

ED PLUTH

AN ADVENTURE IN THE ORDER OF THINGS:

Jean-Claude Milner on language and Lacan's Incomplete Materialism

Milner on the silent seminars

In *L'Œuvre claire*, Jean-Claude Milner claims that Lacan arrives at a theoretical impasse during his last years of teaching, one that makes his entire project comparable “to the great materialist works,” such as those by Lucretius and Marx—projects that, like Lacan’s, Milner thinks are incomplete or failed.¹ The problem is found in Lacan’s notorious silent seminars, during which the study and manipulation of Borromean knots seemed to be tasked with the work of transmitting psychoanalytic theory. Milner takes the use of these knots to mean that Lacan had concluded that showing theory was better than transmitting it through speech, and was also superior to the transmission of it via the mathemes Lacan had been using for years. Milner argues:

What is shown in silence [psychoanalytic theory, via the Borromean knots] is that without which the transmission of psychoanalysis would not be able to be accomplished integrally. How can we avoid a bit of inductive reasoning here? If the matheme is abolished then one can no longer say, one can only show: well, after Seminar XX, Lacan progressively arrives at doing nothing other than showing; it is therefore the case that the matheme had been abolished. (*L'Œuvre claire* 167)

Milner’s argument in this paragraph sounds to me more like an example of *deductive* reasoning. And if it is, it turns out to be a formally invalid argument, committing the fallacy of “affirming the consequent” (taking the form, “If P then Q; Q; Therefore P”). Perhaps Milner only means to say that from the fact that Lacan “shows” psychoanalytic theory via the Borromean knots, it can be inferred that he came to negative conclusions about the matheme, and language itself, as ways

1. Jean-Claude Milner, *L'Œuvre claire: Lacan, la science, la philosophie* (Paris: Seuil, 1995) 171. Further references in the text as *L'Œuvre claire*.

of transmitting theory. This certainly seems to be what Milner is arguing, and put this way, the problem with the argument is also easier to see. What is questionable, however, is that Lacan ever thought one could or should only *show* theory. This, the basis of Milner's reasoning, is what I will be calling into question in this paper.

In Milner's discussion of Lacan, there are echoes of the famous concluding thesis from Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*—"whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent."² This is not accidental; reflections on the relation between Lacan and Wittgenstein make up an important part of Milner's considerations. Wittgenstein's thesis obviously upholds a strong antinomy between speaking and showing. As Milner frames it: "there is what is said and there is what is not said; between the two, the frontier is real and impassable. What is not said shows itself and it is necessary to be silent about it" (*L'Œuvre claire* 168). For most of his career, Milner points out, Lacan considered the problem posed by this thesis to be "a real one and, simultaneously, one that could be handled; and that it did not lead to the duty to be silent" (168). This is in large part because silence was held by Lacan to be "at the level of the real, impossible" anyway (169).

What Milner is pointing to here is an assertion upon which Lacan's work was for a long time based—that there is an unconscious, and that the actions of the unconscious require us to posit something like a thinking or a speaking other than that posited by the classical philosophical subject. For much of Lacan's career, an account of the unconscious—its structures, its genesis—was very important for the teaching of psychoanalysis. Milner's claim, that Lacan's materialist project is ultimately incomplete, is driven by what he takes to be a modification in the status of the unconscious: in the period of the silent seminars, the unconscious is no longer considered to be a thinking at all, really. And if this is the case, its structure can at best be shown, not spoken, and not even mathematized.

One of the great merits of Milner's reading of Lacan is not only the fact that he places Lacan within the materialist tradition in philosophy, but that, by bringing Lacan into relation to Wittgenstein, he gets us to pay attention to a topic that any materialist project now should attempt to clarify: the relation between thinking and being. It is perhaps obvious why materialisms avoid this topic, since it seems to be the very stuff of idealism. A common point shared by most contemporary materialisms is their degradation of the status of thinking, which is usually considered to be epiphenomenal and non-real, reducible to and constituted by brain activity. Why bother accounting for its status? Therefore, many contemporary philosophical materialisms do not at all require that thinking, or anything like it, be considered a part of the real. The real, for these materialisms, can well be considered silent, and its silence is an unproblematic one—all the more reason why the "showing" of the real would be better than any possible "speaking" about it, which will always be off the mark. The real's silence does not cause any difficulties for the sciences that

2. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. C. G. Ogden <http://www.uweb.ucsb.edu/~luke_manning/tractatus/tractatus-jsnav.html> [accessed 17 July, 2010].

study it, since these sciences circumvent ordinary human language and linguistic meaning in the first place, precisely by relying on a mathematization of nature. It is not ordinary human language that hits the real at all, but a more formalized “language” that does so.

None of this stops natural scientists from trying to convey in ordinary language something about their discoveries sometimes but we know that, when they do this, their writing approximates the status of poetry, as Merleau-Ponty pointed out, and that such written texts are not really the conveyors of scientific knowledge anyway. Such knowledge is in the formulas, the math (if it can be said to “be” anywhere), and not in the ordinary language descriptions of those formulas, which are always metaphorical. Whatever is going on at the atomic or sub-atomic constitutive level of nature defies our ability to think, imagine, or intuit. Furthermore, our ability to manipulate the constitutive level of nature does not require that we *think* anything particularly clearly about it either. It simply requires a technical know-how, based on proper formalizations; not on the creation of correct linguistic expressions about it, and not on having proper intuitions about it either. The sciences show us a way, then, in which knowledge is transmitted through mathemes, and what is said about them is basically superfluous. According to Milner’s reading, Lacan embraces the Borromean knots because they are “saying” even less about the real than the mathemes do, and are therefore respecting even more ably what is supposed to be an inviolable barrier between the shown and the spoken. For that reason, Lacan’s is a failed or unachieved materialism: in fact, less a materialism than a mysticism.

Quentin Meillassoux’s materialist return to Parmenides

A discussion of Quentin Meillassoux’s project is relevant here, because it addresses the tendency of contemporary materialist projects to, if not embrace, then at least enable, mysticism—precisely by trying to remedy materialism’s shortcomings when it comes to the status of thinking.³ Meillassoux’s development of a position that returns to the “Parmenidean” idea of a real union of thinking and being (and not Parmenides’ monism) is worth considering as a possible instance of what a successful, achieved materialism would be. Interestingly, he uses the mathematization of the real as a main point in his refutation of what he calls “correlationism”—about which more in a moment. Yet, as I suggest above, it would seem that the mathematization of nature goes very well with a continuation of the position Meillassoux wants to avoid. The question I will raise after considering Meillassoux’s alternative (he calls it “speculative” materialism) is: whatever happened to dialectical materialism? Not a dialectical materialism that posits dialectical relationships in nature, nor one that posits the importance of interactions among material beings for material beings, whatever they are, however they are conceived, but one that posits a dialectical relationship between thinking and being themselves. It is ultimately not

3. Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, trans. Ray Brassier (London: Continuum, 2008).

clear that Meillassoux's position has the merit of destroying the absolute barrier between what can only be shown and what can be said, which would constitute a vigorous refutation of the ineffable. This will lead us to reconsider Lacan's position, as well as Milner's description of it.

Quentin Meillassoux defines his main philosophical antagonist, correlationism, as "the idea according to which we only ever have access to the correlation between thinking and being, and never to either term considered apart from the other" (Meillassoux 5)—that is, we never have access to being as it really is, except through the medium of thought, which, precisely as a medium, distorts what it targets. One way to oppose correlationism would be with a naïve realism, which supposes that access to what is other than thought is possible and even relatively unproblematic—that the relation of being to thought can be immediate. Meillassoux, by contrast, wants to hang on to the idea that there is something problematic about this relation. Naïve realism, according to him, does not sufficiently appreciate the weirdness presented by our ability to make meaningful claims about, for example, what preceded the emergence of any conscious being whatsoever, as we do when we make meaningful statements about the nature of the universe before the existence of humanity.

Meillassoux claims that it is being's ability to be "mathematized" that gives us a way out of correlationism, and this also requires us to reconsider the Kantian turn in philosophy, whose essence can be described as follows: "*being and thinking must be thought as capable of being wholly other*"—as good a definition of what Meillassoux understands as correlationism as there is (Meillassoux 44). Yet a strong correlationism goes further than this, positing a strong separation of thinking from being, making thought into something radically other than being—not superior to it, not a cause of it, but typically more of a sub-being, a mere epiphenomenon, appearance, fiction, or illusion, as it would be for a Nietzschean as well as for an eliminative or reductionist materialist. In this case, thinking would have access only to what it produces, while being would continue on, independent of and indifferent to what is (rightly or wrongly—it hardly matters) thought about it.

This condition Meillassoux identifies as one of the most significant and pernicious errors committed by correlationism, for it is what, inadvertently, creates an opening for the mystical and the obscurantist. One of the most valuable insights of Meillassoux's work is that a common type of materialism in fact enables mysticism even when it may believe itself to be promoting the hard sciences. The point is that if it is held that thinking is cut off entirely from being, the existence of the divine in the real is as viable a hypothesis as any other. This sort of too-cautious materialism makes agnosticism the safest among philosophical options. What I want to show next is how Meillassoux's project, precisely in its most compelling gesture—its reconsideration of a kind of mathematical realism, its evocation of the Galilean mathematization of nature as a continued inspiration for thought—overlooks an opportunity to make a more vigorous materialist claim about the union of thinking and being.

Consider more closely the relationship between thinking and being that is asserted in Meillassoux's work. Being is said to be mathematizable, and so correlationism is wrong, because mathematics shows us how the "Parmenidean postulate" can be returned to: it shows us where "being and thinking are the same" (Meillassoux 44). Yet this does not mean that mathematics is, or is even part of, the really real. Mathematics is a thinking. It is through mathematics that being and thinking are supposed to be joined together. Yet this still amounts to an imbalanced union, because Meillassoux's way out of correlationism does not allow for anything like a "knowledge in the real"—an idea I will discuss via the notion of *lalangue* in the next section. It is doubtful that Meillassoux wants to say that being itself *knows* anything about mathematics. It would be erroneous to say that the real *knows* the laws of physics and chemistry. And there is also no need to posit a subject in the real who knows these laws. The formal languages we use for such laws are not at all etched into the heart of things either. Must it then be said that such formal expressions of laws "correlate" to the real? Yet this cannot be what Meillassoux wants to say!⁴

This leads me to conclude that the way in which Meillassoux articulates the relation of mathematics to thinking poses a problem for his speculative materialism. While he says of his work that it refutes correlationism by bringing thinking and being back into a union with each other (via mathematics), this relation turns out to be one-directional and therefore not as far from correlationism as it is possible to go. Let's agree that being is mathematizable. This still leaves being ultimately *unaffected* by its mathematization—and therefore, mathematics does not show us where there is an *interaction* and *interrelation*—not to mention union—of thinking and being. (If there is not even a strong interaction between thinking and being, it is hard to see how there could be a meaningful union . . . unless Meillassoux really meant to go all-out Parmenidean on us, by claiming that thinking *is* being, and vice versa: the monist direction, in other words. But I see no evidence for this in what I've read of him.) The hard sciences, and mathematics, can only take us from one kind of correlationism to another, it seems. What is needed, for a different sort of materialism, one of human practice, is a reconsideration of the status of the so-called "human" sciences.

A table from Alain Badiou's *Theory of the Subject* is very helpful for gaining clarity on the nature of this debate and where I wish to take it—toward a position that I would describe as some variant of dialectical materialism.⁵ Badiou has always understood his own work to be articulating such a position, and the figure he uses to illustrate it is that of a spiral: an arrow starts in the realm of being, crosses over into thinking, turns back to being, and continues to move on in this way. There is no circularity here, in the sense that there is no projected completion, no overarching purpose or goal that thinking and being are trying to attain—such as a point of ultimate coincidence, when the relation between thinking and being would be fully

4. Ray Brassier makes a similar point about Meillassoux's position in *Nihil Unbound: Enlightenment and Extinction* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007) 87-88.

5. Alain Badiou, *Theory of the Subject*, trans. Bruno Bosteels (London: Continuum, 2009) 117.

adequate, complete, attained, in a sort of ideal correlation. Nor is it the point of a dialectical materialism to claim that being and thinking are really one (à la Parmenides). Rather, what is desired is a theory in which the actual reciprocity and strong mutual influence between thinking and being, theory and practice, at least in some domains of human life, is accounted for; a theory in which there is no absolute barrier between thinking and being (and also not between saying and showing) that would require us to adopt silence as the most appropriate philosophical attitude (and therefore devaluing thought itself). As Georg Lukàcs put it in *History and Class Consciousness*, when contrasting dialectics to what he called metaphysics, “in all metaphysics the object remains untouched and unaltered so that thought remains contemplative and fails to become practical; while for the dialectical method the central problem is to change reality.”⁶ Obviously, the merely contemplative status that thinking must have in mathematics is one of the things that concerns me about Meillassoux’s attempt to refute correlationism. Much better, it seems to me, is to reconsider what a dialectical materialism can do.

In response to my points here, Meillassoux may be able to assert that mathematics does have effects on being too. The natural sciences have assisted, after all, in the creation of new material beings, as well as new types of beings, and have certainly given us an effective “know how” with the real. While this is certainly practical, and suggests that mathematics is something other than *merely* contemplative, it does not allow us to assert that any change *in the nature of being itself* has come from mathematics (or from any of the hard sciences). In fact, it is difficult to see how the hard sciences could offer us *any* examples of the kind asserted by a dialectical theory in which being and thinking would be mutually influencing each other (unless one adopts an undesirable “quantum mysticism”). And therefore it is difficult to see how the hard sciences can offer a model for how thinking and being are actually *unified*, along the lines of the Parmenidean thesis Meillassoux himself wishes to rehabilitate. It would seem that Meillassoux’s position is, by Lukàcs’ standard, metaphysical rather than dialectical, even though it does qualify as a philosophical materialism.

My study of Milner’s interpretation of the notion of *lalangue* in Lacanian theory in the next section will give us an example of what is desired: something like a dialectical materialism on the question of the relation between thinking and being. Yet *lalangue* also plays a key role in what Milner considers to be the impasse in Lacan’s materialism, because Milner ultimately concludes that what is going on in *lalangue* cannot be called a thinking at all. Thus, it functions as a “silent” real,

6. Georg Lukacs, *History and Class Consciousness*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1971) 3.

and the barrier between thinking and being is reinstated. This is the point I will question in my conclusion.

***Lalangue* and Saussure’s anagrams as an “adventure in the order of things”**

Lacan introduced the term *lalangue* in the 1970s to address what there is of the real in language—something like the very sound of a language, such as phonemes considered apart from the creation of sense. The phrase *lalangue* is itself written in a way that is supposed to get us to pay attention to the sound of language under or alongside its meaning, which is the very thing the term is about. Bruce Fink uses “llanguage” as an English translation for this, in which the graphically repeated, and in speech a bit elongated “l” gets us to hear the word differently, having basically the same effect—calling our attention to the thing the concept is supposed to designate.⁷

Lalangue, Milner argues, is not unstructured and without reason. It is structured and, according to Milner in *L’amour de la langue*,⁸ its structure marks the presence of a kind of “knowledge in the real.” This is what “dooms” language “to equivocality” (*L’amour* 22). The structure or “reason” intrinsic to *lalangue* can even be considered extra-linguistic since it involves things like resemblances among sounds, or, in writing, the physical arrangement of letters. It is “extra-linguistic,” therefore, on the condition that language is thought of along the lines of Saussurean linguistic structure. Milner writes that “homophonies, homosemies, palindromes, anagrams, tropes, and all the imaginable figures of association” are the effects of *lalangue*, and are due to nothing other than the materiality or physicality of languages, and not to that in languages which is involved in the creation of meanings—such as relations and differences among signs (*L’amour* 104). On Milner’s reading, *lalangue* is, therefore, also a term for what it is of language that escapes and exceeds formalization, and it therefore presents a challenge to the science of linguistics.

Saussure’s analyses of Saturnian verse—a type of Latin poetry whose nature still seems to puzzle scholars—provide Milner with an intriguing case study for this view of *lalangue* as a challenge to the science of linguistics. When first published in 1971, Saussure’s notes inspired many to wonder whether the father of structuralist linguistics had opened up a new discipline that questioned some of the basics of what was set up in his earlier and influential *Cours*.⁹ Saussure argued that these Latin verses contained anagrams of things like the names of gods or the individuals to whom the poems were devoted—anagrams of names that do not themselves

7. See Jacques Lacan, *On Feminine Sexuality: The Limits of Love and Knowledge: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book 20: Encore, 1972-1973*, edited by Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. with notes Bruce Fink (New York: W. W. Norton, 1998).

8. Jean-Claude Milner, *L’amour de la langue* (Paris: Seuil, 1978). Further references in the text as *L’amour*.

9. Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, ed. Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye, with Albert Riedlinger, trans. Roy Harris (La Salle, IL: Open Court Press, 1986).

necessarily appear in the verse as such. Although often referred to as anagrams, this turns out not to be the best name for what Saussure was discussing. Saussure himself suggested some alternative names, like homograms, since the “anagrams” in question do not involve a rearrangement of letters strictly speaking (as anagrams do) but of phonemes.

Finding the original or key name (the *mot-thème*, Saussure sometimes called it) for a given poem required a puzzling out of which phonemes were repeated from verse to verse, and which were left over—a sort of tangential code had to be developed for reading the poem. David Shephard described it well in a paper from 1982:

Firstly, each phonetic term in the verse might be repeated in pairs, in such a way that no unmatched sound was left over in a given line or passage (monophones). Secondly, the phonetic structures could involve more loosely-arranged sets of syllables or phonic groups which then ‘echo’ one another across the line or passage (diphones, triphones, polyphones). And thirdly, there was an independent, though related, phenomenon in which the groups of sounds seem to reproduce the syllables or sounds of a key-word (*mot-thème*) or of a name important in the context of the passage as a whole (*anagramme*).¹⁰

According to Roman Jakobson, in these notebooks Saussure was developing what could be called a “diachronic” linguistics, alongside the well-known “synchronic” linguistics proposed by the *Cours* (Shephard 523). The anagrams reveal an historical constant in language use that is distinct from the rules governing language as a synchronic structure: one now sees that the particular features of any language’s materiality provide the basis for some aspects of the style of that language’s use. This use would not depend on the structure of the language and the relations among signs in it, but rather on the nature of the physical phonemes—their sounds—their-selves. This is why Milner himself calls the anagram theory “maximally distinct” from the theory proposed by the structuralist Saussure of the *Cours* (*L’amour* 91). One particular phoneme rather than another appears where it does in a Saturnian verse due to its homophony with the phonemes of the “*mot-thème*,” or with other phonemes of the poem. The placement of sounds is not entirely arbitrary, but conditioned (although not entirely conditioned either). It is for this reason that Milner claims the anagram theory shows us where a theory of language can touch on the real, in opposition to what linguistics usually studies. And, making a point I will expand on in my conclusion (for it affects the status of Lacan’s allegedly incomplete materialism), it also shows us the conditions for the actions of the unconscious:

Simply, linguistics [as a structural science] has nothing to do with this real of homophony, a condition of the slip of the tongue and the pun. Linguistics sets it aside, consigning it to contingency. [A conclusion] to which the Saussurean sign easily leads: if it is contingent that such and such a phonic

10. David Shephard, “Saussure’s Vedic Anagrams,” *The Modern Language Review* 77. 3 (July 1982): 513-523. 514.

signifier is knotted to such and such a signified this will be *a fortiori* the case if two phonic signifiers knotted to different signifieds find themselves in resemblance. This would be an adventure in the order of things, which the order of signs would not be able to attain. (*L'Amour* 91-2)

Saussure's views on the arbitrariness of the signifier are well known: that a particular sound comes to be linked to a particular signified is not supposed to be motivated by any trait in the thing referred to, the signified, or the sound itself. So if the sound of two signifiers is identical, this would also be a merely contingent and accidental feature of the phonemes involved, with no bearing on the constitution of meanings or values in a language. As Milner puts it, this is an adventure on the order of things, not signs. But what is interesting about the anagram theory is that, in it, this adventure in the order of things, the materiality of language itself, *does* become the condition for certain aspects of a language's style and use. The anagram theory should not be understood as a mystical pursuit of hidden meanings, therefore, as it has sometimes been taken (Shepherd's essay makes this point well). In fact, the "*mot-thème*" revealed by the analysis of Saturnian verses does not really tell one anything new about the verse—the result is usually rather obvious, or else trivial, whether the *mot-thème* or keyword appears in the poem directly or not. What is happening is that these poems (like everything else, potentially) show us another register of language at work, a register other to language as a meaning-generating system—one that exploits a language's materiality, sonority, textuality or 'litterality,' and one that is not entirely without its own rules. And this is why Milner says, with respect to such linguistic creations, that in them "it is no longer the linguist who knows, but *lalangue* who knows by him, because that is the truth of his competence: not mastery, but subjugation (*assujettissement*) and the discovery that *lalangue* knows" (*L'Amour* 128). And later on: "No one is master of *lalangue*, a real insists there, and *lalangue*, ultimately, knows" (133).

But why does Milner consider calling what is going on in *lalangue* a "knowledge" at all since, clearly, there is not really anything like knowledge going on in it? Rather, there is simply an ordering, a patterning in the order of things, an order proper to the thingliness of language. The ordered interactions of material beings in physics do not lead most people to speak of a knowledge present at that level. Milner's claims in *L'Œuvre claire* suggest that he reconsiders this point. It is no longer really anything like a knowledge that occurs or is contained in *lalangue*; stripped of anything like thought and reason, it becomes a mere automaticity. The idea is that the insistence of sounds, the repetition of phonemes—even articulated to the advanced degree that they are in Saturnian verses—happens thoughtlessly. It is for this reason Milner comes to the conclusion that he does about Lacan's materialism: that for Lacan the real is silent, and therefore is best shown, not spoken about—with all of the problems for theory that this poses (namely, silence, and an anti-philosophy). In conclusion, I want to point out how the play in *lalangue* is, however, always a possible source for the generation of meaning; this is what Milner overlooks, and it is

what calls into question his conclusion about the alleged failure of Lacan's materialism. It also models for us a dialectical materialism operating in Lacanian theory.

The way back to dialectical materialism?

Can a materialism that would not be eliminative or reductionist, but instead dialectical (because it posits a real transformation of being by something like thinking), and, in turn, a real influence on thought from being (if not in the domain of the hard sciences then in that of the old "human" sciences)...can such a project do anything with the idea of a "knowledge in the real," as odd as this sounds, and as *outré* as such a thing would be for most types of materialism? If Hegelian idealism is to be avoided—if there is to be no super-subject who knows, no spirit or mind who is driving things—and yet thinking and being are to be aligned in a way that is more vigorous than what occurs in the natural sciences or in mathematics itself, should this relation be put in such a way that there can be said to be a "knowledge in the real"?

The "knowledge in the real" allegedly contained in *lalangue*, according to Milner's reading in *L'amour de la langue*, involved an ordered appearance of phonemes; an appearance that is not guided according to the dictates of sense and classical Saussurean differential relations among signs, and thus also not in accordance with a language-user's intent, or with what a language-user wants to say. This order is guided simply by resemblances among sounds, by homophonies, or by other physical factors.

Structuralist linguistics did much to teach us that a speaker says more (or less) than what she wants to say: a linguistic system generates a surplus of meaning. There is, in language use, a production of meaning that occurs in indifference to anything like the conscious intent of a speaker. This perspective affects how the relation between thinking and language should be conceived, and it helps to refute the idea that there is a clearly articulated thought that precedes its expression in language. Rather, it is the case that being put into a form of expression gives a thought or an intention a clarity it did not previously have. This is why we continue to work with and alter the form of expression, and is why we feel that our thoughts have sometimes not been adequately expressed: not because the form of expression (language) fails to portray them accurately, but because what is expressed is itself, if not inexhaustible, then at least vague enough and indeterminate enough to allow for repeated and multiple expressions. Here, linguistic form not only forms content (meaning) but indeed makes (much of) it. It is no wonder then that structuralist approaches to language were of interest to psychoanalysis.

Lalangue shows us instead a kind of stupidity proper to language, something that concerns not the relation between thinking and language, and not the generation of unintended meanings, but rather a level of no meaning at all. A zombie-like level of language, the level of language's materiality itself, the phoneme or grapheme; a level responsible for homophonic insistences (one sound influencing the sounds that appear elsewhere), resemblances, etc., which insist within or alongside what

is meant, running parallel to what is said. As we have seen, Milner at one point wanted to call the structure that guides such articulations in *lalangue* a “knowledge in the real” (as opposed to the knowledge in/of the symbolic that classical linguistic structure would be). In *L'Œuvre claire* he reconsiders this, because what goes on in the real no longer deserves the name of thinking. I will go over his case for this in a moment.

What Milner overlooks, however, is the fact that the dimension of *lalangue* can, of course, serve as a basis for the development of potential linguistic content, and for thinking. But here it is not a matter of there being, first, a relatively undetermined, vague thought that is the seed for continuing formation, precision, in words, as is the case for the relation between language and thinking. In *lalangue* we see how the matter of language itself can inspire further adventures in thought. If Saussure is right about Saturnian poetry, we would have an entire genre based on this dimension. But, as I will explain in a moment, something as simple as punning shows us the same thing. And beyond punning, everyday language use contains aspects of the same thing. What I am getting at, then, is the idea that *lalangue* is a positive factor in, and a genuine contributor to, the creation of thought. *Lalangue* shows us how an adventure at the level of things can feed an adventure at the level of thought—exactly the sort of relation between thinking and being that a dialectical materialism is about.

This is why I do not think Milner’s conclusions about Lacan’s materialism are right. Let’s get back to the alleged impasse in Lacan’s materialist project, and to the reasons for Milner’s change of heart about a possible “knowledge in the real.”

Milner’s contention in *L'Œuvre claire* was that the Borromean knot period of Lacan’s teaching amounted to a triumph of showing over saying, a renunciation of the possibility of articulating psychoanalytic doctrine, of transmitting it well in either natural language or via mathemes. In his twentieth seminar, Lacan claimed there was no thinking but “Aristotelian” thinking (that is, philosophical, or individual, or classical thinking, or something like that)...and that if the “signifier” is “*bête*,” one cannot say the unconscious thinks. Lacan claimed that “man thinks with his soul, that is, man thinks with the thought of Aristotle” (quoted in *L'Œuvre claire* 144). Milner glosses this as follows: “In other words, there is no thought but an imaginarized and qualified one [...] with which the unconscious has nothing to do” (*L'Œuvre claire* 144). But the idea that the unconscious was some kind of thinking had been important to Lacanian theory previously: “in order for the unconscious to be a ‘ça pense,’ it is necessary, one knows, that a thinking without qualities exists; psychoanalysis entirely succeeded in establishing the existence of this [...] and yet at the very moment of its success, it turns out that one must no longer speak of ‘thinking’ here” (145). So Milner opposes one of Lacan’s early theses about the unconscious, which embraces the idea that “ça pense”—it thinks, or there is thinking, there where I am not—to the later thesis, which goes as follows: “there where it thinks, it enjoys, and it knows nothing” (145). This should be taken to mean that an impersonal “it enjoys” replaces an impersonal “it thinks.” And the dimension of *lalangue*, according to

Milner, illustrates just this: it is language pleasuring itself in a “headless” manner, as it were, through, as well as despite, our uses of it. An enjoyment in and of the real is posited, rather than a thinking therein.

The more Lacan thought the unconscious through the category of the real, Milner suggests, the more it, too, veered over into the domain of silence and non-thinking (being, let’s say). Accordingly, a “science of the unconscious” itself had to forgo not only natural language but even a matheme-based approach to transmitting a know-how with the unconscious, which the training of psychoanalysts, and psychoanalytic theory itself, requires. Psychoanalytic theory becomes a (non-)discourse of showing, not saying. Hence the silent seminars.

And yet there is a practice of saying, a persistence in saying, in a particular mode, that continues in this period of Lacan’s teaching, as Milner himself notes. This is why I find Milner’s conclusion unconvincing. And that’s why the inference Milner tries to draw doesn’t work. Remember that Milner tried to engage in what he called some inductive reasoning: from the fact that the knots were used to display theory, the matheme was refuted. Yet the knots were never used entirely on their own. Or, they were never really supposed to do all the work Milner tries to make them do. For accompanying the use of the knots was, always, an “elucubration” of the real.

Milner points this out himself, when he calls attention to an interesting comment Lacan made in his seminar in 1977: “should a psychoanalyst be inspired by something on the order of poetry? This is where I’m trying to take you. [...]. Although I slide into it occasionally, an articulated logic is not the thrust of my speech” (Lacan, quoted in Milner, *L’Œuvre claire* 172n4).¹¹

But for Milner, the explosion of puns and witticisms in the Seminar only confirms his interpretation. Yes, Lacan’s “poetization” of theory continues in the silent period (not silent enough, after all . . .). But according to Milner, the many plays on words, the jokes that transmit knowledge, only confirm that Lacan thought the knots are the way to go. Why? “Each of these games devours the other, to the point where each devours itself. The poem, polymerized to the unlimited infinity of *lalangue*, explodes fixedly on the abyss. On the one hand, the taciturn knots, on the other [...] the poem, attested to and abolished by its own proliferation” (*L’Œuvre claire* 165). Milner is distinguishing between something like the bad infinity of a “poetizing” approach to theory—one that opens up an abyss of interpretation by exploiting the level of *lalangue*—and the silent but precise alternative abyss of the matheme, embodied by the Borromean knots (which, strictly speaking, Milner thinks count as an abolition of the “matheme” as well). Beyond “poeme” (sic) and matheme, into silence; this seems to be Milner’s thesis on Lacan’s project.

11. Lacan’s French is typically challenging, so I include it here: “Être éventuellement inspiré par quelque chose de l’ordre de la poésie pour intervenir en tant que psychanalyste? *C’est bien ce vers quoi il faut vous tourner [...]. Ce n’est pas du côté de la logique articulée-quoi que j’y glisse à l’occasion-qu’il faut sentir la portée de notre dire...*”

It is true that during this last period Lacan pays less and less attention to the structuralist view of language that had guided his thinking for so long. Yet the more one considers the status of *lalangue*, the more questionable Milner's conclusions about the incompleteness of Lacan's materialist project and his embrace of silence become. What is going on in *lalangue* can be described as a zombie-like non-thinking. But punning is something else, and the punning during the silent seminars is like a folding in of *lalangue* into sense, an exploitation of it for sense, for thinking . . . or a forcing of sense from *lalangue*, such that any purity in the domain of the real is not respected at all. (And isn't this one of the lessons of the knots anyway—the interweaving of all three orders, the abolition of the distinctness of any one of them from the others?) We are back to what was always Lacan's violation of Wittgenstein's prohibition. The purity of the ineffable is rejected. Milner might take this assertion to be, in fact, a negative conclusion about theory and language—because it would seem to sanction saying whatever, presumably. Yet Milner's interpretation of *lalangue* in Lacanian theory points to just what a philosophical materialism needs. *Lalangue* shows us a de-individualized “knowledge in the real,” and a link between thinking and being that is more vigorous than what Quentin Meillassoux's interesting and important project gives us. One needs to look outside the hard sciences to find this, to what used to be called the “human sciences.” Not only linguistics, but economics and, of course, psychoanalysis need to be considered by such a project as well, as cases in which an interaction between thinking and being indeed takes place.

So, the pun-fueled observations and theses Lacan promotes during this period also “show” us the solution to the apparent impasse in Lacan's materialism. They show it in practice, and are a showing that is irreverent to the sanctity of the real—an un-Wittgensteinian showing. Lacan continues to violate Wittgenstein's prohibition: whereof one cannot speak, it is legitimate to go ahead and speak anyway, and one can even mock the reverential mere showing of theory. Perhaps it is the showing of the Borromean knots that needs to be considered the parodic commentary, and not the punning?

This discussion also bears on the question of whether Lacan was an anti-philosopher or not. He probably was, or meant to be. Whether his theory succeeds in being an anti-philosophy is another matter. If Milner's interpretation of Lacan is correct, not only was Lacan personally an anti-philosopher, but his theory results in anti-philosophy as well. I am trying to propose another reading of Lacanian theory here, nowhere near as detailed, well-documented, and rigorously argued as Milner's study in *L'Œuvre claire*, it is true (to which I have not been able to do justice here). But I hope to have presented the outlines of a counter-interpretation to the challenge Milner's work poses, a counter-interpretation that considers Lacan's work to contain the basic elements of a dialectical materialism, theorizing like little else the interaction of thinking and being. (Wasn't philosophy for Althusser the theory of theoretical practice? Lacanian theory teaches us quite a bit about that.)