

## Milner Obituary

Michael Brearley

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MARION MILNER was a prominent independent psychoanalyst and writer. She trained as a psychologist and worked in industry, and in schools. Her interest in the unconscious grew from her personal approach to a vague sense of dissatisfaction; she kept a diary in which she recorded as honestly as she could her stream of consciousness.

She discovered by this method aspects of herself which she had previously denied - pettiness, vanity, fear and anger. She published a trio of books in which she revealed these feelings and discoveries. The first of these, *A Life of One's Own* (1934), is a particularly good introduction to her thinking and to the ways in which one person's self-deceptions were brought to light.

One of her central interests was the "Suppressed Madness of Sane Men", the title of a collection of papers published in 1987. This madness is, in her view, a matter of being cut off from the instincts and the body. It was her contention that the hard-won mental and emotional achievements of separation - of self from other, of feelings from things, of symbols from things symbolized - can be overvalued.

For many reasons we may cling to the raft of logical thinking in fear of the rough seas of imagination. In Freud's terms, secondary process thinking seems to drive out primary process. One reason for such an absolute solution would be having a mother who is emotionally ill: "such a human environment forces the child into a desperate clinging to the phase of thinking that . . . distinguishes between the 'me' and the 'not-me', because this is the only protection against an impossible confusion between their own and their parents' problem."

Psychoanalysis, Milner argued, is one area where such one-sidedness may be undone. It offers a space in which it is safe to be absent-minded and illogical; the transference itself involves illusion, and in fostering and working on this illusion, the analyst enables the over-sane person to allow something to be what it is and be another thing. "The recurrent merging with the object through the blurring of boundaries . . . must precede the creation of symbols."

She stressed the healthy aspect of such regressions, and the need for constant oscillations between such [states of mind](#) and the more logical, differentiating, practical, common-sense states which are also of course essential. The true self can be restored by the growth of the capacities of imagination and symbolization.

Milner underlined the need to imbue the common-sense world with one's personal sense of meaning. She described this process as the alchemy which transmutes base metal into gold. This requires a sacrifice of the old self and a plunge into emptiness, from which one develops a trust that, out of the unconscious, something new and

valuable can grow. These lines of thought led on to other interests of Milner's - the role of art and [poetry](#) in the life of the mind, and mysticism.

She was also a talented painter, and in *On Not Being Able to Paint* (1950) she wrote an important book on creativity and on some of the forces that prevent it. As with so much of her writing, she was not afraid to reveal herself. Her authorial voice was itself an instance of her view that "the internal gesture needed is to stand aside." *The Hands of the Living God* (1969), an account of a 20-year analysis, also focused on drawings and doodles, this time her patients'.

Milner's style was entirely hers. Every paragraph had her own stamp on it; she wrote in long sentences, letting thoughts develop and ramify almost as if she were speaking an inner dialogue aloud. At times the tone of what she wrote could move close to the ecstatic - a characteristic that may have been, in part, an expression of something she often regretted in herself, her never quite having reached to the deeper levels of her anger.

Right to the end of her life she retained a psychoanalytic attitude to herself and others, wondering if burst blood vessels in her eye a year or so ago were the result of unconscious anger. She wished she had lived late enough to benefit from the more sophisticated understandings of modern psychoanalysis. But she was also aware of the limits of psychoanalysis, especially in regard to the body.

Her last years were, physically, a struggle against increasing deafness, blindness and wobbliness; but her mind was wonderfully alive till the very end, her warmth, curiosity, humour and interest in other people intact. At the age of 93, she asked me to help her on to the swing in our garden, saying she hadn't been on a swing for 60 years. She remained beautiful, and was always elegant, in her idiosyncratic, many-layered, textured, and harmonious way.

It was a tremendous privilege and enrichment to be one of her friends. Our loss will be a little mitigated by the fact that there is another book to come: *Bothered by Alligators* will be an analysis of herself as a mother through her study of the illustrated story-book of her son, John, which he made when he was seven. Marion Milner had more or less finished this final act of love and reparation, and was, perhaps, ready to die.

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Nina Marion Blackett, training analyst, artist and author: born London 1 February 1900; married 1927 Dennis Milner (died in 1954; 2 sons); died London 29 May 1998.