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A method of her own: tracing memory in Marion Milner's *The Hands of the Living God*

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ABSTRACT

This article contributes to the growing critical literature that situates the British Psychoanalyst and pioneer of life writing Marion Milner within the modernist tradition, not only as a Freudian but as someone who extends the modernist project through her studies of technique and method. Focusing on the practice of drawing in two key Milner texts – *On Not Being Able to Paint* (1950) and *The Hands of the Living God* (1969) – I explore Milner's clinical and aesthetic preoccupation with space and spacing. By way of Milner's somewhat distanced dialogue with Freud and much more intimate dialogue with Winnicott, as well as via a consideration of material from the Marion Milner archives, I demonstrate how Milner's technical and clinical praxis offers an alternative articulation to the model of deep memory. Specifically, through her development of a spatial idiom, I propose that Milner's dedication to working at the surface – including tracing and copying her patient's drawings – permits mimicry to stand in for memory so that the lost background of her patient Susan can be re-drawn.

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Marion Milner (1900–1998) was a member of the Independent School of British Psychoanalysis, as well as a poet, painter, and pioneer of introspective journaling practices. Her work is currently enjoying a critical revival.¹ As an important theorist of 'reverie' Milner brings to the fore a conception of the unconscious as a creative inner resource that is arguably more in line with romantic than modernist tropes. Similarly, Milner's commitment to what Lionel Trilling identified as psychoanalysis's alliance with the Romantic tradition, specifically through '[passionate devotion] to a research into the self, allows a productive ambiguity to hang over her literary heritage.'² (Of

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course, in one sense, we might say that such genetic ambiguity mirrors the psychoanalytic project itself, which has always been adoptable – and rejectable – by multiple and often opposed traditions of thought.) However, the case for appreciating Milner as a late-modernist has been more securely advanced in recent scholarship: Milner's significant reading of Virginia Woolf³; her methodological alliance with T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*⁴; her broader associations with the Bloomsbury Group; her prefiguring of an imagistic and feminist auto-theoretical writing; her democratisation of psychoanalytic ideas through, for example, the 'autobiographical cure'⁵; her active wrestling with the threat of fascism and mass politics in the 1930s⁶; as well as her enduring preoccupation with ordinariness and the everyday, have all been productively explored in work that identifies Milner's contributions, especially her studies of technique and method, as coterminous with the modernist project.

Critical studies of the relation between modernism and psychoanalysis have often over-invested in the question of whether their chosen modernist writers did or did not 'approve of Freud'.⁷ With Milner however, we are spared such a limited enquiry, not simply because she readily declared her Freudian 'training and skill' as a clinician, but also because her brand of Freudianism diverts the question. It is impossible to read Milner's work without appreciating the extent to which Freud's texts take their place alongside others of equal value (those of Keats, Blake, Wordsworth, Montaigne for example): what mattered most was that the texts in question – their words, ideas and theories, but also shapes and rhythms – could be satisfactorily *used* by the reader.⁸ As she writes in her 1937 work *An Experiment in Leisure*, '[...] my sole concern at the moment was to borrow forms, no matter from where, by means of which my own obscure preoccupations could declare themselves'.⁹ This *borrowing of forms* in her non-clinical writing reflects the formal investments and creative pragmatism of her clinical style. As Lyndsey Stonebridge notes, in Milner's clinic, 'paint, ink, line and contour replace mummy and daddy as Milner [...] concentrates on the formal structuring, and not the content of unconscious phantasy'.¹⁰ My argument across this article is that Milner's clinical investigations into the formal qualities of psychic life, as well as her technical and aesthetic experiments in the everyday, necessitated her development of a spatial idiom that allows us to move between her different modes of writing. Further, my emphasis on the formal preoccupations of Milner's clinical aesthetic facilitates an important link to the topic of memory. Following Derrida's conviction that Freud attempted to 'account for the psyche in terms of spacing', I will use the concept of the 'memory trace' to bring depth and surface registers into a specifically clinical dialogue. When I turn to Milner's extensive case-study with her long-term patient Susan, *The Hands of the Living God (HOLG)*, it will become apparent that the notion of psychical writing which Derrida offers complements an understanding of clinical spacing. Here, 'writing' is

expanded to include the forms of drawing and image-making that Susan and her analyst engage in. Milner explains that she came to see her patient's drawing as her 'private language which anyone who tried to help her must learn how to read – and speak'.¹¹ Milner's active handling of her patient's drawings, specifically her drawing in dialogue with them, was central to how she came to share an understanding of her patient's language.

In what follows, I will briefly consider how the development of Milner's method of 'free drawing', as outlined in her text of 1950 *On Not Being Able to Paint* (ONBAP), sets the scene for a closer reading of what's at stake in her extraordinary clinical case study *The Hands of the Living God* (first published in 1969). In her 1950 text, Milner confesses that she had wanted to keep separate her leisure-time pursuit of drawing by the free method from her professional interests and expertise in psychoanalysis – 'psychoanalysis was part of work and painting was not'.¹² Her preference, however, was unrealistic; let's call it an impossible wish – which is surely just as well for her patients, and Susan especially. When turning to the clinical case study, I will suggest that Milner's self-trainings and self-explorations provided her with an invaluable creative resource for her work with Susan. I will also endeavour to illustrate Milner's intimate and reciprocal dialogue with Winnicottian thought as a further critical background to the work. Finally, I will share descriptions and images from the Marion Milner Collection at The Archives of the British Psychoanalytic Society to indicate how her clinical preoccupations were constantly being worked through privately, in everyday spaces of aesthetic interplay. Before turning to Milner's texts however, I will begin as she did, on or about the year 1922, with a first encounter with Freud.¹³

What is your way of remembering?

The following two short Freud texts stage the question: *what is your way of remembering?* First, from 1914, 'Remembering, Repeating, and Working Through'¹⁴; then, from 1925, 'A Note Upon the 'Mystic Writing Pad''.¹⁵ The first is offered by Freud as a potted history of the changes in technique that occurred across the (then) short lifespan of the discipline of psychoanalysis. 'Remembering, Repeating, and Working Through' is the story of the progress and failure of psychoanalysis as a clinical enterprise. There are three phases to the story: 1, the catharsis or abreaction phase, where the analyst used hypnosis to elicit and abreact the patient's memories (i.e. to induce a discharge of affect from the memory); 2, the post-hypnosis phase, where the analyst's interpretations would be used in the service of 'discovering from the patient's free associations what he failed to remember'; and 3, the 'consistent technique used today' where the analyst 'contents himself with studying whatever is present for the time being on the surface of the patients mind' interpreting what they repeatedly resist remembering so that when the resistance

becomes conscious, memories will resurface.¹⁶ Across all phases, Freud tells us that the ultimate goal, ‘descriptively’ at least, is to ‘trace’ the patient’s contemporary material back to the past and ‘fill the gaps in’ in their memory.¹⁷ I refer to this paper as a story of progress and failure because, while Freud’s conviction that the evolution away from hypnosis and towards a focus on resistance and repetition is ultimately what saves psychoanalysis from association with any form of suggestion-based therapy, he also insists on the many ways in which the work can fail.¹⁸ Primary among them is the analyst’s ‘perpetual struggle with his patient to keep in the psychical sphere all the impulses which the patient would like to direct into the motor sphere’; this struggle speaks to the patient’s preference for acting out, rather than working through.¹⁹ And here the analyst will necessarily fail (intermittently at least) to promote the work of memory and the ‘remembering process’ as the favourable means for addressing an issue that the patient would rather discharge of through action.²⁰ Freud’s qualification of this stance, and his implicit warning to the clinician, is that patient’s preference for action and repetition is paradoxically both a resistance to the work of remembering and also already a mode of memory-work. In other words, the compulsion to repeat is the patient’s ‘way of remembering’.²¹ When we turn to Marion Milner’s case study, we will see how the analyst is obliged to reappraise the remembering process and question the centrality of psychical repression, so as to find and create different techniques to attend to the fundamental goal of filling in the gaps in the patient’s memory.²² From the vantage of textual studies, we might anticipate that Milner’s approach facilitates a perspective shift where psychoanalysis’s association with depth models – Freud framed as a poster boy for suspicious reading – gives way to its affiliation with practices of surface reading.²³ For now, though, I’ll underscore that in 1914 the move from the deep memory model of hypnosis to the surface repetitions and resistances of the patient’s mind, represents, for Freud, the improvement of a clinical method.

The second coordinate is Freud’s Mystic Writing Pad paper.²⁴ Here, in recognition of the common distrust of one’s memory-functioning, Freud considers the inadequacies of the standard technologies and techniques we use as ‘substitutes for our memory’.²⁵ He describes to his readers how, should he fear forgetting something, he can take a note with ink and paper and be sure to preserve a ‘permanent memory-trace’, but all too soon the paper will become full; whereas if he places his note on a renewable surface, such as a chalkboard which can be wiped clean, he will receive ‘unlimited receptive capacity’, but no permanent trace.²⁶ Typically, these two note-taking procedures are differently compromised. Ingeniously however, the Mystic Writing Pad, with its resin tablet covered by a thin double-layered wax and celluloid sheet, does away with the either / or. Now there is *both* unlimited receptive capacity for one’s mnemonic reproductions etched upon the top sheet but erasable when the two components of the pad are separated, *and* a permanent

trace of the writing captured on the resin tablet beneath. This delights Freud, not because he thinks he has solved a personal difficulty in his system of aid-memoir, but because he has found a precise illustration for the ‘structure of the perceptual apparatus of the mind’.²⁷ The double-layered cover sheet is comparable to ‘an external protective shield’ tasked with diminishing the ‘strength of excitations coming in’ coupled with a background surface which receives the stimuli. The resin tablet (or wax slab) is the unconscious itself which takes permanent trace of the depressions or indentations from the perception consciousness system; and the action of separating the cover sheet from the resin tablet begins to account for the discontinuities of the perceptual system and ‘the flickering-up and passing-away of consciousness in the process of perception’.²⁸ Freud never fully articulated a theory of memory, but the ‘psycho-physiological notion of the memory trace’, also referred to as the mnemic image, is central to his topographical schema of the mind.²⁹

We can note, then, that unlike his text on remembering of 1914, the Mystic Writing Pad paper offers no guidance on clinical technique. Rather, developing Freud’s metapsychological papers of the nineteen-teens to nineteen-twenties, as well as returning to the conjectures of his early ‘Project for a Scientific Psychology’ (1895), this short paper refigures a set of theoretical speculations about the functioning of multiple psychical systems by way of an analogy that takes us to the scene of writing. As noted above, Jacques Derrida’s positioning of Freud’s ‘Wunderblock’ as the text that returns to and accomplishes his earliest and enduring attempts to ‘account for the psyche in terms of spacing’ is an important background coordinate for my discussion. Defining the ‘fundamental property’ of writing as spacing, Derrida has it that ‘the subject of writing is a *system* of relations between the strata: the Mystic Pad, the psyche, society, the world’.³⁰ When we turn to Marion Milner’s work with her patient Susan, we will see how the workings of the Mystic Writing Pad play out differently again: not only analogous to the operations of the mind and memory, or indicative of the relational force of psychological writing, the promise of Freud’s ‘curious little device’ now takes on an explicit clinical value.³¹ Milner had to find new ways to work deeply at the surface; to develop a clinical idiom that, though not exactly eschewing a depth model of the unconscious, would nonetheless place the mnemic image in a different register. In her work with Susan, the act of drawing spatialised and exteriorised memory, creating, through repetition (and difference), the means through which her patient might come to figure herself out from a lost and absent background.

Marion Milner: a method of her own

At around the same time that Freud stumbled on his ‘Wunderblock’, Marion Milner was engaged with the question of memory from a different

perspective. Prior to her psychoanalytic formation, when she was just out of university and working in the fields of industrial and educational psychology, Milner undertook a training course in Pelmanism, a system of mind and memory training guided by practical exercises and mnemonic methods.³² Pelmanism enjoyed significant popularity in the early twentieth century, so Milner's interest in it might not be especially instructive to highlight if it weren't for a resonance between Pelmanism's commitment to providing an accessible philosophy of living, oriented to self-improvement, and the appeal of Milner's most popular works. As a creative autobiographer, Milner narrated her experiments in living, including in journaling – getting to know what she liked in her daily life –, and in drawing, painting, and leisure. Across these different modes, Milner was developing a praxis of self-attention, training herself in different ways of looking and finding inspiration from her own inner-resources. In this way, she can be regarded as a praxis-thinker whose mining of the personal and idiosyncratic is of general value in so far as it proposes a method for others to follow. For example, her critically acclaimed first book, *A Life of One's Own* (published under the pseudonym Joanna Fields in 1934), is offered as an attempt 'to find a method by which the ordinary man can be himself, not dependent on experts'.³³ At the time of writing this influential work, Milner was yet to become that strange kind of 'expert' (a psychoanalyst) upon whom others – her patient Susan especially – would depend. But following her clinical training (1939-1943) she developed a psychoanalytic style that kept faith with the principles of her experiments in living, bringing to British psychoanalysis a conception of the unconscious that was as creative as it was destructive. Milner's style bridges her clinical and aesthetic writing projects, or, to put it more correctly, there is a signature *merging* of clinical and aesthetic preoccupations which constitutes her idiosyncratic style.³⁴

Milner shared her inclination to 'think in pictures'³⁵ with her psychoanalytic colleague, mentor, and one-time analyst Donald Woods Winnicott, and with her most significant patient Susan. There is of course a danger in sharing things: whether sharing images, sharing memories, or perhaps even sharing a body, the danger is that you may not be able to recover what you felt to be yours. Or, worse still, that the uncertain and difficult line between 'me' and 'mine' (me-my mother, me-my body) never comes to be drawn in the first place.³⁶ This danger is articulated across Milner's work through the dynamics of separateness and merging.

On Not Being Able to Paint investigates the resistances Milner encounters within her own artistic practices, and documents how her experiments in 'free drawing' enabled her to better understand them. With her technique of 'letting hand and eye do exactly what pleased them without any conscious working to a preconceived intention', her method of drawing allowed her to approach and interpret the conflicted and unknown aspects of her identity.³⁷

To find her own painting-voice Milner explains that she needed to attend to ‘certain facts about [herself] as a separate being, facts that could often perhaps be successfully by-passed in ordinary living’.³⁸ This question of separateness is central to the anxieties she encounters in the process of becoming the painter she wants to be. To lose ‘all sense of separating boundaries; particularly the boundaries between the tangible realities of the external world and the imaginative realities of the inner world [...]’ lies at the heart of the ‘fear of being mad’.³⁹ And yet, the fear of being mad – the dissolution of boundaries, and states of merging with another person or object – is not to be defended against too rigidly if the creative process is to offer any satisfaction.

Separation and merging (or fusion) depict different modes of perception (looking with a ‘narrow’ or ‘wide’ focus); different thinking styles (the scientific and the intuitive); and ultimately different relational stances to the distinction between self and other. Milner’s abiding interest is the movement between the two, how such movement is a question of spacing and vision – sometimes allowing the lines to blur, sometimes ‘keeping oneself apart from what one looks at’, and always working to achieve a rhythm and reciprocity between the two. In Milner’s own words:

Observations of problems to do with painting had all led up to the idea that awareness of the external world is itself a creative process, an immensely complex creative interchange between what comes from inside and what comes from outside, a complex alternation of fusing and separating. But since the fusing stage is, to the intellectual mind, a stage of illusion, intoxication, transfiguration, it is one that is not so easily allowed for in an age of civilization when matter-of-factness, the keeping of oneself apart from what one looks at, has become all important. And this fact surely has wide implications for education. For it surely means that education for a democracy, if it is to foster that true sanity which is necessary in citizens of a democracy, foster the capacity to see the facts for oneself, rather than seeing what one is told to see, must also understand the stages by which such objectivity is reached. In fact, it must understand subjectivity otherwise the objectivity it aims at will be in danger of fatal distortion.⁴⁰

Milner’s recognition that the historical moment demanded ‘the keeping of oneself apart from what one looks at’ reflects the fear of mass politics that she and many of her contemporaries shared.⁴¹ But her conviction that the stage of illusion (fusing) should not be undervalued if ‘true sanity’ is to be fostered sounds a countervailing note. She goes on to describe as ‘revolutionary’ the idea that creativity ‘comes from the free reciprocal interplay of differences that are confronting each other with equal rights to be different, equal rights to their own identity [...]’, insisting on the ‘titanic emotional forces’ working against this interplay.⁴²

We can see, then, how Milner’s personal experiments with free drawing shaped her perspective on the political value of an aesthetic education.

Moreover, as the philosophical knot to which she is repeatedly returned (i.e. the stability of the subject/object distinction⁴³), as well as the ‘navel’ point in her own psychic landscape where the boundaries give way between ‘thoughts and things’, Milner’s preoccupation with separation and merging expresses an anxiety about space and spacing.⁴⁴ My interest going forward is to ask how these spatial concerns, achieved through Milner’s experiments in painting and drawing, and with extractable lessons for her understanding of democratic politics, are re-positioned within the clinical frame.

Still in her *Painting* book, Milner describes the imaginative identifications and appropriations necessitated in painting if the creative interplay, with its revolutionary potential, is to be realised.

For in order to ‘realise’ other people, make them and their uniqueness fully real to oneself, one has in a sense to put oneself into the other, one has temporarily to undo that separation of self and other which one had so laboriously achieved. In one’s own imaginative muscles one feels the strain of the model’s pose, in one’s own imaginative body one feels the identity of one’s opponent, who is one’s co-creator. But to do this and yet maintain one’s own integrity, neither to go wholly over to the opponent’s side, nor yet retreat into armour-plated assertion of one’s own view-point, that is the task demanded.⁴⁵

This is a striking description, but of what? A painter at work? A democratic citizen straining to engage in genuine political dialogue? Or, possibly a clinician’s shifting states of attention and awareness with her patient? For Milner, ultimately, it is a description of the paradox of creativity which leads her, alongside Winnicott, to learn to think about space differently.

On Not Being Able To Paint shows how learning how to paint required a large amount of unlearning. Specifically, Milner found herself growing frustrated and disillusioned by the deadness in her pictures that resulted from a ‘sheer copying of the object’.⁴⁶ She writes:

I had intended something great and beautiful and studied the rules and then expected the results to follow from the excellence of the intention. But always the result had been, both in painting and in living, a sense of emptiness and futility.⁴⁷

Sheer copying – working in tribute to the pre-existing object, or the canonically great artwork – simply doesn’t work for Milner. Technical proficiency is no way to feel alive. Importantly however, whilst the act of copying frustrates and disappoints in the context of her painting (and living), copying – and specifically copying the visual image – is a valuable and highly productive technique in Milner’s clinical work. We see this most clearly with Susan, Milner’s patient who also discovered a passion for ‘free drawing’.⁴⁸

In his introduction to the 2011 edition of Milner's case study, Adam Phillips remarks that we should not be surprised to find Milner copying some of Susan's drawings in her efforts to understand them.⁴⁹ Not surprised perhaps because copying can be, among many things, an empathic gesture, endeavouring to feel one's way into another's perspective. But it can also suggest a striving for objectivity, the likes of which Milner was so resistant to in her art practice. Milner's copying of Susan's drawings is sometimes strategic, conscious, and declared in the published text.⁵⁰ But I will be suggesting that it also has an important 'background' quality as an off-stage activity that was 'marked off' from the sessions with Susan.

The Hands of the Living God: repeating, repeating and figuring out

Milner opens her preface to *The Hands of the Living God* with the following: 'This book is about a patient [Susan] who came to her first session saying three things: that she had lost 'her soul'; that the world was no longer outside her; and that all this had happened since she received E.C.T. [Electroconvulsive Shock therapy] in hospital, three weeks before coming to me'.⁵¹ In 1943, Susan, age 23, had come to Milner, via Winnicott. The Winnicotts – Donald and his first wife Alice – had arranged for Susan to be discharged from hospital into their care, with Milner in place to undertake Susan's analysis.⁵² Seven years of treatment would pass before Susan began to draw, taking inspiration from Milner's then-published works on creative process and bringing her drawings – some 4000 or so – to her analyst's attention.⁵³

In the early stages of the treatment, before the drawing began, Milner listened to Susan's history which was replete with evidence of trans-generational trauma, environmental deprivation, and childhood sexual abuse. Milner hears of the volatility of Susan's early home-life with her mother, older sister, and the ambiguously status-ed Jack (an alcoholic invalid lodger, who was perhaps Susan's father); her intense shame at her family's poverty; the 'terrible black moods' that would grip her mother; and the 'hate' in the home that could render them all speechless.⁵⁴ As she listens to Susan recount the childhood memories available to her, including two prominent and traumatic memories that surfaced immediately following the E.C.T., Milner underscores that Susan's 'mother seemed to have had almost no recognition of her daughter's separate existence'.⁵⁵ Thus, the analysis stages the opportunity for Susan's relationship with a 'non-separate mother', with its con-fusional states and annihilation anxieties, to be repeated with Milner – as it had been repeated with other significant mother-figures in Susan's life. Seventeen years of therapy would pass before Milner could say of Susan that she was able to have a feeling in

their sessions of there being ‘two separate whole people in contact with each other’.⁵⁶ The colossal achievement of a feeling of contact between separate people is accomplished (though not definitively secured⁵⁷) through the repeating, repeating and ‘figuring out’ that Susan and Milner engage in together.

With the phrase ‘figuring out’ I intend to suggest a number of related meanings. Most simply, there is the intellectual and creative work of generating a clearer understanding of a difficulty: figuring something out, scratching one’s head and puzzling it over, perhaps with increasing urgency if the demands of the situation cannot be addressed by familiar means. Across the case study Milner comments on the fashions and blind spots in contemporary psychoanalytic thinking that obliged her to figure out her own clinical-theoretical idiom, which she shares in a highly accessible glossary of ‘possibly useful concepts’ for her reader.⁵⁸ Then, there is the sense of discerning figure from ground that Milner as an artist and thinker of creative process makes use of across her texts to address formal questions of perspective, outline, distinction, surface and depth. Her choice of D.H. Lawrence’s lines for the title of her account with Susan, speaks to this: Milner comments that her work with Susan had been accompanied by ‘the rhythm of a line of poetry running in [her] head’ – it was the rhythm rather than the words that she first became conscious of. Then, when she was able to remember the words – ‘It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God. But it is a much more fearful thing to fall out of them’ – she explains that ‘it took [her] a long time to bring [herself] to see the implications of it, and to turn poetic symbolism into a discursive prose statement’.⁵⁹ Milner writes that Lawrence’s lines

seemed to epitomize this idea that I had been trying to formulate about the state of direct contact with the undifferentiated sea of one’s own body awareness which is, most of the time, taken for granted by most people, but which can become something, as I had discovered, that one can directly attend to, letting go the ‘figure’ of ideas and finding the ‘ground’, an act of attention that I did believe Susan had discovered how to make [during a relatively settled 4-year period of her adult life].⁶⁰

Milner would turn repeatedly to questions of embodiment and bodily awareness in the work with Susan, regretful that there was an absence of psychoanalytic literature on this important dimension of clinical work.⁶¹ In step with her discoveries from her artistic practice, she regards the possibility of reciprocal movement between different modes of perception – wide focus and narrow focus – and the pleasurable interplay afforded in moments when the distinction between the inner and the outer does not need to be upheld, as necessary for ‘healthy living’.⁶² Critically, she believed that Susan had had some experience of such modes of attention made

possible by a rudimentary experience in infancy of being held. However, as Milner writes, this was catastrophically destabilised following the E.C.T.:

Certainly, there did seem to have been for Susan, after the E.C.T., a loss of some essential part of her unconscious memories of her mother's hands and arms, holding her, sustaining her, protecting her, without which, however inadequate her mother had been, she would have died. Surely too this aspect of her infant experience would have been felt as God-like, both as a God-like merciful 'other' sustaining her, or, in moments of no differentiation, a feeling of herself as 'being God'.⁶³

Thus, the sense Milner came to make of her unconscious preoccupation with the rhythm of Lawrence's lines concerns the 'loss of background' that Susan reported suffering following her E.C.T. treatment in the hospital. To fall 'into' or 'out of' the hands of the living God evokes what she calls the 'undifferentiated sea of one's own body awareness' which approximates Freud's 'oceanic feeling of oneness' associated with a primary, narcissistic (and illusory-omnipotent) merging with the mother. Milner's point of stress however is on one's *own* body awareness, sometimes set apart from, and yet still tied to, the unconscious memory of maternal merging. It is a background awareness that 'one both holds and is held by' and can be 'most of the time, taken for granted by most people'.⁶⁴ But for Susan, after the E.C.T., it is lost, leaving her 'cut-off from all perceptions coming from inside herself'.⁶⁵ Susan now felt that she'd been 'shot forward'; that she was 'not behind her eyes'; and that she had no 'back to her head'.⁶⁶ With this flattened and distorted spatiality, Milner knew that for her patient 'the concept of inside and outside did not exist anymore'; as Susan had declared at the beginning of the treatment, 'the world is not outside her'.⁶⁷ Such radical alterations of perception are evident in the first drawings Susan produces in her treatment in the Spring of 1950 (see [Figure 1](#)).⁶⁸ The sketch in the top left-hand corner of a boundary-less head suggests the loss of background Susan experienced; and the third of the three egg-shapes at the bottom of the page represents Susan's depiction of her post-E.C.T. self, with 'the lines showing what comes from outside, but nothing making contact from inside'.⁶⁹ That Milner observes and draws out this lack of contact with the inside is key to the treatment; it is also reminiscent of her appreciation in her *Painting book* that 'awareness of the external world is itself a creative process, an immensely complex creative interchange between what comes from inside and what comes from outside'.⁷⁰

To prefigure a Winnicottian formulation, the challenge of finding and creating one's bodily form so to then take it for granted as a holding environment, is, in part, a spatial problem.⁷¹ How *does* one find the limits or the edges of something if not by encountering the limits or the edges of something else? In clinical work, this something else can be the frame, which

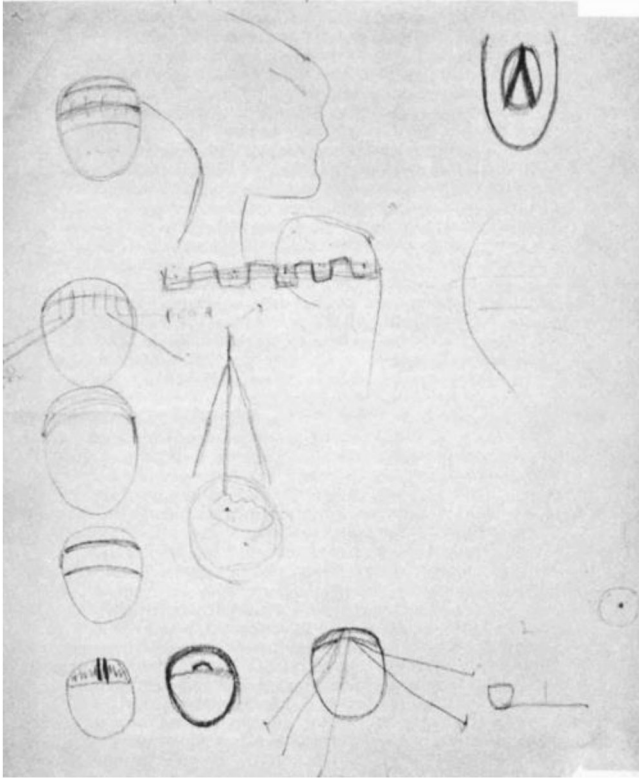


Figure 1. From Marion Milner's *The Hands of the Living God*, (also [Figure 1](#) in original text, 'Diagrams of herself'). By permission of The Marsh Agency Ltd., on behalf of The Estate of Marion Milner.

might be conceived as an extension of the mind-and-body of the analyst (analyst *qua* primary other). The importance of limit setting and frame management, allows the patient by way of their exploratory gestures, or *outward* movements – be they tentative, testing, or pushy – to be recalled to the boundaries of their self as they make contact with the boundaries of the other. Or, in certain cases, to begin to find those limits, edges and boundaries, as if for the first time.⁷²

This brings me on to a further sense I would like to conjure with the phrase 'figuring out' which follows closely on from the above but puts a different note of stress on the 'out' as a movement of depth, three-dimensionality, as well as of force and projection. As Mary Jacobus has detailed, the drawings that Susan produced in the treatment are 'the surface on, or through, which Milner reads Susan, and by which Susan herself is enabled to enter a three-dimensional psychic world'.⁷³ In contrast to her very first drawing attempts, those that follow use shade and patterning to indicate

enclosures, and interior spaces (see [Figure 2](#)). Milner notes that there is no ‘ground line’ for the different motifs in these drawings – ‘nothing to support them, they just floated in space [...]’.⁷⁴ These early drawings feature shell-like and bowl-like forms, nests and cocoons, which, in accordance with the analytic theme of privacy, might be thought of as spaces of withdrawal, shelter and holding. The spiral – the ‘whorl’ or coiled form – is given special attention for its intestinal and faecal valence, as well as for its potential to signify safety and/or strangulation.⁷⁵ The symbol of the circle is similarly privileged: for Milner it denotes ‘a hole, an empty body orifice, a gap, a wound, something not there’ with the additional prospect of a *filling in*, outlining a shape that starts and ends at the same point.⁷⁶ Repeatedly, these recursive shapes are interpreted by way of the body – its cavities and orifices – to suggest how, in drawing out of her bodily imaginary,

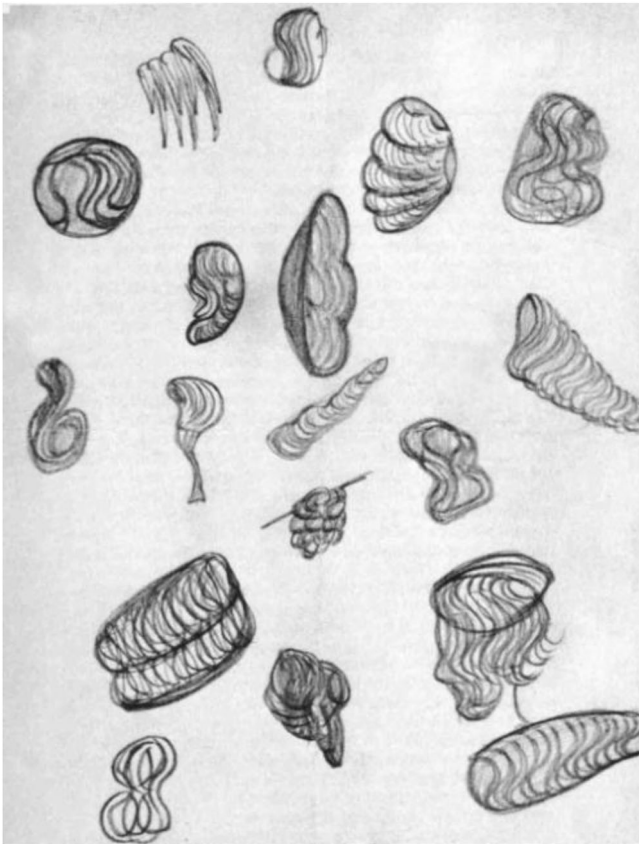


Figure 2. From Marion Milner’s *The Hands of the Living God*, (also [Figure 2](#) in original text, ‘Black things’). By permission of The Marsh Agency Ltd., on behalf of The Estate of Marion Milner.

Susan may be recomposing its muscle memory, giving form to her fear of breakdown, and beginning to conceive of a holding environment.

It is important to register this drawing process as an active and bodily undertaking, one that enacts the expression of destructive and creative impulses by means of an engagement with materials beyond the self, and beyond the analytic dyad. We might recall at this juncture that in his 'Remembering, Repeating and Working-Through' paper, Freud anticipated that the clinician would have difficulty in encouraging the patient to keep in the 'psychical sphere' that which they would prefer to 'act out' through the 'motor sphere', counselling that the remembering process is likely to give way to repetitive acting out in cases of strong psychic resistance. We can ask how Susan's prolific drawing activity might be read in terms of the logic of Freud's paper; does it make sense to think of her drawing as a mode of acting out, a motor repetition in the place of memory? Perhaps not immediately. But Susan's resistance to Milner's psychoanalytic interpretations was strong. As already suggested, the case study recounts many moments where the clinician is at a loss with her familiar theoretical repertoire, needing to adapt and invent new ways of thinking and being with her patient. Central to the difficulty was Susan's outright rejection that there could exist such a thing as the unconscious, or that she herself could be capable of producing something called 'unconscious fantasy' – Susan would ask Milner in frustration and anger, 'but in what part of my mind do I think these things?'⁷⁷ Whilst of course, on the one hand, this could be regarded as the patient's strong psychic resistance to the reawakening of memories; on the other, the drawing activity that emerged in the treatment can be seen as a practice of re-surfacing memory. In this regard, Susan's drawings – and their subsequent holding (and handling) by Milner – can perhaps be thought of a shared response to the Freudian question 'what is your way of remembering?'.

Importantly, in 'Remembering, Repeating and Working-Through', Freud identifies the 'handling of the transference' as the 'main instrument for curbing the patient's compulsion to repeat, and for turning it into a motive for remembering'.⁷⁸ Here he characterises the transference as an 'intermediate region between illness and real life through which the transition from one to the other is made'.⁷⁹ Classically this transference 'intermediate region' – a space of crucial importance for Winnicott's and Milner's psychoanalytic innovations – demarcates the stage on which the patient repeats (without conscious memory) the conflicts of their past. However, if, as the work of the Independent psychoanalytic tradition makes clear, clinically utilisable transference phenomena can be found and created beyond the patient-analyst relation, then other spaces or objects of transition come into view. In the glossary to her case study, Milner offers the reader a succinct definition of the frame: it 'marks off the area of accepted illusion' – for

Milner, this is as true for the frame of the psychoanalytic session as it is for the frame of a picture.⁸⁰ Functioning to give a ‘recognizable edge’ to the space of illusion, ‘the frame is necessary to protect the sanity of the experiencer of the work’.⁸¹ In order that a secure area of accepted illusion could be sustained in the therapy with Susan, Milner would have needed to be actively engaged in ‘marking off’ practices, that also protected herself, which I will return to more fully in the final section of the article. Here, once again, Milner’s artistic practice is instructive to an understanding of her evolving clinical thinking and technique.

In *On Not Being Able to Paint*, Milner’s thoughts regarding the relational dynamics between the artist, the artwork, and the artistic materials are psychoanalytically inflected. The material itself - pencil, chalk, charcoal, paint, paper - becomes an ‘other’.⁸² She explains that the occasions of free drawing that were ‘satisfying’ to her had felt like an experience of a ‘dialogue relationship between thought and the bit of the external world represented by the marks made on the paper’.⁸³ This possibility rests on the medium being ‘pliant and undemanding’, able to ‘[give] of itself easily’.⁸⁴ Milner is writing with the experience of early childhood in mind, specifically the maternal grounds for making possible a reciprocal relationship with the outside world. Contending that ‘in the beginning one’s mother is, literally, the whole world’, she continues:

... the problem of the relation between the painter and his world then became basically a problem of one’s own need and the needs of the ‘other’, a problem of reciprocity between ‘you’ and ‘me’; with ‘you’ and ‘me’ meaning originally mother and child. But if this was the earth from which the foundations for true dialogue relations with the outside world should spring, did they always get established there?⁸⁵

Milner answers her question in the negative, elaborating how, when the early dialogue relation fails, some form of psychic ‘dictatorship’ gets set up.⁸⁶ Considering that Milner is, in this work, documenting her own experiments in drawing and painting, her analysis of the process is alarmingly proximate to her clinical thinking about Susan’s case. The dialogue achieved in an art practice rests on ‘an experience of togetherness with one’s medium’; this is extended to the clinical practice of psychoanalysis when the analyst acts ‘as a pliant medium, giving back the patient’s own thought to him, in a clarified form, rather than intruding his own needs and ideas’.⁸⁷ As Halton-Hernandez has observed, the ‘pliant’ medium of *On Not Being Able to Paint* will become the ‘pliable’ medium of Milner’s expressly clinical writings, with Milner offering subsequent elaborations on the importance of the analyst’s pliability if the patient is to have success in creating a bridge between an inner experience and the outside world.⁸⁸ To continue to consider the nature of such bridging work and

the role of memory within it, we can bring Winnicott's writings more closely to bear on the discussion.

'It is a joy to be hidden but disaster not to be found'

Taking poetic license from Milner's rhythm-focused appreciation of Lawrence's lines, we can next explore their resonance with Winnicott's 'it is a joy to be hidden but disaster not to be found'. This line can be found in Winnicott's 1963 paper 'Communicating and Not Communicating', in which he distinguishes simple and restive modes of non-communicating (linked to the right to be silent and the pleasures of hiding), from pathological modes of not-communicating that are active or reactive.⁸⁹ The analyst, he advises, must be ready to discern the difference between acts of non-communication that are 'a positive contribution' to the work, and those that signal distress, or self-absence.⁹⁰ The latter, clinically more complicated modes, are indicative of a facilitating environment in early infancy which has 'failed in some respect and in some degree' so as to produce a 'split' in the infant's object-relating.⁹¹ Milner's case-study describes sessions with Susan that fall under the second mode, as the following example indicates.

On Thursday 4 May (she has obviously washed her hair), she is silent at first, but soon begins her constant complaint that she is not there —there is a five-year gap (again she underestimates the time), there is a void inside, E.C.T. takes away your memory. She feels herself as a void, cold, no soul, not reacting, she never has since the E.C.T. Soon she adds that the nurses at the hospital where she has been for Easter say that the trouble with all E.C.T. patients is that they cannot remember.⁹²

Susan's initial silence in this Thursday session pre-sounds her sense that memory has been taken away from her through the E.C.T. and that neither she nor Millner exist (Susan maintained that she had not existed since E.C.T.). Of course, it could be conjectured that the memory-obliterating experience of the E.C.T. is sufficiently traumatic to produce the types of reactive modes of not-communicating that Winnicott is concerned with (indeed, the nurses' observations on memory loss in 'all' E.C.T. patients suggest as much). But it is plausible also to hold that the 'gap' that follows the E.C.T. is already a repetition of the type of environmental deprivation that Winnicott regards as formative to the infant's disturbance in object-relating. Such a gap poses a challenge to Freud's idea, touched on above, that the clinician's primary task is to lead the patient to the past and 'fill in gaps in memory'. In a more Winnicottian idiom, this memory gap can be read as a break in the subject's 'continuity of existence'.

Winnicott's 'Communicating and Not Communicating' paper develops his account of the 'subjective object', a theoretical innovation that, I contend, conveys Milner's profound influence on her close colleague.

Coined to emphasise the ‘infant’s subjective experience of the external object/m/other, and to distinguish between object-relating and the primary merged state’, the ‘subjective object’ exists for the infant at a ‘stage of development that precedes separation that leads to perception’ (i.e. perception of the objective object).⁹³

Remaining in Milner’s terrain of separation and merging here, we can consult an image from her *On Not Being Able to Paint*. The image comprises two jugs positioned adjacently, without a visual gap between them; they seem to have been sketched in a hurried fashion, as if to convey movement in what are otherwise classic still-life objects.⁹⁴ As a visual examination of surface, edge, perspective, line and conjunction, the image communicates Milner’s understanding of the ‘paradox of creativity’, namely, ‘to be able to break down the barrier of space between self and other, yet at the same time to be able to maintain it.’⁹⁵ This aesthetic interplay has explicit political potential for Milner: ‘For surely the idea is revolutionary that creativeness is not the result of an omnipotent fiat from above, but is something which comes from the free reciprocal interplay of differences that are confronting each other with equal rights to be different [...]’.⁹⁶

Milner’s ‘Two Jugs’ also appears in one of Winnicott’s most widely read papers ‘On the Location of Cultural Experience’ where he credits his discussions with Milner for helping him think about the themes of (environmental) deprivation and ‘continuity of existence’.⁹⁷ He writes that Milner was able to convey ‘the tremendous significance that there can be in the interplay of the edges of two curtains, or of the surface of a jug that is placed in front of another jug’.⁹⁸ Milner’s interplay of edges reflects for Winnicott ‘the *potential space* between the subjective object and the object objectively perceived’.⁹⁹ Famously, out of this potential space, Winnicott would theorise the transitional object, bringing together his presiding themes of creativity, psychic health, and the good enough environment.¹⁰⁰ Of utmost importance is its paradoxical status: no longer a subjective object, but neither quite an object objectively perceived, the transitional object exists in the potential space between the individual and the environment.

In health the infant creates what is in fact lying around waiting to be found. But in health *the object is created, not found*. This fascinating aspect of normal object-relating has been studied by me in various papers, including one on ‘Transitional Objects and Transitional Phenomena’ (1951). A good object is no good to the infant unless created by the infant. Shall I say, created out of need? Yet the object must be found in order to be created. This has to be accepted as a paradox, and not solved by a restatement that, by its cleverness, seems to eliminate the paradox.¹⁰¹

The reason Winnicott insists on preserving this paradox at the level of theoretical statement is because he holds that, in the normal run of things, it is a taken for granted experience: the good enough facilitating environment of

infancy succeeds in affording the baby the illusion that ‘the object is created not found’. This affordance, he states, is facilitated, *repeatedly*, such that ‘the process gradually becomes built in and gathers a memory backing’.¹⁰² I want to underscore this idea of a ‘memory backing’, achieved through repetition, as the grounds for the development of psychic health.

With Susan in mind, we can ask what *is* the backing behind memory? And what might the picture look like when this backing is not in place (recall Susan’s first image of a back-less head suggestive of her reported loss of memory following the E.C.T. [see [Figure 1](#)]).

The contemporary psychoanalyst Christopher Bollas, working in the British Independent tradition and supervised by Milner in the mid-70s, offers the following broad appreciation of the ‘memory backing’ to selfhood:

Memory of our lives – especially unconscious memory – is the background to any self. The collecting of memories is a mental capability that perceives and stores our lived experiences. It is a matrix that perceives our reality and organises many things, not least our dreams, our reveries, and our personal creativities, and it contributes to our capacity for intimate sharing with the other.¹⁰³

Intimate sharing with the other, made possible by dependable unconscious memory, relies first on the kind of achievement of psychic separateness that was so precarious in Susan’s case.

In the final section of this article, I will suggest how the production of 4,000 or so drawings across the course of her treatment might have helped to create the kind of ‘memory backing’ that Susan was lacking. Any speculation in this direction needs to be able to imagine the qualities (and consistencies) of the facilitating environment; here, Milner’s holding and handling – how she received, facilitated and dialogued with the drawings – is key. Tentatively, I will suggest that Milner’s varied treatment of her patient’s drawings as transitional entities might have enabled mimicry to re-cover memory, and move the clinical work towards the finding and re-creating of a lost background. I will also refer to Milner’s personal drawing artefacts, housed in the Milner archives, that demonstrate the continuation of the analyst’s thinking about her case beyond the consulting room.

Drawing in dialogue (with ‘at least two hands’)

It is important to note that Milner and Susan didn’t engage in drawing activity together. Sometimes bringing as many as 70–90 images to a session, Susan’s drawings would often be spoken about in the sessions, and sometimes they were simply left with Milner;¹⁰⁴ but the role of drawing within the treatment was not, for example, in keeping with Winnicott’s famous Squiggle games which facilitated a creative play between the clinician and his child patients, with active turn-taking as well as possibilities

for interpretative commentary.¹⁰⁵ Whilst Milner and Winnicott may have shared many ideas about the communicative potential of drawing in clinical contexts, ultimately their different patients required different ways of working. What was most important for Milner, I'd conjecture, was to accommodate Susan's need for 'a safely held state in which it is not necessary to be too constantly aware of separateness' whilst simultaneously retaining such awareness for herself.¹⁰⁶ This is perhaps akin to the movement and rhythm between the different modes of attention (narrow and wide) she so valued in her drawing practice and which she saw as distinct modes of 'relating oneself to the other': 'the way of detachment, of analysis, of standing apart [...] and the way of fusion'.¹⁰⁷ In the clinical context however, the achievement of a rhythm between these modes is complicated dramatically by the presence two different subjects in the frame.

In the collections of diaries, notes and selected artworks in the Milner collection of the Archives of the British Psychoanalytical Society, there can be found evidence to suggest that Milner remained in a kind of background dialogue with her patient through her own drawing, sketching and doodling practices.¹⁰⁸ Quite apart from the clinically-focussed notes that Milner would have kept on the case (i.e. confidential patient notes), or the notes she would have kept for the publication of *The Hands of the Living God*, there exists more occasional material, suggesting a preoccupation with, rather than a direct attending to, prevalent motifs and themes from her work with Susan. Squiggles, and the figure of the face feature prominently, with examples seeming to replicate precise details of Susan's sketches, such as a collage of side-profile heads, or a sequence of enclosures (grids and spherical shapes) in which a head is contained.¹⁰⁹ There are a number of Milner's sketches that appear to rehearse a specific observation from the written case study, such as Susan's deep fear of blushing (discussed across the case-study), or Milner's characterisation of her patient's 'head-in-the-air disdainful pride'.¹¹⁰ In the comparative example at [Figure 3](#) we can see quite similar patterning between Milner's sketch on the left (reproduced with kind permission from The Archives of the British Psychoanalytic Society) and Susan's on the right, with Milner's title-ing of her sketch 'theme of shock' resonating with the electric shock treatment that left Susan with no sense of boundary at the back of her head. It is not my intention to impute direct correspondence between the sketches (they are not necessarily faithful copies of Susan's work, though we know it was Milner's practice to make rough copies from memory), but rather to suggest that they point to a different kind of background to the treatment. Much of Milner's engagement with her patient's artwork is an off-stage activity; privately copying, tracing, elaborating with her own hands, in order to contemplate what she had called, in her *On Not Being Able to Paint* book, the 'problem of establishing a dialogue relation between two

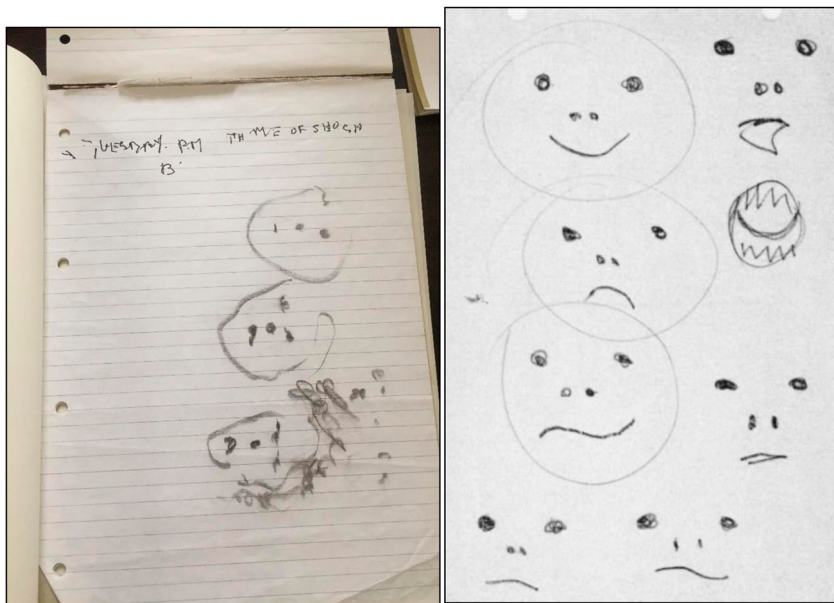


Figure 3. Comparative example. Left: Milner charcoal drawing on A4 lined paper, 'theme of shock', *Archives of the British Psychoanalytical Society*, P01-H-A-5 'Silvine Refill Pad'. Right: Figure 37 from *HOLG*, entitled 'Circles, as faces and toothed mouths'. By permission of The Marsh Agency Ltd., on behalf of The Estate of Marion Milner.

differences'.¹¹¹ My suggestion is that this background work grounded Milner's capacity to give of herself easily as a pliable medium so Susan might safely experience non-separateness in the sessions. Susan's struggle to become a person with a memory backing was figured out through the mind-body states of both patient and analyst. This work retains an inside and an outside, involving intrapsychic, intersubjective, embodied and aesthetic registers: It happens inside the sessions (between two bodies held by the clinical frame), as well as outside the sessions in dedicated spaces of thought and work. But it also happens in more transitional spaces, in the Winnicottian sense: areas of space and time that offer an exciting and therefore dangerous interweave of subjective and objective – spaces of relaxation, idle moments, absent mindedness, reverie, drift and so on. To enter these spaces is to permit, through a mode of wide-attention, the loosening of distinction and the possibility of fusion.

Adam Philips has observed that 'If you read everything that Milner wrote [...] you will see that it is all about her and Susan'.¹¹² When the private drawings in the Milner archives are considered alongside Milner's published work, the force of this statement can be extended: they show how Milner's creative methods, honed through her experiments in free drawing, were

deployed in the service of understanding her patient. In repeating, repeating, and figuring out the drawings of her patient, Milner was attending to Susan's problems of 'background awareness' and psychic separation, making consistent space (and unconscious space) for her patient's still-to-be-found memories, and exposing the risks to her own separateness along the way.¹¹³ For Milner this is a clinical task which echoes what she also saw as the political task of her times. This final point can be illustrated via a drawing of Susan's that Milner found especially difficult to receive (see [Figure 4](#)). In considering this image as a psychical text we can also return to the analogy of the Mystic Writing Pad.

Susan made the drawing directly after the E.C.T., just before she saw Milner for the first time, although it was not brought into the treatment for nine years. The drawing is of a human figure in what looks to be a self-embrace. The circular shape of the upper body has a distorted quality, and the oval-shaped head has its facial features positioned horizontally. Milner makes sense of the drawing along familiar lines to the reader: linking the production of the drawing to the rejection that Susan experienced from a significant female Doctor and maternal figure; interpreting its cradling gesture as indicative of the confusion and un-separation between mother and child; and identifying a kernel of 'hope' in the image connected to the possibility of self-soothing and healing following the E.C.T. In the treatment, the drawing becomes an 'intensely rich symbol' that allows Milner to see what her patient needed from her as a facilitating environment that might permit 'no distinction between the holder and the held'.¹¹⁴

But when Milner first saw the image, she admits to being deeply troubled by it and not knowing what to do with it.

On looking back I realised that the impact of this drawing had been so intense that I had been unable at first to bring myself to concentrate upon its meaning. It produced such a complex state of feeling to do with anguish and tragedy that it seems I did not really know what to do with it. There was one thing I had done, however, which, when I came to write this book, shocked me by its cavalier treatment of someone else's drawing. I had inked it over – in order, I thought, to see it better since it was so faint – instead of, as I should have done, making a traced copy. I was to remember this action of mine as a warning of how too great enthusiasm for the clarity of a verbal interpretation can also, at times, disastrously distort what the patient is experiencing.¹¹⁵

In reading her *inking it over* as an emboldening of a faint figure, Milner is expressing a wish to better see what Susan had lost sight of. Then, in likening this act of over-writing to an environmental impingement (in Winnicott's sense of the term¹¹⁶), she reminds herself of the analyst's need to keep in check her desire for clarity of perception when so much of the patient's experience remains unknown. Perhaps we can imagine the force of her ink pen, carefully following the contours of the figure, pressing down on top

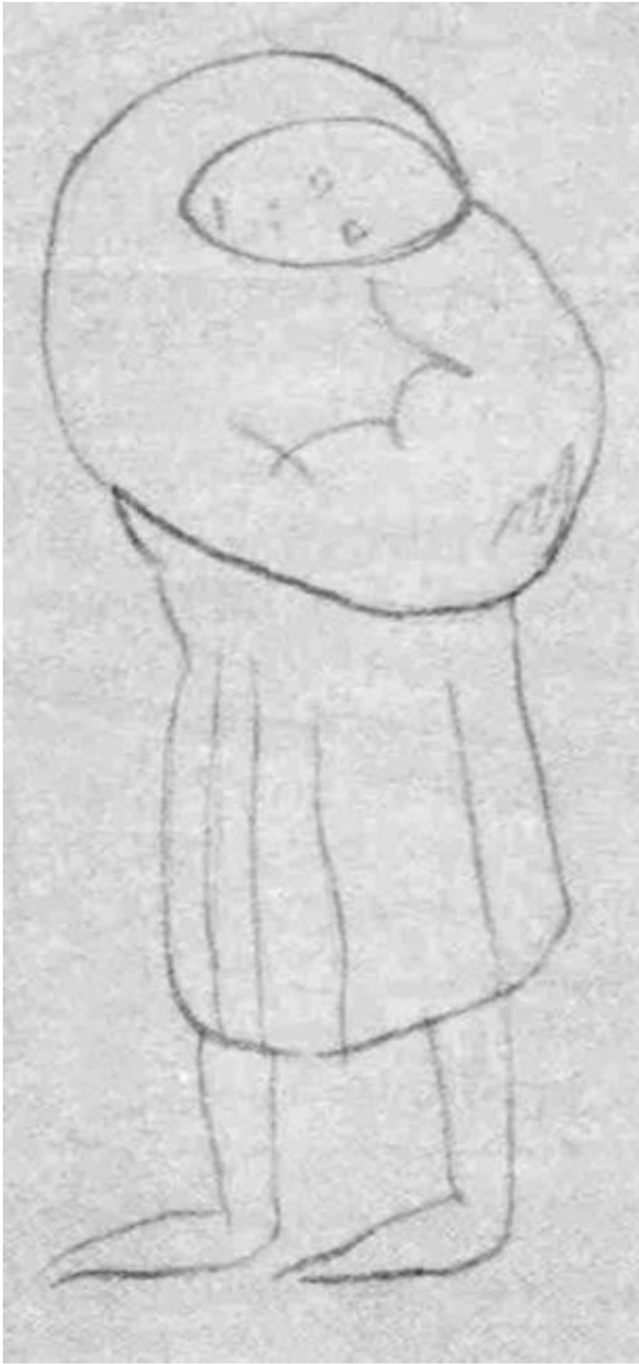


Figure 4. From Marion Milner's *The Hands of the Living God*, (Figure 100 in the original text, 'The post-E.C.T. drawing'). By permission of The Marsh Agency Ltd., on behalf of The Estate of Marion Milner.

of Susan's light pencil line with the kind of 'narrow focus' attention that she identified as an inhibitor to her own free drawing practice. If so, we can read Milner's *inking over* as a striving for objectivity, where clarity and precision gesture towards a knowledge or certitude that proved so elusive in this case. Equally, but moving in a different interpretative direction, we might be reminded of her description in her Painting book of the challenging interplay between different modes of looking required to 'realise' the uniqueness of other people ('in one's own imaginative muscles one feels the strain of the model's pose, in one's own imaginative body one feels the identity of one's opponent, who is one's co-creator'¹¹⁷). Might Milner's forceful *inking over* have been in the service of such an imaginative embodiment of the other? We can only speculate. But if Milner's treatment of Susan's drawings beyond the frame are legible as a '[putting] oneself into the other', then this would have needed to be balanced by the integrity of self she was also able to maintain. The intense labours of such clinical work are not to be underestimated.¹¹⁸ Indeed, it is possible to imagine how, outside of the consulting room, Milner had needed to assert herself with some force on the drawing which she found so troubling because, as Winnicott showed through his writing, a clinician's sentimentally – by which he means her denial of hate – will not serve her patient well.¹¹⁹ If, however, there is something destructive in such a 'cavalier treatment' of Susan's image, there is also something profoundly creative in it.

With the Mystic Writing Pad in mind, we can take Milner's note of 'shock' at having overwritten the image, rather than tracing a copy, as the acknowledgment of a violation of spacing. Had she placed a sheet of tracing paper on top of Susan's sketch, it might have replicated an external protective shield – that element of the perceptual apparatus whose task it is to diminish the strength of incoming excitations. However, as Freud understood it: 'the layer which receives the stimuli – the system *Pcpt.-Cs.* – forms no permanent traces'.¹²⁰ Thus, we might read Milner's writing-over (without a protective top-sheet) as expressing her concern for the creation a much-needed permanent trace of the mnemonic image. Given Susan's troubled sense of psychic spatiality (no inside existence, no unconscious), one can imagine the pressing impulse Milner may have experienced to create a background by means of reinforcing the outline of an image that might otherwise flicker-up and pass away.

In hypothesising that no permanent trace is formed in the system of perception consciousness, Freud posited that 'the foundations of memory come about in other, adjoining systems'.¹²¹ These 'adjoining systems' are then recast when Derrida writes: 'The "subject" of writing does not exist if we mean by that some sovereign solitude of the author. The subject of writing is a *system* of relations between the strata: the Mystic Pad, the psyche, society, the world'.¹²² It is the betweenness of the relational components in

this system that I have been interested in across this article – the spaces of potential overlap or rift which fuse and confuse the distinction between separate objects. In the final paragraph of Freud’s 1925 paper, he encourages the reader to ‘imagine one hand writing upon the surface of the Mystic Writing-Pad while another periodically raises its covering sheet from the wax-slab’.¹²³ Such is the coordinated activity that approximates the interplay of psychical systems through which a permanent memory trace might be preserved. When Derrida returns our attention to this image he stresses the point: ‘at least two hands are needed to make the apparatus function [...]’ – at least two hands.¹²⁴ Milner’s *Hands of the Living God* illustrates this. As a ‘natural co-practitioner’¹²⁵ and a thinker of the intersubjective, Marion Milner was uniquely placed to negotiate and better formulate the rhythms and distances of clinical spacing. Her understanding of dialogue as a means to bridge inner and outer worlds – whether in painting, journaling, or psychoanalysis – combined with her attention to perceptual and spatial sites of experience between self and other, suggests it was not only Milner’s psychoanalytic *holding* of Susan but her active *handling* of her drawings that comprised the background to the case.

Notes

1. The growing interest in Milner’s work has been strengthened by Emma Letley’s official biography of Milner (*Marion Milner: The Life*. Routledge, 2014) as well as her editorship of the 2010–12 Routledge series of Marion Milner works with new introductions by literary scholars and clinicians including, Rachel Bowlby, Maud Elman, Hugh Haughton, Adam Philips and Janet Sayers. Further, in addition to the contemporary scholarship I cite across this article, it is worth drawing attention to the 2021 special issue of *Critical Quarterly* (Vol 63, Issue 4) edited by Akshi Singh and Eve Dickson on *Marion Milner: Modernism, Politics, Psychoanalysis*; to Emilia Halton-Hernandez’s research monograph *The Marion Milner Method: Psychoanalysis, Autobiography, Creativity* (Routledge, 2023); and to the more clinically oriented edited volume *The Marion Milner Tradition, Lines of Development: Evolution of Theory and Practice over the Decades* edited by Margaret Boyle Spelman and Joan Raphael-Leff (Routledge, 2023).
2. L. Trilling, *The Liberal Imagination: Essays on Literature and Society* (New York, Viking Press, 1950), pp. 34–57, cited in Laura Marcus’s 2018 *Autobiography: A Very Short Introduction*. Marcus writes: ‘As the American critic Lionel Trilling observed, we should not be surprised that Romantic thought and literature was so important for the ‘science’ of psychoanalysis. Romantic literature was, in Trilling’s words, itself scientific, in ‘the sense of being passionately devoted to a research into the self – and, we could add, extensively drawing on the scientific knowledge of its time’. (Marcus, L. Oxford, Oxford Academic), p. 54.
3. The lack of reference to Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own* in Milner’s first book *A Life of One’s Own*, published under the pseudonym Joanna Fields in 1934, has been widely commented on. See for example Rachel Bowlby’s introduction to

- the 2011 edition of the text (Bowlby, R. 'Introduction' *A Life of One's Own*. Routledge, 2011), pp. xiii–xxxii, and Vanessa Smith's 'Transferred debts: Marion Milner's *A Life of One's Own* and the limits of analysis' *Feminist Modernist Studies*, 1.1–2 (2018), pp. 96–111.
4. See Helen Tyson, "'Catching Butterflies': Marion Milner and Stream of Consciousness Writing", *Literature Compass*, 17 (2020), pp. 1–14.
 5. See Emilia Halton-Hernandez's study of Milner which examines how her 'autobiographical cure' develops and challenges the psychoanalytic frame (op cit.).
 6. For examples, see L. Stonebridge, *The Destructive Element: British Psychoanalysis and Modernism* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998); H. Tyson, "'Forebodings about fascism': Marion Milner and Virginia Woolf. *Feminist Modernist Studies*, 4.1 (2021), pp. 1–21.
 7. H. Tyson, "'Catching butterflies": Marion Milner and stream of consciousness writing'. *Literature Compass*, 17 (2020), p. 4.
 8. My italics are to suggest that I am drawing on Winnicott's important concept of object-usage, wherein, to be able to truly 'use' an object, it needs to have survived the infant's/subject's destruction, only following which, Winnicott writes, the infant/subject will be able to say: "Hullo object!' 'I destroyed you.' 'I love you.' 'You have value for me because of your survival of my destruction of you.' 'While I am loving you I am all the time destroying you in (unconscious) fantasy.' Here fantasy begins for the individual. The subject can now use the object that has survived.' (Winnicott, D. W. 'The Use of an Object.' *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 50 (1969), pp. 711–6). This typically paradoxical formulation encapsulates Winnicott's conviction that destruction is a healthy and vital aspect of creative living, a conviction which we will also see in Milner's work. For a contemporary literary treatment of Winnicott's account of object use, see Barry Sheils, 'Style Interminable: The Auto-Fictional Object of the Humanities in Works by Brigid Brophy and Ben Lerner', *Textual Practice*, 36:4 (2022), pp. 518–41.
 9. Milner, M., *An Experiment in Leisure* (Routledge, (2011 [1937])), p. 81.
 10. Stonebridge, L., *The Destructive Element: British Psychoanalysis and Modernism* (London and New York, Routledge, 1998), p. 146.
 11. *HOLG.*, p. xxxix.
 12. Milner, M., *On Not Being Able to Paint* (London and New York, Routledge, (2010 [1950])), p. 44.
 13. When Milner first read Freud she was not immediately taken with psychoanalysis. Interestingly, in the preface to *The Hands of the Living God*, she writes that although she was 'intrigued by the cleverness of what it seemed the 'unconscious mind' could do, I think I was sad that it also seemed so often to use its cleverness in such indiscriminating ways' (*HOLG.*, p. xli).
 14. S. Freud, (1914) 'Remembering, Repeating, and Working Through', in James Strachey (ed.), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Works of Sigmund Freud* (London: Hogarth Press, 1995), Vol. 12, pp. 145–56.
 15. S. Freud, (1925) 'A Note Upon the 'Mystic Writing-Pad'', in James Strachey (ed.), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Works of Sigmund Freud* (London: Hogarth Press, 1995), Vol. 19, pp 225–32.
 16. Freud, 1914, p. 147.
 17. *Ibid.*, p. 148.

18. On the charge that psychoanalysis functions on the power of suggestion, Freud writes: 'This working-through of the resistances may in practice turn out to be an arduous task for the subject of the analysis and a trial of patience for the analyst. Nevertheless it is a part of the work which effects the greatest chances in the patient and which distinguishes analytic treatment from any kind of treatment by suggestion' (Ibid., pp. 155–6).
19. Ibid., p. 153.
20. Ibid., p. 153.
21. Ibid., p. 150.
22. For Freud, a belief in repression was one of the cornerstones of psychoanalytic theory (to the extent that anyone who didn't subscribe to its existence was not, in his view, able to call themselves a psychoanalyst). Milner is an interesting figure in this regard; see Maud Ellmann for discussion of Milner's 'disavowal of repression' and 'her sense of the unconscious as elusive rather than debarred [which] brings her closer to mysticism than to orthodox psychoanalysis.' (Ellmann, M., 'New Introduction' to *An Experiment in Leisure*. Marion Milner. London, Routledge, 2011), p. xxxv).
23. The value of psychoanalytic modes of reading within literary studies continues to generate much debate, especially within the context of a post critical turn (see S. Best and S. Marcus, 'Surface Reading: An Introduction', *Representations*, 108 (1) (2009), pp. 1–21; and E.A. Anker and R. Felski, *Critique and PostCritique*, Duke University Press, 2017). Rather than limit the psychoanalytic interpretive mode to the (Freudian) depth hermeneutic however, it is important to consider how clinically oriented practices of reading also bring attention to the surface and the foreground – Milner's work is exemplary in this regard.
24. S. Freud, '1925 'A Note Upon the 'Mystic Writing-Pad'', in James Strachey (ed.), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Works of Sigmund Freud* (London: Hogarth Press, 1995), Vol. 19, pp. 225–32.
25. Ibid., p. 227.
26. Ibid., p. 227.
27. Ibid., p. 229.
28. Ibid., pp. 230–1.
29. J. Laplanche and J. B. Pontalis, *The Language of Psycho-Analysis*. trans. D. Nicholson-Smith. (London, Karnac Books, 1973), p. 247.
30. Jacques Derrida, 'Freud and the Scene of Writing' in *Writing and Difference*. trans. Alan Bass. (London & New York, Routledge, 2001), pp. 272; 285.
31. In selecting Freud's Mystic Writing Pad paper as one of the coordinates through which to approach Marion Milner's work, I have not had scope in this paper to explore the different significations of the word 'mystic' for the two psychoanalysts. For commentary on Milner's 'mysticism' see for example Maud Ellman (op cit.) and Janet Sayer, ('Marion Milner: Recovering mysticism' in *Divine Therapy: Love, Mysticism and Psychoanalysis*. Oxford Academic, 2003), pp. 162–83).
32. Emma Letley, *Marion Milner: The Life* (London, Routledge, 2014), p. 17.
33. The statement comes from Milner's notebooks of the time, cited in H. Tyson 2020 (op cit.). In the text itself, and in ways that resonate well with today's happiness industry, Milner describes her own disillusionment with the 'experts' (including presumably those of the Pellman method): for example, she explains that 'by now I had reviewed all my past attempts to find happiness

- by following the instructions of mental training experts. Gradually a conclusion began to emerge. Instead of, as always before, assuming that they were right and therefore my inability to reach the promised results must be due to my own weakness, I began to ask whether this really was the way to find what I wanted.’ (Marion Milner, *A Life of One’s Own* (London: Routledge, 2011), p. 62). We see in this reflection, Milner’s abiding concern – across all her writing – with the space between knowledge and experience, and the difficulty of ‘trying to live one’s knowledge’ (Ibid., p. xxxiv).
34. Eric Rayner, for example, writes of *The Hands of the Living God* that ‘it can be read as a study in aesthetics or as a detailed case report of the successful treatment of a very ill woman’ (E. Rayner, *The Independent Mind in British Psychoanalysis* (London: Free Association Books, 1991), p. 74.). My suggestion is that, in Milner’s case, Rayner’s ‘either/or’ can be replaced with a ‘both/and’. For further discussion of Milner as a stylist, see Akshi Singh’s recent interview with Adam Phillips (A. Singh, ‘The Unconscious Was Another Word for Inspiration’: Adam Phillips on Marion Milner’, *The Critical Quarterly*, 63.4 (2021), pp. 6–19).
 35. Letley op. cit., p.58.
 36. I am riffing on a line from William James here from his 1890 *The Principles of Psychology*. ‘The Empirical Self of each of us is all that he is tempted to call by the name of me. But it is clear that between what a man calls me and what he simply calls mine the line is difficult to draw.’ (William James (1918 [1890]) *The Principles of Psychology*. New York, Henry Holt & Co., p. 292). The resonance with Winnicott’s thinking on the betweenness of the third or transitional space, and the allusion to drawing difficult lines serves my ongoing discussion of Milner’s work well.
 37. *ONBAP.*, p. xvii.
 38. *ONBAP.*, p. 14.
 39. *ONBAP.*, p. 19.
 40. *ONBAP.*, pp. 171–2.
 41. See also Hope Wolf, ‘A reasonably sheltered position’: Marion Milner, David Jones, and the location of art writing’, *Critical Quarterly*, 63.4 (2021), pp. 90–110.
 42. *ONBAP.*, p. 167.
 43. By returning repeatedly to this knot throughout her text, Milner demonstrates what Leo Bersani has called psychoanalysis’s ‘obsessive concern with the difference between the self and the world’ (see Bersani, (2010) *Is the Rectum a Grave? and Other Essays*. London, University of Chicago Press: p 101). Within the terms of psychoanalytic theory, this obsession finds expression in Freud’s much-contested notion of primary narcissism, which, in Milner’s spatialised treatment, connotes a ‘primary madness’. The sustained theoretical disagreement Milner had with Winnicott over his conceptualisation of the individual as an ‘isolate’ rehearses the same problem – for Milner, the fundamental significance of the merging and separation dynamic does not allow for the idea of a primary narcissism or isolate state.
 44. I am drawing here from Jacqueline Rose’s observations in her Introduction to her Milner-inspired *On Not Being Able to Sleep: Psychoanalysis and the Modern World* (2004, London, Vintage Books).
 45. *ONBAP.*, p. 167.

46. *ONBAP.*, p. 41.
47. *ONBAP.*, p. 106.
48. *On Not Being Able To Paint* was published at precisely the point at which Susan's drawing activity accelerated in the analysis (seven years into her treatment). Milner and Susan's work together raises a host of fascinating questions around influence, identification and mimicry in the clinic. For example, Milner explains how in the early years of the treatment, Susan's reading of *A Life of One's Own* 'was to provide the first bit of accepted common ground between Susan and myself' (*HOLG.*, p. xlii).
49. Adam Philips, 'Introduction', *The Hands of the Living God: An account of a psychoanalytic treatment* (Routledge, 2011), p. xxviii.
50. An excellent example of Milner's copying that is commented on in the case study can be found in the following statement concerning Susan's drawing entitled 'Cornucopia turd-face with first ground line' (figure 50 in the published text).
- It also puzzled me why the mouth has such a curious shape and gives such unpleasant impression. Only when I tried copying her symbol, did I find that the mouth is made up of a cross with a smile superimposed on it. The smile reminded me of the smile she sometimes showed on coming into her session, but which she herself could never give any meaning to. (*HOLG.*, p. 173)
- Here we are invited to imagine Milner getting close to the enigmatic communication that she would repeatedly receive in the consulting room and not know what to make of. By copying and more closely examining the drawing outside of the clinical frame, Milner enables herself to see something else in Susan's cross-lipped refusal to communicate. Incidentally, this image might be taken as a kind of emblem for the prominent Winnicottian theme concerning a 'sacred' and 'incommunicado element' in every person, that will insist on its right to silence (see D.W. Winnicott, 'Communicating and Not Communicating: Leading to a Study of Certain Opposites'. *The Maturation Processes and the Facilitating Environment: Studies in the Theory of Emotional Development*. The International Psycho-Analytic Library (1965). 64, (1963), p. 187).
51. Milner, *HOLG.*: xxxvii.
52. The complications and ethical compromises of this arrangement have been commented on by many (see Letley, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 52–3).
53. Across the 500-page case study only 153 of the 4,000 drawings are featured.
54. *HOLG.*, p. 5.
55. *HOLG.*, p. 11.
56. *HOLG.*, p. 291. For further clinical commentary on the demanding dynamics of separation and merging in Milner and Susan's work together, see Nina Fahri's excellent and deeply informed article on the case (Fahri, N. (2010) 'The Hands of the Living God: "Finding the Familiar in the Unfamiliar"', *Psychoanalytic Dialogues*, 20 (5), pp. 478–503.
57. The parenthetical qualification is added to reflect the parameters of 'cure' in clinical work. In his Introduction to the case, Adam Philips recounts Milner's response to his question about whether she thought that the analysis had 'worked': 'Of course she never got better', she said briskly and there was a pause. And then she said, 'but we got somewhere, she got somewhere', and there was another pause, and she said, 'better.' (*HOLG.*, p. xxxiii).
58. My personal favourite of Milner's casually kept 'useful concepts' that comprise the Glossary to the case study is her entry on the vexed notion of 'self': 'Self: the

- self is a discovery made in communication (Who said this? Someone in the 1920's or early 30's – M. M.) (*HOLG.*, p. 471).
59. *HOLG.*, p. 60.
 60. *HOLG.*, p. 61.
 61. See Letley, p. 117. See also Eve Dickson, "Redeeming the Body": Embodiment and the 'Other' in the Work of Marion Milner', *Critical Quarterly*, 63.4 (2021), pp. 73–89.
 62. See entries in Milner's Glossary on 'Illusions, moments of' and 'Inner Fabric or Matrix' (*HOLG.*, p. 468).
 63. *HOLG.*, p. 60.
 64. *HOLG.*, p. 61. We see here Milner's proximity to Winnicott on the value of taken-for-grantedness (for Winnicott, so much follows from being able to take for granted the reliability of the facilitating environment – or the good enough mother). A fuller statement on the same theme can be seen when Milner speculates that as a child Susan 'had felt an urgent need to keep a watchful eye on her surroundings, [...] at an age when she should have been able trustingly to take for granted the supporting environment, not even recognizing it as something separate from herself' (*HOLG.*, p. 176).
 65. *HOLG.*, p. 52. It is worth mentioning that at this point in the text, when Milner is developing her thinking about the traumatic consequences of the E.C.T. on Susan's perception and memory, she is in close dialogue with Freud's metapsychological writing, moving from his account of the place of internal perception and the verbal image in the mental apparatus to her own focus on the non-verbal image and a prelinguistic sensory awareness of self.
 66. *HOLG.*, p. 53; 54; 77.
 67. *HOLG.*, p. 54.
 68. Milner describes this image as 'a diagram trying to illustrate what [Susan] felt had happened to her after the E.C.T., how she felt cut off from all perceptions coming from inside herself, and was living in a narrow area at the top of her head.' (*HOLG.*, p. 52)
 69. *HOLG.*, p. 76.
 70. *ONBAP.*, p. 171. On this point, one might also consider Rachel Bowlby's emphasis on Milner's language of front-ness and back-ness of mind (e.g. 'back-of-my-mind thoughts') that pervades her early and non-clinical writing, and suggests a spatial reckoning with the problem of self-knowledge (Rachel Bowlby, Introduction to Marion Milner's *A Life of One's Own* (London, Routledge, 2011), pp. xiv–xxxii).
 71. I explain in the next section how the paradox of finding *and* creating is key to Winnicott's appreciation of illusion and transitional phenomena.
 72. I am exploring the proxemics of intimacy and risk in the consulting room in ongoing work, see for example J. Walsh, 'Proxemics and Psychotherapy: What does Two Meters Feel Like?', in *Society and Space* (2020) [online access: <https://www.societyandspace.org/articles/proxemics-and-psychotherapy-what-does-two-meters-feel-like>].
 73. M. Jacobus, *The Poetics of Psychoanalysis in the Wake of Klein* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 119.
 74. *HOLG.*, p. 94–5.
 75. For discussion of the figures of the spiral and the whorl in Susan's artwork see Emilia Halton-Hernandez, 'Spirals, whorls, and faulty containers: the

- psychoanalysis of form in the art of Marion Milner's *The Hands of the Living God* and the sculpture of Louise Bourgeois' in *Free Associations*, 75 (2019), pp 49–64.
76. *HOLG.*, p. 466.
 77. *HOLG.*, p. 45.
 78. Freud, S. (1914) Op. Cit.: p 154.
 79. *Ibid.*
 80. *HOLG.*, p. 468.
 81. Rayner, Op Cit: p. 77.
 82. *ONBAP.*, p. 136.
 83. *ONBAP.*, p. 134.
 84. *ONBAP.*, p. 136.
 85. *ONBAP.*, p. 134.
 86. *ONBAP.*, p. 135.
 87. *ONBAP.*, p. 136.
 88. E. Halton-Hernandez, 'Marion Milner's 'Pliable Medium' and the Role of the Patient's Creativity in the Analytic Encounter', in *British Journal of Psychotherapy* 00 (0) (2022), pp 1–11.
 89. D.W. Winnicott, 'Communicating and Not Communicating: Leading to a Study of Certain Opposites'. *The Maturational Processes and the Facilitating Environment: Studies in the Theory of Emotional Development*. The International Psycho-Analytic Library (1965). 64 (1963), pp 179–92.
 90. *Ibid.*, p. 188.
 91. *Ibid.*, p.183.
 92. *HOLG.*, p. 102–4.
 93. J. Abram, *The Language of Winnicott: a dictionary of Winnicott's use of words* (2nd Edition). (London: Karnac Books, 2007) pp. 212–3.
 94. 'Two Jugs' (Figure 8) in *ONBAP.*, p. 19.
 95. *Ibid.*, p. 167.
 96. *Ibid.*, p. 167.
 97. D.W. Winnicott, 'The Location of Cultural Experience' in *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 48 (1966), pp. 368–72.
 98. *Ibid.*, p. 369. A further layer of influence is added if we consider a possible inspiration for Milner's 'Two Jugs'. In her 'New Introduction' to the 2010 edition of *On Not Being Able to Paint*, Janet Sayers recounts how, in a public talk long after Susan's treatment had ended, Milner explored the 'interplay of inner and outer reality' by linking her 'Two Jugs' sketch with one of Susan's which depicts two overlapping faces (J. Sayer (2010) 'New Introduction' *On Not Being Able to Paint*. Routledge, p. xlvii).
 99. D.W. Winnicott, (1966), p. 371.
 100. For a recent account of the importance and influence of Winnicott's writing on the Transitional Object to Cultural Studies broadly defined, see Vicky Lebeau, 'D.W. Winnicott: "Transitional Objects and Transitional Phenomena"', in Frosh, Vyrgiotti, Walsh (eds.) *The Palgrave Handbook of Psychosocial Studies* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2022).
 101. D.W. Winnicott, (1963) 'Communicating and Not Communicating: Leading to a Study of Certain Opposites'. *The Maturational Processes and the Facilitating Environment: Studies in the Theory of Emotional Development*. The International Psycho-Analytic Library (1965). 64, pp. 181.

102. Ibid., p. 180.
103. C. Bollas, *Three Characters: Narcissist, Borderline, Manic Depressive* (Oxfordshire: Phoenix Publishing House, 2021), p. 50.
104. *HOLG.*, p. 187. Milner makes a point of commenting in the case study when this pattern of production and reception changed – for example, when once Susan ‘actually brought a tube of brown oil paint with her and made a picture while in the waiting room’ (*HOLG.*, p. 220).
105. For discussion of the witnessing and memory work of Winnicott’s Squiggle game, as well as Milner’s influence on Winnicott’s ‘visual turn’, see L. Farley, ‘Squiggle Evidence: The Child, the Canvas and the “Negative Labour” of History’, in *History & Memory*, 23.2, Fall/Winter 2011 (2011), pp. 5–39.
106. *HOLG.*, p. 279.
107. *ONBAP.*, p. 146.
108. I attend more fully to the correspondences between Susan’s drawings and material from the Milner archive in work currently in preparation.
109. *Archives of the British Psychoanalytical Society*, Marion Milner Collection [MMC], PO1-H-B-10 (Unidentified sketches); PO1-H-A-01 (Small black sketchbook).
110. *HOLG.*, p. 324.
111. *ONBAP.*, p. 133.
112. Philips, A. (2011) ‘Introduction’ *HOLG.* p. xxviii.
113. *HOLG.*, p. 428.
114. *HOLG.*, p. 279.
115. Ibid., p. 277–8.
116. Winnicott’s use of the term impingement refers to an interruption to the infant’s continuity of being which comes from the environment. See J. Abram, *The Language of Winnicott: a dictionary of Winnicott’s use of words* (2nd Edition) (London, Karnac Books, 2007), p. 173.
117. *ONBAP.*, p. 167.
118. See Nina Farhi (op cit..) on the risks and intensities of the clinical encounter for both parties.
119. D.W. Winnicott, ‘Hate in the Countertransference’, *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 30 (1949), pp. 69–74.
120. Freud, S. (1925) Op. Cit.: p. 230.
121. Ibid., p. 230.
122. Derrida, J. Op. Cit.: p. 285.
123. ‘If we imagine one hand writing upon the surface of the Mystic Writing-Pad while another periodically raises its covering-sheet from the wax slab, we shall have a concrete representation of the way in which I tried to picture the functioning of the perceptual apparatus of our mind’ (S. Freud, 1925. Op. Cit.: p. 232)
124. Derrida, J. Op. Cit.: p. 284.
125. Farhi, N. Op. Cit.: p. 480.

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