

Marion Milner: Modernism, Politics, Psychoanalysis

Eve Dickson and Akshi Singh

We've often found ourselves surprised that the British psychoanalyst, writer and artist Marion Milner isn't better known, despite the richness of her writing and her influence on well-known figures such as D.W. Winnicott, Masud Khan, and Christopher Bollas. This special issue on Milner began as a response to that surprise, encouraged by renewed interest in her work and new attention to hitherto unexplored dimensions of her writing and art. The selection of essays in this issue hopes to present to the reader both the range of Milner's interests and concerns, and some of the responses it has prompted.

'Modernism, Politics, Psychoanalysis' is perhaps an awkward way of gesturing towards certain emphases in Milner's writing—awkward because the range of topics to which Milner gives her attention defy such neat categorisation. Milner herself is not easily situated, she was someone who was always 'between' things, genres and mediums. Born in 1900, she published nine books until her death in 1998. Her first two books, *A Life of One's Own*, and *An Experiment in Leisure* were published before she qualified as a psychoanalyst, under the pseudonym Joanna Field. Experimental and autobiographical, they trouble genre and, as Lyndsey Stonebridge, Vanessa Smith and Helen Tyson have previously highlighted, put her into dialogue with literary modernism.¹ Her psychoanalytic writing maintains a literary quality—she isn't associated with a set of concepts or theories, but she produced a body of work that consistently makes available to the reader aspects of experience that are difficult to put into words. Nonetheless – or perhaps precisely because her writing refuses easy classification – she is a much neglected figure in psychoanalysis. As her biographer Emma Letley writes, 'the psychoanalytic establishment does not really know what to make of her.'² She was, moreover, in the words of Adam Phillips in this issue, 'radically non self-promoting', something that makes her work all the more captivating, but has presumably not helped her work to be better known. Another side of Milner's work that has been even more obscured is her visual art – in addition to words, she created images. Milner produced paintings, doodles, and collages, which are distributed through the text in her books, moving back and forth between words and images, perhaps nowhere more so than in *On Not Being Able to Paint*.

Adam Phillips, a writer who also moves between literature and psychoanalysis, speaks at length about Milner in the interview with Akshi Singh published in this issue. Milner was a friend, colleague and important influence on Phillips, who speaks of the impossibility of being an 'impersonal spectator' when reading her work. The articles that follow pick up on aspects of Milner's work to which Phillips draws our attention, such as the relationship between self and other, the body, 'ordinariness', and her interest in Modernism and Romanticism. The interview, then, can also be read as a long introduction to Milner's work and her legacy. In her introduction to the interview, Singh suggests that Phillips inherits 'a mood' from Milner, or more precisely 'her mood'. We might say that this 'mood' permeates many of the essays in this issue, which in their own ways can often feel very Milnerian. In her essay on Marion Milner and Virginia Woolf, Helen Tyson puts Milner's writing in conversation with Woolf to show how both writers articulated a refusal of fascist discourses about political action in the 1930s. The essay invited us to consider Milner as a creative and astute observer of her political milieu, one who shared both aesthetic and political concerns with her modernist contemporaries. Political developments in England and Europe in the 1930s are negotiated in Milner's writing from that period, but they also cast a shadow over

Milner's later writing. Akshi Singh's article reads Milner's book of travel writing, *Eternity's Sunrise*, as an attempt to navigate the questions posed by the historical events through which Milner lived, and to which she returned when travelling through Greece, Israel, and Kashmir in later life. Tracking the ways in which these events inscribe themselves in Milner's writing, Singh examines the significance Milner ascribed to the experience of being alone.

Complementing Singh's focus on solitude in Milner's work, Eve Dickson invites us to consider Milner's idea of 'being together with the other' in her article for this issue. In so doing, she attends to the significance of the corporeal in the psychoanalytic encounter, addressing a double marginalisation in psychoanalysis: that of the body (as opposed to words), and of Milner herself as a psychoanalytic thinker. Milner's attunement to bodily states writes itself into her work on painting, psychoanalysis and politics. In its consideration of Milner's scribble drawings from the 1990s, Rye Dag Holmboe's essay shows just how intertwined words, images, and bodily states could be for her. The essay situates these drawings in both their art-historical and psychoanalytic contexts, shedding light on the ways in which drawing has been, in his words, 'the material and generative ground of [psychoanalytic] theory' in Britain. Through an experimental piece of art writing, Hope Wolf considers the possibilities for imagining and thinking opened by Milner's writing, and the work of the painter and modernist poet David Jones. Putting Milner into dialogue with Jones, Wolf draws out the personal and political implications of their work, while at the same time reflecting on their and her own positionality. In tracing the influence of William Blake on Marion Milner, Emilia Halton-Hernandez's article introduces us to one of the abiding influences on Milner's work, allowing her to be situated in the tradition of English Romanticism as much as she has, in the other essays, been put into dialogue with the modernists of whom she was a contemporary.

The essays collected here all speak to each other, and it has been a pleasure to be in dialogue with the contributors, whom we would like to thank for the generosity and enthusiasm with which they made themselves available to the project of putting together some new writing on Marion Milner. They did this through the challenges of the pandemic and we are so grateful. We would also like to thank Ewan O'Neill, the Archivist at the British Psychoanalytical Society Archive, for his continued support for this project, and Prof. Jan Abram, the Chair of the Archive Committee, for permission to publish material from Marion Milner's archive.

This issue by no means represents a comprehensive account of Milner's work, but we hope very much that it introduces, or reminds readers of the pleasures reading Marion Milner.

¹ Lyndsey Stonebridge, *The Destructive Element: British Psychoanalysis and Modernism* (New York: Routledge, 1998); Vanessa Smith, 'Transferred debts: Marion Milner's A Life of One's Own and the limits of analysis', *Feminist Modernist Studies*, 1, (2018), 96-111; Helen Tyson, "'Catching butterflies": Marion Milner and stream of consciousness writing', *Literature Compass*, 17, (2020), 1-14

² Emma Letley, *Marion Milner: A Life* (London: Routledge, 2014), 166