Anne Karpf/'It Thought Me': on interviewing Marion Milner. In: Boyle Spelman and Raphael-Leff, J., eds , 2022. *The Marion Milner Tradition*. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge

Before

When *The Observer* asked me to interview Marion Milner in 1987, I had no idea how eminent she was — indeed I'd never heard of her. It was relatively early in my experience of psychoanalysis, personal and academic, and I hadn't quite shaken off the idea that most psychoanalysts were forbidding figures with Mittel or Eastern European accents and not a tall, elderly and very British woman.

Then I began reading *A Life of One's Own* and *An Experiment in Leisure*.[1] I found both books rather alien at first — a little awkward in style, quite old-fashioned. I couldn't properly make sense of the extracts from Milner's diaries, staccato notes on daily fantasies (almost in real time) from deep within another person's life. It seemed odd to log fleeting thoughts, wisps of ideas, passing sensations in a medium that to me was about permanence and record. But then I came upon two passages that struck me with such force that it was like being knocked to the ground by a sudden gale.

The first, in a chapter entitled *The Coming and Going of Delight* in *A Life of One's Own*, was about a gestalt switch in attention from Milner's mind to her body and the resulting change in consciousness which such a small shift could bring about. It led her to experiment with not trying — doing things intentionally without effort, without frowning or tightening muscles, by restraining her head's tendency to interfere and by standing aside instead. As an inveterate, dogged trier, someone who imbued trying with almost magical powers, I found this shocking and wildly attractive. When, a year later, I learned the Alexander Technique for the first time, I recognised Milner's internal gesture as a cousin of Alexander's encouragement to stop 'end-gaining' — a challenge indeed for a virtuoso end-gainer like me.

The second illuminating moment arrived in the chapter called *Two Ways of Looking*, on narrow versus wide attention. This, the difference between looking selectively and looking as a whole, I got immediately. I remembered an instance when I'd been at university, rushing to the hairdresser to have my hair done up in a Chekhovian chignon in preparation for a nightly performance as Masha in *Three Sisters* at the Playhouse. I looked up and suddenly noticed the tops of the buildings and they shocked me — I'd forgotten that they existed: I was so tightly bound up in my little pod of business that everything outside of it had been erased. I glimpsed, at that moment of looking, how transactional my engagement with the outside world was — that I riffled it for what I needed for the task in hand, rather than allowing it to envelop and suffuse me.

Both those passages revealed how Milner was putting into words aspects of experience and perception that had mostly existed beneath the radar of language — tiny corporeal habits of

mind and being. Pierre Bourdieu identified *habitus* as our acquired, embodied systems of perception.[2] In a sense, Milner was capturing a psyche-body *habitus* that was so intrinsic, personal and unconsciously produced that it escaped both recognition and discussion. I immediately wanted her to save me.

I arrived at her house, not far from mine, and she took me into a very small study, strewn with papers. I seem to recall sitting slightly uncomfortably close to her. My interviewing of her was steeped in idealising and longing: I wanted what she had and I wanted her to give it to me, right there and then. When I think back on it, what strikes me now is how contained she was (no 'great woman' grandeur), how calmly she resisted my stabs at projective identification as she told me of her frustration in not having enough time to paint. It's only now, all these years later, that I realise that she was offering me something more valuable than the idealised analyst I was craving— an image of herself as a woman with struggles of her own.

Here's what I wrote about her at the time.

Insert article[3]

After

I bumped into Marion Milner at least once — or perhaps twice? My memory fails — after my article was published, outside the local greengrocer's. We chatted and she told me about a family matter that was vexing her. I wasn't ready for this — I still needed her to be perfect and, once again, the notion of her wrestling with a domestic problem unsettled me. It was only when I wrote her obituary for *The Guardian* eleven years later,[4] and spoke to the writer Margaret Walters about her, that I learned of her astonishing capacity to make new friendships, including with a number of younger people, throughout her life. And so I entertained another, this time retrospective, fantasy: that I might have become one of them.

Later, when I took up an academic post, I read *On Not Being Able to Paint*[5] and used it in my teaching: it helped me to look and see better. And when I read Winnicott, it was clear that Milner shared not just a professional realm with him but also an imaginative one — both of them so curious, so delighted in discovering ways of living as creatively, zestfully and openly as possible, but so very English too.

Perhaps the most powerful thing that Marion Milner said to me in the interview was her description of having an idea: "It thought me," she said. This completely startled me, although I knew exactly what she meant — the way that ideas arrived almost of their own volition, so that it seemed hubristic to claim ownership of them: all one needed was to create the right conditions in which they could flourish. In *The Suppressed Madness of Sane Men* this was rendered as "it thinks you", part of a reflection on creative surrender.[6]

All this time later, I understand more why I was discomfited by Milner's ideas, even while I found them seductive. With so much family trauma still to work through, surrendering — creatively or not — felt to me not just impossible but indeed dangerous: there were unexploded bombs from the second world war lying in wait that needed to be carefully detonated first. "The capacity to bear the tensions of doubt and of unsatisfied need" — I was a long way from that then but, over time, Milner's ideas became a part of my emotional grammar and my own way of looking.

Now, nearly 35 years after I met her, I'm starting to write about how trauma and trying are linked, about how the wider vision can get constricted and attenuated in the process. And in some small part of my being, I'm hoping that Marion Milner can think me.

Anne Karpf is a sociologists and writer, contributing to *The Guardian* and other publications. Her five books of nonfiction include a family memoir, *The War After: Living with the Holocaust* and *How Women Can Save the Planet*. Her research into the radio broadcasts of Donald Winnicott was funded by the Winnicott Trust. She is Professor of Life Writing and Culture at London Metropolitan University.

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[1] Milner, M., 1986. *A Life of One's Own*. London: Virago Press; Milner, M., 1986. *An Experiment in Leisure*. London: Virago Books

[2] Bourdieu, P., 2014. *The Logic of Practice*. Transl. from the French by R. Nice, 1992. Cambridge: Polity Press

[3] Karpf, A., February 2, 1987. 'Experiment in Leisure'. *The Observer*

[4] Karpf, A., June 3, 1998. 'Marion Milner: Journey to the centre of the mind'. *The Guardian*

[5] Milner, M., 1950. *On Not Being Able to Paint*. London: William Heinemann

[6] Milner, M., 1987. *The Suppresses Madness of Sane Men*. London: Tavistock