continuity runs—symbolically, if not practically—from the Nazi “Final Solution” to contemporary Left European positions against the state of Israel. In Milner’s view, the dark secret of the Holocaust is precisely its “success.” Milner presents this as a historical fact; the Jewish “problem” has, for all intents and purposes, been “solved” in Europe due to the Nazis’ “success,” which serves as the original sin of European integration and expansion.¹¹ But this resolution has beget a displacement in that the problem persists in the state of Israel, the effective “obstacle” to the spread of European democracy worldwide. In Milner’s view, the call for the end of Israel as a specifically “Jewish state” is the extension of Europe’s historical relation to the Jew into the present.¹²

For Badiou, the only viable future for Israel is to shirk its Jewish particularism, to take leave of the restrictions of the predicate “Jew” and to serve as a site for a new universalist egalitarianism that recognizes the privilege of no predicate.¹³ But for Milner, the obstacle enshrined in the persistent adherence to the Jewish predicate is what is to be maintained at all costs. Milner’s position has provoked hostile reactions from virtually every quarter, but to limit our assessment to his views on Zionism or the state of Israel would be unfortunate because it would prevent us from grasping what is most pertinent in his theoretical project, especially when it is read alongside Badiou’s or indeed Žižek’s. Most critiques of Badiou’s thought come from an external position, or a theoretical framework that Badiou does not recognize as viable.¹⁴ But what makes Milner a particularly valuable thinker is the proximity of

9. In addition to *Penchants*, see Jean-Claude Milner, *Le Juif de savoir* (Paris: Grasset, 2006), and Idem., *L’Arrogance du présent: Regards sur une décennie, 1965-1975* (Paris: Grasset, 2009). See Alain Badiou, *Circonstances 3: Portées du mot “Juif”* (Paris: Lignes, 2005).

10. François Regnault, *Notre objet a* (Paris: Verdier, 2003).

11. Milner, *Penchants*, 47-101.

12. Milner, *Penchants*, 103-26.

13. For a compelling analysis of the mechanisms, and limitations, of this procedure in Badiou’s thought see Tracy McNulty, “The Event of the Letter: Two Approaches to the Law and its Real,” *Cardozo Law Review*, 29:5 (2008): 2209-38.

14. See Adrian Johnston, “The Right Left: Alain Badiou and the Disruption of Political Identities,” *Yale French Studies*, nos. 116 & 117 (2010): 55-78.

his trajectory to Badiou's. They were comrades in the Lacano-Althusserian journal the *Cahiers pour l'Analyse*, and equally marked by the events of May 1968.¹⁵ Along with Jacques-Alain Miller, Milner was a major player in the Maoist Gauche prolétarienne for a spell. What is more, there is much to be gained in reading Milner's and Badiou's intellectual trajectories in tension with one another, from their contributions to the *Cahiers* to the nearly simultaneous publication in the early 1980s of two key works, Badiou's *Theory of the Subject* and Milner's *Noms indistincts*.¹⁶ When we consider Milner's efforts alongside Badiou's a fundamental discord becomes clear, one that turns on the function of the Imaginary as a site of mediation between the Symbolic and the Real. Where Badiou's oeuvre might be generally, if vulgarly, characterized as an effort to think the imbrication of the latter two terms of the Lacanian register to the detriment the former, Milner's work insists, in effect, if not principle, upon the salutary function of the Imaginary as a domain that cannot be excised or bypassed without a collapse of the political as such.

Functions of the Figure "Jew"

Before developing this comparison, however, it is worth devoting further attention to Milner's recent positions and the critiques they have provoked, because, ultimately, the goal of what follows is to show that the rupture between Badiou and Milner over the "Jewish question" serves as a symptom of a theoretical dispute that has been underway for decades. And just as a symptom never exhausts the cause that serves as its essential condition, often masking a truth that the symptom itself obfuscates, there is more to the "truth" of the difference between Milner and Badiou than an argument over Israel's status as a "Jewish state" would allow. What is telling here is that the discursive function of "Israel" or the "Jew" in Milner's recent thought is presented above all as a symptom of a more profound pathology in the European experience, namely, the desire to get rid of sexual difference, which for Milner is presented, in the terms of his Lacanian *organon*, as the desire to overcome the permanent obstacle that renders the tension between the social—the feminine *pastout*—and the political—the masculine *tout*—possible.¹⁷

It is precisely this link—between the "Jew" as such and "sexual difference" as such—that has flabbergasted most respondents to Milner's recent work.¹⁸ In order for this connection to have even the air of plausibility, however, two qualifiers are immediately required. First, in the opening of *Les Penchants criminels de l'Europe démocratique*, Milner readily admits that he is extracting Lacan's formulas of sexualization

15. The complete contents of the *Cahiers pour l'Analyse*, along with a comprehensive editorial apparatus, are available online <http://www.kingston.ac.uk/cahiers/>

16. Alain Badiou, *Theory of the Subject* (1982), trans. Bruno Bosteels (London: Continuum, 2009). Jean-Claude Milner, *Les Noms indistincts* (Paris: Seuil, 1983; Paris: Verdier: 2007). Page references will be to the Verdier edition.

17. Milner, *Penchants*, 119–30.

18. See Rancière, *Hatred of Democracy*, 10.

from “L’Étourdit” and the twentieth seminar and putting them to a heterodox use.¹⁹ Essential for Milner is the logical efficacy of these two categories—the *tout*, which names a “limited whole” and the *pastout*, naming an “unlimited whole”—and their logical intercalation with one another. In effect, Milner maps this logical relation onto a conceptual history of the West’s political forms. Moving brusquely from Thucydides and Aristotle to Michel Foucault and Carl Schmitt, Milner tracks the different conceptions of the relation of the political to the social and the equivocal form of “democracy” within this complex intellectual history. Milner’s point, however, is to arrive at the post-1918 conjuncture as a moment wherein the political form of democracy as a “limited whole,” i.e. the nation-state, enters into a conflict with its social form, conceived as the “unlimited whole.” In effect, in the social form of democracy, one more term or item (or “subject”) can always be added; its capacity for inclusion is “unlimited.” And yet this capacity is in tension with the political correlate which establishes a democracy in the fixed space—figural or literal—of the nation-state. Much as Lacan’s formulas of sexuation for man and woman result in the impossibility of their relation, Milner reads in these competing “forms” of democracy an impossible relation that can only be transcended with the collapse of one form into the other. In the period of late capitalism, Milner sees the “*pastout*” form of social democracy as the driving force behind global economic integration, a force which requires an obstacle—an *objet petit a*—as both its condition of possibility and the scapegoat for its failure to ever arrive at the surety of the established “limited whole” of a smoothly functioning political democracy.

But what of the original contents of Lacan’s formulas? At the same moment that Milner signals his appropriation of these logical forms for other uses, he suggests that he will return to their original sense as well.²⁰ And, indeed, in the concluding analyses of *Les Penchants criminels de l’Europe démocratique*, Milner re-inscribes Lacan’s teaching on the non-relation of the sexual relationship into his analysis of the symbolic function of Israel in the European imaginary. His argument runs as follows: forsaking the inscription of any theological or biological content to the concept “Jew,” which Milner in fact does, the persistence of Jewishness in European cultural history has been a simple matter of the transmission of learning, a mode of knowledge passed from generation to generation. *Les Penchants criminels de l’Europe démocratique* thus ends with this striking analogy: insofar as Jews remain the group most committed to the thoroughly symbolic principle of generational kinship, a principle grounded in what Milner, aping Heidegger, calls the fourfold of man/woman/parent/child,²¹ their insistence on particularity, their wholesale refusal to assimilate to a socio-political generic extension of a universalist egalitarianism, functions as a resistance to a more general “inclination” on the part of

19. Milner, *Penchants*, 17–26. Jacques Lacan, “L’Étourdit.” *Autres écrits*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (Paris: Seuil, 2001) 449–95, and Jacques Lacan, *On Feminine Sexuality, the Limits of Love and Knowledge, 1972–1973: Encore, the Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XX*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: W.W. Norton, 1998) esp. 78–89.

20. Milner, *Penchants*, 17.

21. Milner, *Penchants*, 119.

“democratic Europe” to get rid of sexual difference as such in a biotechnical frenzy that abandons the fourfold of kinship for a social field of pure desire, devoid of Law, paternal injunction, and, consequently, politics. With all the focus on Milner’s position vis-à-vis the state of Israel, and the general puzzlement over this strange argumentative leap, what has been overlooked is the fact that Milner’s concern is most fundamentally with a conception of social being that undoes the possibility of politics itself, by undoing the sexual difference as the name for a fundamental tension between the Symbolic *qua* law *qua* form and the Real *qua* desire *qua* matter, or indeed the *tout* and the *pastout*.

Here is where the second qualifier is needed, however. By linking the name “Jew” to the fact of sexual difference as such, Milner is in fact inscribing his project—wittingly or not—in one of the most controversial currents of postwar French thought: the effort to make the signifier “Jew” the mark of difference as such, which is to say, the identifier that itself names the impossibility of self-identity. In her recent study, *The Figural Jew*, Sarah Hammerschlag has shown how the equivocal “trope” of the Jew emerged in France via the works of Sartre, Levinas, Blanchot, and Derrida as a figure for thinking the core tension of modern political thought between exclusionary communitarianism and liberal universalism.²² The signal virtue of Hammerschlag’s study is to show how the tension constitutive of “the figural Jew” is itself operative in the works of these key thinkers. The central figure in this trajectory is Levinas, whose work shuttles between a conception of “Israel” as the name which stands for “every man,” the “primordial mode of the human,” and, in his later works especially, an increasingly recalcitrant set of Zionist investments.²³ In Hammerschlag’s view, Blanchot and Derrida provide the most fecund avenues out of the impasse of Levinas’s thought, the former by insisting that “Judaism is universalizable only insofar as it cannot be taken up, claimed, or inhabited as an identity,” and the latter by showing how “being Jewish becomes [...] the exemplary case of both the problems and virtues of exemplarity as such,” with the themes of Judaism appearing “almost always in the service of illustrating undecidability” throughout Derrida’s oeuvre.²⁴

In this regard, we might read Milner’s recent work as providing a Lacanian element to this thinking of the “figural Jew” present in Blanchot’s and Derrida’s efforts. And indeed, Milner’s recent books have had their origins in courses delivered under the aegis of the Institut d’études lévinassiennes in both Jerusalem and Paris. But Milner’s case is clearly a paradoxical one in that he appears to have returned to the impasse of Levinas’s conception of the Jew as a universalizable figure for humanity and the specific support for the state of Israel’s political claims in order to accept the contradictory nature of this relation and, apparently, to bask in it. It must nevertheless be recognized that Milner’s analysis is primarily conceptual, if not

22. Sarah Hammerschlag, *The Figural Jew: Politics and Identity in Postwar French Thought*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010).

23. Hammerschlag, 159, 166.

24. Hammerschlag, 206, 205.

strictly figural, and that his main concern is for the symbolic function of Israel in Europe's "phantasm,"²⁵ itself the screen for a globalizing form of "democracy" and consumption that seeks to have done with obstacles or indeed the political itself as a site of contestation. For Milner, it is not simply the fact that Israel's claim for existence as a nominally "Jewish state" is grounded in the generational principle of kinship, but its insistence upon the *viability* of this fact as a legitimizing force that is the cause of its scandal. But since "generational kinship" is, in the terms of Milner's apparatus, the Symbolic mechanism wherein sexual difference—the Lacanian correlate for Derridean undecidability or that which renders the community "unavowable" in Blanchot's thought—is precisely "operative," it is the stigma of this primordial non-relation or non-identity at play in the Jewish case that renders the state of Israel an object of contempt, irrespective of the colonialist elements of its policies and military actions in the Middle East.²⁶

And yet, since the fact that children are produced through heterosexual confrontation is not, at present, limited to Jews, it seems that Milner's focus on the Jewish question has a phantasmatic component of its own, which is to say, it is the imaginary representation of a much more fundamental anxiety on his part. Indeed, if we look at Milner's variegated oeuvre what we find are works of linguistics, Lacanian exercises and assessments, and various engaged writings, such as his defense of Republican education against Bourdieusian sociology in *De l'école*, in which the periodic resurgence of the same concern is striking,²⁷ namely the limits

25. Milner, *Penchants*, 99.

26. This insistence on the kinship principle, conceived as a matter of knowledge transmission, is also what mitigates the most obvious critique of Milner's position (a critique which is nonetheless wholly pertinent): namely, that the presence of Arab immigrants clearly functions as the more pertinent "obstacle" to European integration than the presence of the state of Israel in the Middle East. Milner's allusive remarks concerning Islam in *Penchants*, produced by way of a brief commentary on the figure of the "Palestinian" (77-80), suggest that he views it as no less compromised than Christianity in terms of its commitment to the generic extension of the universal, eliminating particular differences. It would seem that, within the frame of Milner's symbolic worldview, Christianity and Islam are complementary figures of "universalisme facile," excising the anxiety of particular difference in their fundamentalist fanaticism, the result of which is a forsaking of the political itself. "Protestant" Christianity and Judaism are apparently exempt from this charge insofar as their transmission remains grounded in a difficult fidelity to the text rather than its forsaking in favor of the unambiguous injunctions of religious illumination. On "universalisme facile," see the discussion below. On "fanaticism" as a figure of political critique, see Alberto Toscano, *Fanaticism: The Uses of an Idea* (London: Verso, 2010).

27. Milner's career as a linguist was decisively inflected by his encounter with Noam Chomsky's work at MIT in the late 1960s. Indeed, Milner was the translator of Chomsky's *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax* into French in 1971. Among Milner's works of linguistics are *De la syntaxe à l'interprétation* (Paris: Seuil, 1978) and *Ordres et raisons des langues*. Paris: Seuil, 1982. *L'Amour de la langue* (Paris: Seuil, 1978; Paris: Verdier, 2009); translated by Ann Banfield as *For The Love of Language* (New York: Macmillan, 1990), was a Lacanian analysis of the science of linguistics itself. Milner's key reckoning with Lacan and the Lacanian legacy is *L'Œuvre claire: Lacan, la science, la philosophie* (Paris: Seuil, 1995). Among his

of knowledge as a condition of knowledge as such, which is to say the limits of a universalist, generic extension of a science of the *quelconque* or the “whatsoever” evidenced, for example, in the work of the linguist who comes up against the “Real” limit of *lalangue* or Lacan himself turning from a commitment to formalization to a concern precisely to formalize the impasse of formalization. This constitutive tension is crystallized in the second book of Milner’s recent trilogy, *Le Juif de savoir*. Indeed, this title itself is one name among many for the nexus that has been at the center of all Milner’s theoretical inquiry. The core of this study is an engagement with Hannah Arendt as an exemplary “juive de savoir.”²⁸ Arendt, like many others of her generation, subscribed to an ideal of *Wissenschaft*, a secular mutation of Jewish learning that aimed to have a universal remit shorn of an antiquated particularism. In this regard, the Jew was properly speaking the foundation for a new universalism, a universalism of *savoir*, in the sense that Badiou often celebrates with reference to Spinoza or Einstein. For Arendt, however, the Holocaust itself was the end of this nexus, the death of the “Juif de savoir,” in that it showed how the generic extension of rational science, in this case technical science, led to its torsional conversion into the counter-rationality of the extermination of the Jews. The “lesson” was that the *quelconque* at best has limited political bearing, and at worst tends toward a Symbolic erasure of particular names that accomplishes itself in a murderous erasure in the Real of embodied lives. Though Milner himself does not make this connection explicit, his analysis sheds light on one of Arendt’s most profound insights, namely, the destitution of human rights as a political paradigm.²⁹ The “human as such,” which is to say the human *quelconque*, is a symbolic fiction whose indifference to particular identifications, in which all three rings of Lacan’s Real, Symbolic, and Imaginary are engaged, means not simply that it lacks purchase on particular political situations from an analytic perspective, but also that it sanctions either the foreclosure or the override of the fundamental knot of Lacan’s tripartite schema that functions as an obstacle, or a mode of resistance, in discrete instances.

Indeed, the lesson for Milner is not that the generic extension of the “human” is the problem, rather it is generic extension as such. In *Hatred of Democracy*, Rancière makes the astute point that what was previously castigated under the name “totalitarianism” during the Cold War is conspicuously similar to the contents of what is derided under the name “democracy” in Milner’s work.³⁰ Where before “totalitarianism” served to name an overweening extension of the political into

“engaged” writings are *De l’école* (Paris: Seuil, 1984; Verdier, 2009) and his response to the collapse of the Soviet Union, *Constat*. (Paris: Seuil, 1992), which was collected with his short book on Mallarmé (*Mallarmé au tombeau*) and his account of the function of pleasure in ancient Greek philosophy (*Le Triple de plaisir*) in *Constats* (Paris: Gallimard, 2002).

28. Milner, *Le Juif de savoir*, 35–51, 143–65.

29. See, in particular, chapter nine “The Decline of the Nation-State and the End of the Rights of Man” in Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1948) (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1979) 267–302.

30. Rancière, *Hatred of Democracy*, 10–7.

all domains of life, in effect an erasure of social antagonism in the name of the overriding symbolic of the state; today “democracy” serves to name the overweening extension of the social, unlimited in its essentials, to all the corners of existence. Where Rancière arguably errs is in presenting this mutation as a liability for Milner’s argument. For it is Milner’s precise point that it is the attempt to extend the “tout,” i.e. the Symbolic, or the political, indefinitely that compromises what is most fundamentally specific to the political: its discretionary capacity to establish limits, in all senses of the term. The historical inversion of “totalitarianism” into “democracy” is in fact integral to Milner’s argument, in the sense that the historical precedent of the political’s extension into all walks of life is the loss of the political as such. Milner uses the travesty of Jewish experience as a fulcrum to articulate this conversion. Where before the “Jew” was what stymied the political establishment of the *tout* in a discrete instance, i.e. the limited totality of the nation-state, today, “Israel,” in its anachronistic status as the limited totality of a nation-state, is what stymies the generic extension of the social qua *pastout* worldwide.

In effect, Milner’s insistence on the principle of kinship in *Les Penchants criminels de l’Europe démocratique* might be read simply as a robust defence of the Name-of-the-father, the paternal signifier that allows for the construction of a limited whole, metaphorically established, that mitigates the unlimited metonymic whole of embodied desire. Though it is grounded in the historical conflict between Jewish Law and Christian Love, the argument pursued in Milner’s trilogy is more subtle than a call for an unbridled return to the Mosaic pastorate.³¹ Indeed, in Milner’s analysis, the phenomenon expressed in the history of Jewish experience is *not* the wholesale affirmation of the Law, the Name-of-the-father, symbolically proliferating in a manifest indifference to the Real and the Imaginary, but rather the key *tension* between the *tout* of the Symbolic and the *pastout* of the Real, a tension that is insurmountable and operates through an incessant vacillation that in each instance traverses the Imaginary. At root, what troubles Milner most in Badiou’s position is this fundamental desire to excise the imaginary as a site of *anxiety*, the functional site, the nexus, wherein the political and the social exist in tension with one another. Although anxiety plays an important role in much of Badiou’s thought, it is typically as a propaedeutic to courage, which is to say anxiety is important insofar

31. Rancière suggests as much when he appears to assimilate Milner’s argument to that put forth by Benny Lévy in *Le Meurtre du Pasteur: Critique de la vision politique du monde*. Paris: Grasset, 2002. See Rancière, 33–49. Though Milner was intellectually close to Lévy, the valorization of the pastoral is in fact a site of major divergence between them, with Milner taking a more critical line indebted, above all, to Michel Foucault’s arguments on this score. See *Penchants*, 31–2, 136. For Foucault on the “pastoral,” see his “Omnes and Singulatim: Toward a Critique of Political Reason,” in *Power: The Essential Works of Foucault, 1954–1984*, 3, ed. James D. Faubion, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: W.W. Norton, 2000) 298–325, as well as *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1977–1978*, eds. Arnold I. Davidson and Michel Senellart, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Picador, 2007).

as it is an affect that demands to be overcome.³² As such, Badiou's and Milner's differences over the Jewish question become illuminated when they are posed in terms of the Lacanian framework that has been common to both thinkers for decades. The core of this difference concerns the status of the Imaginary. For Milner, it is the essential site wherein the tension between the Symbolic of the political and the Real of the social must be maintained, preventing their collapse into one another. For Badiou, the Imaginary is above all what flummoxes the emergence of the very truths, political or otherwise, it is philosophy's task to recognize.³³

From Lack to Mark...and Back: "The Point of the Signifier"

It is this insistence on the necessary coexistence of the *tout* and the *pastout*, one which presupposes the mediate relation of the Imaginary, that dates back to Milner's contributions to the *Cahiers pour l'Analyse* in the mid-1960s. What is striking here is that this moment of theoretical production *predates* Lacan's formulas of the *tout* and the *pastout*, and yet we can already see Milner's investment in keeping the contents of these formulas in tension. The central argument of Milner's article "The Point of the Signifier," which takes the form of a reading of Plato's *Sophist*, concerns the vacillating nature of "being" as alternately function and term in Plato's discursive enumeration of the genera of being, a list which, in addition to being itself, also includes *movement* and *rest* and *same* and *other*.³⁴ In the generic extension of being as function, it briefly loses its status as term in that this extension, in moving outside of the "same" or self-identical concept, for example to generate the concept of "rest" out of "movement," momentarily opens "being" to the "Other" which portends non-being within it. Each time that being is re-established as "term" this element of "non-being" is rejected; it resurges again, however, each time being is extended as a generic function. In other words, the vacillation of being as function and term is symmetrical to the vacillation of non-being as a function that is integral to "that which is not the same," i.e. the other or non-identical, and non-being as term. But one of Milner's key points is that Plato precisely *denies* non-being its

32. See Adrian Johnston, *Badiou, Žižek, and Political Transformations: The Cadence of Change* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2009) 77-8.

33. To be clear: Milner makes no special claims on behalf of the Imaginary in his writings, even nominating it as the essential domain of *bêtise* or stupidity (cf. *Noms indistincts*, 123-32). And even a cursory glance at Milner's other writings will show the extent to which he valorizes the Symbolic as the mechanism and site of scientific *savoir* (e.g., in particular, *L'Œuvre claire*). But it is insofar as he adheres to the Lacanian dictum that to cut one ring of the Borromean knot of the Real, Symbolic, and Imaginary, is to unravel the ring itself, that his work *in effect* makes a case for the special role of the Imaginary, *when it is read alongside Badiou's*.

34. Jean-Claude Milner, "Le Point du signifiant," *Cahiers pour l'Analyse*, 3, "Sur l'objet de la psychanalyse," (1966): 73-82. "The Point of the Signifier," trans. Christian Kerslake and Knox Peden, in *Concept and Form: The Cahiers pour l'Analyse and Contemporary French Thought*, vol. 1, eds. Peter Hallward and Knox Peden (London: Verso, forthcoming 2011).

status as term, because to do so would result in the annulment of the whole sequence of genera, and consequently the signifying chain seeking to establish truth. If non-being exists, nothing exists, its generic extension being just as unstoppable as “being’s.” So this symmetry in fact becomes an asymmetry. Movement and rest are paired; same and other are paired; being is not “paired” with non-being, since the latter is denied as term.

What we have here is a prototype of the relation of the Symbolic to the Real, and of the *tout* to the *pastout*. In each generic extension of the Symbolic qua being as the One of scientific discourse, the Real of non-being is engaged and summarily rejected. Likewise, the establishment of the limited whole of the *tout* requires the exceptional point—the *x* to which the generic function does *not* apply—in order to establish itself as a whole. But the existence of this “*tout*” as a term grounded upon a function of negation is what, in Lacan’s logic, entails the formula of the *pastout*, pure function, pure generic extension that never coalesces in a set whole, i.e. that which can never be established *qua* term. For Milner, this relation or indeed vacillating tension occurs in a precise focal point, “the point of the signifier” whose mark is the proper name, in this case the sophist, and whose domain is the Imaginary, the field itself of *méconnaissance* and the obfuscation of truth.

In order to grasp the relevance of these arguments, we have to understand their place within the general project that was the *Cahiers pour l’Analyse*. Indeed, Milner’s article is best read as a kind of intervention in the debate over science and ideology that was central to the *Cahiers* and that was distilled in the conflicting theses of Jacques-Alain Miller’s “Suture: Elements for a Logic of the Signifier” and Badiou’s “Mark and Lack: On Zero.”³⁵

Roughly speaking, in this face-off Miller was the Lacanian and Badiou was the Althusserian, which is to say the latter held to the possibility of a scientific discourse unsullied by ideology, and the former conceived all discourse, including science, as grounded on a more primordial logic of the signifier that ideologically masked the truth of lack—equivalent to a lack of truth—at its core. In a heterodox reading of Frege’s *Grundlagen der Arithmetik*, Miller sought to establish a logic of the signifier

35. Jacques-Alain Miller, “La Suture: Éléments pour une logique du signifiant,” *Cahiers pour l’Analyse*, 1, “La Vérité” (1966): 37–48. “Suture: Elements for a Logic of the Signifier,” trans. Jacqueline Rose, in *Concept and Form*. Alain Badiou, “Marque et manque: À propos du zéro,” *Cahiers pour l’Analyse*, 10, “La Formalisation” (1969): 150–73. “Mark and Lack: On Zero,” trans. Ray Brassier and Robin Mackay, in *Concept and Form*, op. cit. Badiou’s article is dated January 1967, and thus it postdates Milner’s “The Point of the Signifier,” whose original incarnation was a paper delivered to Lacan’s seminar in June 1965. Thus, our claim that Milner’s article has a critical function vis-à-vis Badiou’s is a heuristic, if not a speculative proposition. The point of what follows is simply to accentuate the differences between Milner and Badiou with regard to their engagement with Lacanian analysis and to emphasize the roots of these differences in their contributions to the *Cahiers pour l’Analyse*. Page references for “La Suture” and “Marque et manque” refer to the French edition, reproduced online.

subtending all discourse, including that of mathematical logic. Miller's argument was that Frege's grounding of the whole number line was based on the suturing of a primordial lack, a suturing that took place when the category of "that which is not identical to itself" received the concept zero, demarcating a singular class with no members. With this nomination, that which would have been the ruin of scientific truth, i.e. the existence of entities which are not self-identical, is covered over, sutured, given a fixed concept.³⁶ Via the successor function, Frege then enumerates the whole number line. The singularity of the concept zero gives us in turn the concept 1, the two concepts together, 1 and 0, give us 2, *ad infinitum*.³⁷ Miller's point is that the number line only holds due to the suturing over of a primordial lack which, if allowed to surge forth, would result in the annulment of scientific "truth" as such, much as "non-being" would have done to Plato's discursive production of the genera of being in the *Sophist*. Miller's inspiration here is the Lacan of "Science and Truth," for whom science is predicated on a lack of truth about its own truth, which is to say, a lack of awareness of the fact that it is predicated on lack.³⁸

In Miller's view, the basic suturing mechanism is the logic of the signifier and is constitutive of the subject as such. The subject emerges in a signifying chain via the suture of primordial lack. More pointedly, the subject *is* this suturing mechanism because it is only the differential movement that results from an untenable non-identity that allows for the signifying chain to emerge, and this regardless of whether the chain in question is the number line or spoken or written language. In all instances, the chain has the suture of lack at its source.

For Badiou, this model is manifestly unacceptable for scientific discourse. In "Mark and Lack," Badiou attempts to show, via an exquisitely technical engagement with Kurt Gödel's incompleteness theorems, that the constitutive undecidability of mathematics' foundations does not lend support to Miller's thesis, but is in fact the ruin of it *a propos* of science. Against Millerian suture, Badiou insists on the operation of foreclosure. Where for Miller a suture is arguably what accomplishes a foreclosure—once sutured to the chain of its discourse, any access for the subject beyond the Imaginary is foreclosed—for Badiou it is precisely the foreclosure of non-identity at the outset that prevents scientific discourse's saturation. The rejection of non-identity—or undecidability—that serves as the axiomatic basis of mathematical writing means precisely that all the "marks" of that writing are in fact self-identical. In other words, what *x* means in one instance in a given formalization is the same as what it means elsewhere.³⁹ The mark is self-identical, which, to be clear, is not a claim about the mark's putative referent, hardly a concern for Badiou. It is precisely because scientific discourse only relates to itself that the

36. Miller, "La Suture," 40-7.

37. Gottlob Frege, *The Foundations of Arithmetic* (1884), trans. J.L. Austin (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1980).

38. Jacques Lacan, "Science and Truth," in Idem. *Écrits* (1966), trans. Bruce Fink, in collaboration with H  lo  se Fink and Russell Grigg (New York: W.W. Norton, 2006) 726-45.

39. Badiou, "Marque et manque," 156.

non-substitutable for itself is not permitted within this discourse, “foreclosed without appeal or mark.”⁴⁰ Thus there is no mark of lack in scientific discourse; rather, there is a lack of mark for that which is non-identical to itself. For Badiou, the point holds: 0 means the same thing everywhere it appears; wholly unambiguous within scientific writing, indifferent to a putative referent, it is effectively self-identical.

Miller will insist elsewhere that the lack of a lack is also a lack, and hence science does not escape its dalliance with ideology.⁴¹ François Regnault will suggest that the One of scientificity is precisely the lack of the lack of the lack.⁴² Lacking the will to pursue this further, we can nevertheless see that the Miller/Badiou differend concerning suture and foreclosure is what provides the space for Milner’s novel contribution to the *Cahiers*. For the stakes of Miller and Badiou’s dispute become clear when we consider it in terms of the Lacanian schematic of the Real, the Symbolic and the Imaginary. For Miller, the Real *qua* lack is sutured over in signification, itself the domain of the Symbolic. The unary trait of the Fregean 0 establishes the symbolic chain, grounded in real lack. The effect of this grounding however is that the subject remains constitutively blind to the operation, in effect stuck in the domain of imaginary *méconnaissance*. Ideology, the expansive Althusserian correlate of the Lacanian Imaginary, is what remains, the essential stuff of the experience of a subject carried forth by the signifying chain.

For Badiou, by contrast, there is strictly speaking “no subject of science.” He writes: “Foreclosure, but of nothing, science may be called the psychosis of no subject, and hence of all: congenitally universal, shared delirium, one has only to maintain oneself within it in order to be no-one, anonymously dispersed in the hierarchy of orders. Science is the Outside without a blind spot.”⁴³ What we have here is a strange twist on Lacanian psychosis, which is conceived in the third seminar as the foreclosure of the paternal signifier, and consequently of entry into the Symbolic, and which results in a kind of condemnation to the Imaginary domain of pure unregulated semblance and dissimulation.⁴⁴ But since for Badiou what is foreclosed is properly speaking nothing—rather than the *mark* of that nothing in the paternal signifier—there is no “subject” to speak of, and the psychosis in question is a psychosis of the Symbolic, indifferent to the Imaginary, and cutting like a razor through the “pure space” of an Outside without blind-spot, that is, without the Real of the impasse, since the impasse was foreclosed at science’s source.

40. Badiou, “Marque et manque,” 157.

41. Jacques-Alain Miller, “Action de la structure,” *Cahiers pour l’Analyse*, 9, “Généalogie des sciences,” (1968): 102. “Action of the Structure,” trans. Christian Kerslake, with Peter Hallward and Knox Peden, in *Concept and Form*.

42. François Regnault, “Dialectique d’épistémologies,” *Cahiers pour l’Analyse*, 9, “Généalogie des sciences,” (1968): 59. “Dialectic of Epistemologies,” trans. Knox Peden, in *Concept and Form*.

43. Badiou, “Marque et manque,” 161-2.

44. Cf. Jacques Lacan, *The Psychoses, 1955-1956: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book III*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Russell Grigg (New York: W.W. Norton, 1993).

To formalize this ourselves, with Miller we have a suture that rejects the Real in the establishment of the Symbolic thereby condemning the subject to the Imaginary in a foundational gesture. With Badiou, we have a foreclosure of the Real at the outset that establishes the Symbolic of science and results in the wholesale excision of the Imaginary. The key point here is what Miller and Badiou have in common: both ground their theoretical frameworks in isolated mechanisms—suture and foreclosure—that establish the purity and unimpeachable quality of two domains: pure Imaginary, i.e. the reign of pure semblance, predicated on a Symbolic rejection of the Real, for Miller, and, for Badiou, pure Symbolic, i.e. the reign of the pure signifier, predicated on a Real rejection—the cut that is foreclosure—of the Imaginary. When we return then to Milner’s “Point of the Signifier” we see what is novel about its position; against an isolated singular mechanism, Milner insists upon vacillation and repetition. In other words, at no point in the “logic of the signifier” enumerated via Plato’s *Sophist* is there a foundational mechanism that *holds*. Through the mere continuous existence of that which is marked by the proper name, and thus predicated in the Imaginary, all three rings of the Real, Symbolic, and Imaginary are engaged in the vacillating errancy of non-being. To be sure, Milner’s pedagogical point is to show how Plato ultimately rejects the sophist—naming him, and then denying his status as term—in order to preserve truth with a naming and consequent rejection of non-being. But this is more than a lesson on Plato, and it is clear that Milner thinks Plato’s own rejection does not hold, precisely because of the manifest persistence of the proper name, the sophist’s name, whose periodic resurgence cannot be attenuated without violence.

That the relation of being to non-being should be thought in terms of the relation of the Symbolic to the Real is the Lacanian crux of Milner’s reading. But the key point to be extracted here is that this relation is *permanent*—summoning and annulment are coextensive and symmetrical—and that it must take place somewhere. Where it takes place is precisely the Imaginary, which cannot be excised because to excise it would precisely annul the relation between the Symbolic and the Real, just as the annulment of the Symbolic results in psychosis and the annulment of the Real is equivalent to death.

Semblance against Synonymy: Theory of the Subject and *Les Noms indistincts*

The abstraction of these arguments in the *Cahiers* acquires further purchase in the key works of what might be described as Badiou’s and Milner’s “middle period.” Indeed, Badiou’s *Theory of the Subject* and Milner’s *Noms indistincts* are books which become illuminated when they are read in light of each other. The common denominator is that both are first attempts at a major theoretical reflection on the events of May ’68 and the sequence that followed. While neither work is reducible to theses prefigured in the *Cahiers*—there is a dialectical component to *Theory of the Subject* that is lacking in “Mark and Lack”—there is nevertheless a significant line

of continuity that merits consideration, and that concerns, precisely, the status of the Imaginary.

The argumentation of *Theory of the Subject* is remarkably complex and there's no way to do any real justice to it here. But we can highlight some passages which show how a desire to bypass, if not excise, the Imaginary as quickly as possible is essential to Badiou's project therein. Badiou writes: "In spite of its legend, there is nothing more structural and, in the last instance, nothing more impoverished than the imaginary."⁴⁵ In his own fourfold of anxiety, courage, superego and justice, Badiou locates the Imaginary in the "diagonals" that connect justice and anxiety via an experience of skepticism, and courage and superego via an affective dogmatism. Badiou's graph is apt in that he describes the Imaginary as "what saturates the static of the subject,"⁴⁶ accounting for morality, the opposite of ethics. "Alas," he concedes, "we are all extremely moral. Nobody can escape saturation."⁴⁷ In his fourfold square, the Imaginary is thus what literally fills in the square, saturating it. The diagonal movement is, in its very graphic manifestation, a "traversing of the fantasy," a movement *through* the Imaginary. But as noted, it is clear that Badiou views this traversal as an unfortunate necessity that we would bypass if—alas—we could.

What's interesting is how this traversal is itself a key component of *torsion*, the central concept of Badiou's Lacanian alternative to Hegelian dialectics. Badiou describes the Imaginary as "the historical key to all totality and similitude,"⁴⁸ two clearly derided terms in Badiou's work. Against a dialectic of coalescence in which totality is restored, Badiou seeks to develop a dialectic of torsion, a twisting, inverted movement which accomplishes a destruction of the old that makes possible the genuinely new rather than a mere restoration of totality. A topological conception of space—evocative of the "pure space" of "Mark and Lack"—is essential to Badiou's argument. Indeed, torsion occurs when the algebra of the Symbolic, i.e. the pure signifier, predicated on lack, cedes to the topology of the Real, i.e. the pure space, predicated on destruction.⁴⁹ So the paradox here is that this "torsion" necessarily traverses the Imaginary, as the mediate, saturated space between the Symbolic and the Real, and yet Badiou wants to dispense with this "impoverished" category as quickly as possible. Its essential and structural role, which Badiou nonetheless admits as "necessary,"⁵⁰ is at once the *medium* of the torsion that Badiou sees as the operator for historical "progress" and what flummoxes that torsion through a vacillation between a crippling anxiety before justice and an excessive dogmatism of courage. This errant vacillation is evocatively captured in Badiou's description

45. Badiou, *Theory of the Subject*, 301.

46. Badiou, *Theory of the Subject*, 297.

47. Badiou, *Theory of the Subject*, 299.

48. Badiou, *Theory of the Subject*, 245.

49. Badiou, *Theory of the Subject*, 125–31.

50. Badiou, *Theory of the Subject*, 301.

of anxiety as a question without an answer, and courage as an answer without a question.⁵¹

As is well-known, courage remains a keyword of Badiou's effort. A recent editorial for *Le Monde* was titled precisely "Le Courage du présent,"⁵² in which we should read Badiou's response to Milner's recently published book on the legacy of May '68, *L'Arrogance du présent*. This commitment to courage first developed in *Theory of the Subject* has theoretical sources in "Mark and Lack," in that an answer without a question might be read as a metaphorical translation of the operation of foreclosure described in this article. "Without a question" means "without a (big) Other" to interrogate and who frustrates us with its silence, giving rise to anxiety; the foreclosure that inaugurates scientific discourse is the foreclosure of a specific "question" that science would seek to answer. To be sure, Badiou's own movement from the "destruction" of *Theory of the Subject* to the "subtraction" of *Being and Event* is intimately tied to Badiou's notion of a forcing of the unnameable as the source of terror and political evil. This idea is prefigured in *Theory of the Subject*, however, in Badiou's nomination of an excessive dogmatism of courage—one that attenuates a subjective process of justice in favor of a dogmatic superego of Law⁵³—as a source of political disaster. But what is it that tempers this excessive dogmatism if it is not the countervailing diagonal of anxious skepticism—the question without an answer, i.e. the conviction that there is something that cannot be univocally named? It seems that there is a tacit acknowledgement all throughout Badiou's work of the pivotal role of the Imaginary, an acknowledgement which consistently undermines or at least qualifies Badiou's persistent effort to bypass the medium of "meaning" or *sens* in favor of a philosophy that is committed to the formal proliferation of truths grounded in the proximity of the Real and the Symbolic, or to invoke Lacan's gloss on Hegel, essential for Badiou, of "the fundamental identity of the particular and the universal."⁵⁴

Just as Milner's "Point of the Signifier" functions within the *Cahiers pour l'Analyse* as a crucial corrective to "Mark and Lack," insisting upon the permanent vacillation across the Imaginary, traversing the fantasy *ad infinitum*, against the singular mechanisms of suture and foreclosure, so too does *Noms indistincts* qualify the claims of *Theory of the Subject* in its insistence on the necessary and ultimately salutary role of the Imaginary. *Noms indistincts* is marked by a fundamental irony that one hopes was not lost on its author. This is a book whose central thesis is that

51. Badiou, *Theory of the Subject*, 292.

52. *Le Monde*, 13 February 2010. Available online, in a translation by Alberto Toscano, at *Infinite Thought*: http://infinitethought.cinestatic.com/index.php/site/index/badiou_op_ed_the_courage_of_the_present/. Also forthcoming in the edited collection, Alain Badiou, *Political Writings*, eds. Nina Power and Alberto Toscano (New York: Columbia University Press, forthcoming). See also Johnston, "The Right Left."

53. Badiou, *Theory of the Subject*, 303.

54. Badiou, *Theory of the Subject*, 132. See Lacan, "The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis," in *Écrits*, 242.

“there is no metalanguage,” but that then proceeds to make this point through a thoroughgoing application of Lacan’s tripartite register to a variety of discourses.⁵⁵ Complicating matters is that this book is remarkably laconic and elliptical, proceeding at a level of abstraction that resists easy translation or summary. Beginning with a presentation of the Real, Symbolic, Imaginary triumvirate,⁵⁶ Milner establishes the Real as the site of the factic—the *il y a*—and consequently as the site of the indistinct. The Symbolic, as the domain of writing and inscription, is by contrast what allows for distinction; its inaugural statement is *il y a de la langue*. This step is evocative of Jacques-Alain Miller’s reading of Frege: in the beginning, “there is,” but the Symbolic is engaged in the mere cognition or saying of this “there is.” In this gesture, distinction is immediately inscribed in the indistinct of the Real. Finally, there is a third gesture: *il y a du semblable*. There is some similarity. This is the site of the Imaginary, which Milner qualifies further as the site of *relation* and above all the site of connection, or linkage, *le lien*. As the site of semblance the Imaginary is also the mechanism of *rassemblement*, or gathering.⁵⁷ If the Symbolic introduces cuts, i.e. distinctions, the Imaginary is what *ties* these cuts to one another. Without the Imaginary, you just have discrete cuts and properly speaking no discourse at all, nothing that ties letters, much less words, from one to another. But since the mechanism for establishing links is precisely semblance, there will be *no* discourse that is not *du semblant*.⁵⁸

For Milner the linguist, the crucial effect of *lalangue*—the Real foundation of language named as such in the Symbolic—is homonymy.⁵⁹ Everything in *lalangue* is indistinct, so everything “sounds the same.” But over the course of *Noms indistincts* Milner descends from abstraction and shows how certain “names” operate within the R,S,I triumvirate, and how we can track the homonymy of an indistinct name through the knotted R,S,I sequence. One of his key examples is “freedom”

55. See Maurice Tournier and Annie Geffroy, “Compte-rendu de Jean-Claude Milner, *Les Noms indistincts*,” *Mots*, 11:1 (1985): 208-13.

56. Milner, *Noms indistincts*, 9-17.

57. Milner, *Noms indistincts*, 97.

58. See Tracy McNulty’s remarks *a propos* of Freud’s *Moses and Monotheism* in her critique of Badiou’s negligence of the advent of Law as itself an event: “In Lacanian terms, one could say that the key innovation of the Mosaic tradition is the invention of the symbolic as distinct either from the real (the exceptional jouissance of the primal father) or from the imaginary (the father imago that persists as an ideal ego even after his murder, but also the norms and prohibitions that take the father’s place in the logic of the fraternal pact).” McNulty, 2233. Though McNulty’s point is to emphasize the “invention” of the Symbolic, it is the function of the Imaginary, described as such in her distinction, that is close to what Milner has in mind here. *After* the Symbolic injunction has been made, establishing a cut in the Real, the Imaginary “persists” as the “norms and prohibitions” in play in the “fraternal pact.” In other words, the Imaginary is what binds the group together, making relation among its members possible—a relation that can, to be sure, be alternately violent or accommodating.

59. Milner, *Noms indistincts*, 36-47. See Milner, *L’Amour de la langue*, 90-102.

(“*liberté*”).⁶⁰ At the level of the Imaginary, “*liberté*” is a question of the freedom to establish links based on “properties,” i.e. perceptions of semblance. Basically it means the freedom to enter into a relation; its effect is one of collection. At the level of the Symbolic, there is what Milner qualifies as a kind of “transcendental freedom,” which is very close to the freedom of the Imaginary, in that it also establishes a link. And yet its mechanism is the opposite. Whereas the Imaginary establishes a link through similar properties, the Symbolic forges a linked collection through an indifference to properties, operating by a “denegation of all real heterogeneity.”⁶¹ Finally, the meaning of the term at the level of the Real is the true inverse of the two others: rather than establishing links, forging collections, “real” freedom results in pure dispersal, a destruction of limits. Milner writes: “Its emergence, when subjects make themselves agents of it, can only be horrifying for whoever asks, more than anything else, for survival and connection—which is to say, for whoever asks [period].”⁶² In other words, the response is terror for whoever insists on the rights of the Imaginary, and this notwithstanding the essentially equivocal nature of the links established therein.

From here Milner names what he sees as the paradox, or indeed “the secret of all modern politics: to make a social link out of that which disperses all links.”⁶³ Which is to say: to insist on “real” liberty—in both the prosaic and the Lacanian sense—as the foundation for politics, i.e. the “act of making of social link,” is a move which cannot but bypass the Imaginary—denying semblance since the move takes its authority from the indistinction of the Real—in the Symbolic establishment of the transcendental One of liberty. Milner cites the then-current events in Cambodia as evidence of this “terror,” this exemplary formulation of “modern politics” that attempts to forge a link via the authorization of that which disperses all links.⁶⁴ The error, then, is a confusion of the senses of the term “freedom,” an attempt to base its Symbolic meaning in its Real meaning. Milner’s critical presentation of “the political vision of the world” endemic to his generation is now further clarified through his formal argument for the relation between homonymy and synonymy, or the equivocal and the univocal. “The political vision of the world” shared by ex-68ers in the early 1970s was tantamount to a belief in the efficacy of politics as metalanguage.⁶⁵ Everything is political in the political vision of the world. In this attempt to establish a metalanguage, homonymy and equivocity, that is to say, the very real fact that words have different meanings and functions in the different rings of the R,S,I relation, is forsaken for an insistence upon synonymy and univocity.

60. Milner, *Noms indistincts*, 87-96.

61. Milner, *Noms indistincts*, 89.

62. Milner, *Noms indistincts*, “Son émergence, lorsque des sujets s’en font les agents, ne peut qu’être horrifiante pour qui, par-dessus tout, demande la survie et le lien—c’est-à-dire pour qui demande.”

63. Milner, *Noms indistincts*, 90.

64. Milner, *Noms indistincts*, 90.

65. Milner, *Noms indistincts*, 75-86.

In a nutshell, the ethical core of this book is Milner's insistence on the equivocity of language, countenanced in the last instance by the Real of *lalangue*, and the necessity of maintaining this equivocity against univocity at all costs. Homonyms are not to be mistaken for synonyms, which means the sense or manifestation of a name in one discursive tier cannot be used to authorize its implementation in another. The attempt to force univocity and synonymy is not a collapse *into* the Imaginary; it is the collapse *of* the Imaginary—the remainder is horror, dispersal, end of all semblance, and, Milner insists upon this, the end of all capacity for connection (*liaison*), however stupid (*bête*) its operative principle may be.⁶⁶

What's powerful about Milner's argument here is that he accepts the erroneous nature of the Imaginary—it is unfounded, based on pure semblance of properties rather than anything essential or scientific—and yet insists *all the same* that it functions as a necessary stopgap to the terror that results from the Real and the Symbolic's complicity. If the Symbolic is the domain of science—the indifferent mechanism of a science of the *quelconque*—and the Real is the domain of truth—that which stymies the extension of the *quelconque* even as it serves as its condition—the Imaginary is precisely what *mediates* the two. Or to put it in Lacan's language of the twentieth seminar—the *tout* of the Symbolic and the *pastout* of the Real relate precisely because "there is no sexual relationship." The terrain of this frustrated relation, riven with anxiety because it is grounded in the impossibility of the relation, is nothing less than the Imaginary itself. As such, its status is absolutely essential and cannot be bypassed or excised; it is the medium of engagement, and the site of all practice since it is what makes the forging of links possible. To be sure, the concept "imaginary" seems doomed to retain a negative connotation, not to mention its correlate "ideology." But if Milner seems heterodox in this regard, it should be recalled that Althusser's expansive concept of ideology has been described as "the air we breathe,"⁶⁷ a metaphor whose logical consequence suggests that without it we are dead. Likewise, in *The Logic of Sense*, Deleuze makes reference to the "rarefied air" of the "perverse world" without others, and thus without semblance, described as "a strange Spinozism from which 'oxygen' is lacking," the implication again being that one cannot breathe in this universe, much less survive.⁶⁸

So in contrast to Badiou, who wants to traverse the fantasy as quickly as possible, to establish the torsional conversion from the Symbolic to the Real, Milner insists on the site of the Imaginary itself as what mitigates the torsion. It is at once its condition and its obstacle. We can translate the terms of *Noms indistincts* into the *tout/pastout* organon of Milner's recent work as follows. The effort to make Real freedom the foundation for Symbolic freedom is tantamount to attempting to make the *pastout* the foundation of the *tout*. This in turn is tantamount to trying to make the

66. Milner, *Noms indistincts*, 99; 126-7.

67. For example, Raman Seldan, *Practicing Theory and Reading Literature: An Introduction*, (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1989) 153.

68. Gilles Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, ed. Constantin V. Boundas, trans. Mark Lester with Charles Stivale (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990) 320.

social form of democracy—based on dispersal and unlimited extension—the foundation for the *political* form of democracy—based on a singular cut that establishes a collection in a sole gesture. The problem with this operation is that, by bypassing the Imaginary in the name of a foundational instance, it makes the relation between the social and the political impossible; it forecloses it, it reduces one to the other. This excision of the relation is, in the context of Milner's elliptical frame, a manifestation of the desire to transcend, deny, or simply to do without sexual difference, which is to say *the* difference—the irreconcilability of the *tout* and the *pastout*—that makes relation as such *possible*.

Conclusion: In Defense of Difficulty

In the opening of *In Defense of Lost Causes*, Žižek presents the Badiou/Milner differend over the Jewish question and unequivocally endorses the former's line. Žižek glosses the Milner position as follows: "The name 'Jews' stands for the most basic *fidelity* to what one is."⁶⁹ Žižek opposes this position to Badiou's, in which the "One" must emerge in an emancipatory sequence, not already existing as a preestablished identity that one could be faithful to. He then remarks, the "irony is that in the history of anti-Semitism Jews stand for both of these poles,"⁷⁰ i.e. the Badiou pole and the Milner pole; the familiar list of names follows as a matter of course: Spinoza, Marx, Freud, to which we could add Paul and Einstein. And yet, this gloss of "fidelity to what one is," as if this is a preexistent one, misses the fundamental point of Milner's entire argument; it's not a question of fidelity to what *one* is, as if what is extant and anterior is an *identity*, a "One" of the singular mark. What one is faithful to is a fundamental difference, in fact *the* fundamental difference expressed in the aphorism: "il n'y a pas de rapport sexuel." And the reason there is no sexual relationship is precisely because the *tout* and the *pastout* exist in a profound non-relation, forging a permanent tension that cannot be overcome except in psychosis or death.

Where this has a critical bearing on the Badiou and Žižek position concerning the emergence of the One in an emancipatory sequence is in Milner's lack of concern for the One's putative site. Milner agrees with Badiou that "the One is not"⁷¹ in an ontological or anterior sense—but he is even more radical in his insistence that "the One *should* not." Its emergence in a sequence is the foreclosure of vacillation, the end of anxiety, the end of tension, and as such the end of relation. In terms of politics, it is the end of an operative tension between the social and the political, the collapse of homonymy into synonymy. At the end of *Le Juif de savoir* Milner proposes a "universalisme difficile" that would be opposed to the "universalisme

69. Slavoj Žižek, *In Defense of Lost Causes* (London: Verso, 2008) 5. Italics in original.

70. Žižek, *In Defense of Lost Causes*. See also Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006) 253-9.

71. Badiou, *Being and Event*, trans. Oliver Feltham (London: Continuum, 2005) 23-48.

facile” on offer from Badiou.⁷² The content of a “universalisme facile” is the establishment of a synonymy between the *quelconque* and the universal. In this, Milner remains consistent with his arguments from thirty years ago. The *quelconque* is the domain of the Symbolic, of science and knowledge: a unifying singularity predicated on an indifference to the qualitative distinction of properties. The “universalisme facile” that seeks to synonymize the *quelconque* with the universal of the Real, the dispersed base, accomplishes this by eliminating mediation and anxiety. In this regard, Milner produces a pointed critique in *Le Juif de savoir* of Badiou’s theses on St. Paul.⁷³ Paul’s universalism is grounded in the mediation of Christ, a mediation which is paradoxically the excision of mediation as such, since it eliminates the anxiety of a vacillating skepticism at the level of imaginary *méconnaissance*.

Here Milner remains true to his own prohibition on forcing synonymy. But it is also precisely here that we should not let Milner completely off the hook. Though Žižek errs in his suggestion that Milner insists upon “a fidelity to what one is,” he is right to emphasize the flaw in Milner’s tendency to univocally identify the Jew with Israel. On its own this is a somewhat banal point—it is obvious that there is no strict synonymy between the Jew and the Israeli—but when we think of it in terms of Milner’s *own rubric* it is a devastating betrayal of his own most profound insights. In effect, the Jew plays a wholly formal and conceptual role in Milner’s recent work. Indeed, the further irony of Žižek’s claim that Milner doesn’t understand that both poles of the Badiou/Milner differend exist in Jewish history is that Žižek misses an opportunity to perform one of his infamous dialectical reversals by recognizing that the function of the Jew in Milner’s rubric as the *name* of sexual difference means precisely that the concept is in fact not singular at all, but indeed *universally applicable*, in the “difficult” sense that it is just as suitable for Palestinians or Haitians or whomever as it would be for Israelis. And perhaps we should mobilize the logical consequences of Milner’s project against Milner’s own “desire” to forge a synonymy, where there is not even a homonymy, between the Jew and Israel. The “universalisme difficile” that Milner calls for in *Le Juif de savoir* is one that paradoxically posits that the predication necessary for the establishment of a discrete political entity, be it a state, party, or “movement,” cannot be maintained in the Symbolic or the Real, but that this is the precise source of this predication’s value. The equivocation inherent in the Imaginary is, to be sure, what allows it to function as a site of aggression and conflict; but it is also its foundation in semblance that allows it to serve as the operative medium of transformation and flexibility. What is most problematic, then, is the countervailing tendency in Milner’s recent work to sap the link between the Jew and Israel of its equivocality, forsaking the rights of the Imaginary in its capacity for mediation and relation in the name of the rights of the Imaginary in an unequivocal sense,

72. Milner, *Le Juif de savoir*, 207–22.

73. Milner, *Le Juif de savoir*, 103–14. See Hammerschlag’s critique of Badiou along similar lines, 261–7.

the univocality of a state's name. In this regard, it seems that the strongest position from which to critically engage with Milner's recent arguments comes to us not from Žižek, Badiou, or Rancière, but from Jean-Claude Milner himself.⁷⁴

74. After providing a compact distillation of the book's argument, Milner ends the note on the back cover of the 2007 edition of *Noms indistincts* with the following remark: "This is what I concluded in 1983. After a quarter of a century, everything has changed except the essential. A sole, but decisive, event: real names sprang forth there where I wasn't expecting them. The doctrine that I proposed before is not compromised, but confirmed. It's through such surprises that the real provides us with a glimpse of its existence." Likewise, in *Le Juif de savoir*, he writes, "le nom juif est réel," and that at present it functions as a reminder of the "imaginary" quality of any belief in a "plus-de-savoir" that might be produced in the practices of the modern sciences (181). The resurgent function of the name "Jew"—as precisely resurging from the Real to trouble the dictates of the Symbolic and the comforts of the Imaginary—is also integral to one of the most compelling analyses in *L'Arrogance du présent*, which concerns the repression of this "name," apart from slogan-eering, in the rhetoric of Resistance and the Second World War mobilized by the Gauche prolétarienne (169-91). And yet, by univocally aligning the name "Jew" with the Real in his recent work, Milner in fact compromises the defense of equivocity that was the dominant theme of *Noms indistincts*, and this notwithstanding the fact that this volume did make a case for the "real" function of certain names in discrete instances. Now that the name "Jew" has "sprung forth in the real" for Milner, one hopes that in future work he will track its renewed movement through the other terms of the Lacanian register so that its critical function as an exemplar of the equivocal might be, however figuratively, restored.