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# ‘Redeeming the body’: Embodiment and the ‘other’ in the work of Marion Milner

## Introduction

In the afterword to *The Suppressed Madness of Sane Men* (1987), an edited collection of Marion Milner’s psychoanalytic papers, Milner observes how few ‘technical psychoanalytic terms’ can be found in the book. At first seeming to slightly regret this absence, she quickly shifts her position to suggest that:

it may be that this disinclination to use technical terms has helped me to get a better hold on what seems to have been my deepest pre-occupation over the years: that is to do with one’s sense of being alive and inhabiting one’s body, what I have called one’s body presentation, as against body representations or body images, this sense of the inner dark matrix from which emerges drives to action or thoughts or emotional expression or new perceivings.<sup>1</sup>

There is something antithetical, Milner seems to say, between psychoanalytic terminology and understanding what I will call the ‘lived body’, a central line of thinking in her *oeuvre*. While Milner’s formulation emphasises what her ‘disinclination to use technical terms’ has allowed her to do – thereby keeping the focus on her own thought – another way of reading this passage is that she has identified a constraint within psychoanalytic discourse, which has in some way not been conducive to thinking about bodily experience. Perhaps Milner’s modesty here obscures what is one of her most radical contributions to psychoanalysis: a deep engagement with embodied experience and its role in the intersubjective relationship between self and other, analyst and analysand. In her view, attending to one’s body from the inside – deepening one’s awareness of bodily experience – is central to the analytic process, and, more broadly, to cultivating an openness towards the other. Despite this, Milner is rarely credited with developing a body-focused approach to psychoanalysis and her insights into embodiment are yet to be substantially recognised.<sup>2</sup>

In this article I trace the significance of embodiment across Milner's autobiographical, theoretical and clinical work, domains of her thought that have often been treated separately. I seek to highlight her sustained engagement with the experience of inhabiting one's own body and the centrality of embodiment in the intersubjective encounter in the consulting room and beyond. I begin by considering the role of embodiment in Milner's theory of the relationship between self and other. Drawing primarily on *On Not Being Able to Paint* (1950) and 'Painting and Internal Body Awareness' (1960), I explore the relationship between Milner's dialectic of perception and her idea of 'being together with' the other, showing how she elaborates an ethics of alterity which has bodily awareness at its centre. I then read 'Painting and Internal Body Awareness' alongside *Eternity's Sunrise: A Way of Keeping a Diary* (1987), taking up Milner's observation that both texts attempt to grasp 'the effects on one's relation to the outer world of directing one's attention inwards'.<sup>3</sup> It is in *Eternity's Sunrise* that Milner's project of 'redeeming the body' is most fully articulated: she situates embodiment as a particular kind of non-rational knowledge, one that does not seek the separation of subject and object but rather stems from a willed 'con-fusion' between self and other. Milner rejects the mind/body dualism at the heart of the Western philosophical tradition and advocates for a 'dialectic re-union' between psyche and soma. Finally, I show how Milner's preoccupations with bodily experience are intertwined with her critique of psychoanalysis, and particularly its privileging of the verbal. Through her impressionistic reflections on embodiment, her analytic work in *The Hands of the Living God* (1969), and through her very use of language, which enacts the difficulties of articulating bodily experience discursively, Milner invites psychoanalysis to attend to the body beyond the verbal domain.

### Wide attention in Athens

In 1960 Milner travelled to Athens to give a paper titled 'Painting and internal body awareness' at a Congress on Aesthetics. The paper, reproduced in *The Suppressed Sadness of Sane Men*, is concerned with what Milner terms 'body attention', a state in which consciousness is suffused in the lived body. Milner's focus in this paper is on 'the direct sensory (proprioceptive) internal awareness [...] the actual "now-ness" of the perception of one's body, and therefore of the perception of oneself'.<sup>4</sup> She traces this concern back to the time of writing her first book, *A Life of One's Own* (1934), an introspective analysis of what

made her happy, which she wrote in an experimental stream of consciousness style and published under the pseudonym Joanna Field. In the course of writing *A Life of One's Own*, she realised that cultivating this internal body awareness enriched her perception of both herself and the external world. In Milner's vocabulary, this enrichment of perception comes about through a process of 'wide attention' which strives to rekindle contact with a 'primary body awareness'. 'Wide attention', first set out in *A Life of One's Own*, describes a process of widening perception – suspending what Milner terms 'narrow attention', which focuses only on that which is of immediate interest, and maintaining an openness that is bound up with the experience of bodily relaxation. It is a mode of experience that involves the whole of the body, requiring a deep attendance to 'one's own internal body perception, [which] is inarticulate, dark, and undifferentiated'.<sup>5</sup> For Milner, 'narrow attention' was the default mode of perception, 'probably essential for practical life'<sup>6</sup> and was associated with 'discursive logical verbal thought' and the intellect.<sup>7</sup> Wide attention, on the other hand, whereby 'consciousness [...] suffuse[s] the whole body' was intimately connected with both art and the unconscious.<sup>8</sup> Milner conceived of 'narrow' and 'wide' attention dialectically; she believed that 'true perceiving' required an interaction of the two.<sup>9</sup> But Milner was undoubtedly more interested in 'wide attention' and most of her work was concerned with privileging this 'wider' mode of perception.

In *On Not Being Able to Paint* (1950), a text in which Milner begins to experiment with 'free drawings', she suggests that these two kinds of attention 'can also be thought about in terms of the antithesis of male and female ways of being'.<sup>10</sup> In doing so she invokes a series of longstanding and interconnected binary oppositions in Western thought: between male/female, mind/body, rationality/irrationality, with the second term traditionally functioning as the gendered 'other' of the dominant first term. However, the gendered dimension of her dialectic remains underdeveloped, surfacing only occasionally in tentative formulations such as the one just quoted. Although Milner states that 'narrow' and 'wide' attention 'can' be gendered, her own stance is never fully articulated, and any conclusion that her privileging of the 'other' terms (the body, irrationality) of these binaries can be conceived of as a potentially feminist endeavour would be at best provisional. We might instead conceive of gender in her model of perception as a question suggestively posed but never answered, and as encapsulated by the following line in *Eternity's Sunrise*: 'Is it perhaps easier for a woman, potentially to do this deliberate letting awareness go down inside away from striving

after assertive action in the outer world, and just letting oneself be breathed?"<sup>11</sup> Women are imagined as potentially more capable of cultivating 'wide attention' – for Milner the female body may be more receptive, more able to allow itself to be 'acted upon', as the metaphor of 'letting oneself be breathed' implies. Yet the question remains open, and Milner's stream of thought moves on.

The dialectic between narrow and wide attention can be mapped onto Milner's idea that there are two kinds of thinking: 'the kind of thinking that makes a separation of subject from object, me from not-me, seer from seen, and the kind that does not'.<sup>12</sup> Milner understands narrow attention as a mode of perception inherently concerned with separation, whereas wide attention is seen as bringing about a 'dialectic re-union' between mind and body, the psyche and the material.<sup>13</sup> Although Milner's notion of primary body awareness involves a deep awareness of one's own body, it is somewhat paradoxically configured not as an experience of withdrawal from the external world, but as an experience that, through sinking into one's own body, opens oneself to the other. Behind narcissistic states, Milner claims, lies 'an attempt to reach a beneficent kind of narcissism [...] which, if properly understood, is not a rejection of the outer world but a step towards a renewed and revitalized cathexis of it'.<sup>14</sup> This mode of bodily perception, then, is not in any straightforward sense a narcissistic state, but is an experience that can return us to the external world anew.

Milner's concept of 'primary body awareness' would seem to invoke Freud's notion of the 'oceanic feeling'. In *Civilization and its Discontents* (1929), Freud writes that his friend Romain Rolland proposed that the 'real source of religiosity' was:

a particular feeling of which he himself was never free, which he had found confirmed by many others and which he assumed was shared by millions, a feeling that he was inclined to call a sense of 'eternity', a feeling of something limitless, unbounded – as it were 'oceanic'.<sup>15</sup>

Freud continues by sharing his difficulty in analysing Rolland's description, admitting 'he can discover no trace of this "oceanic feeling" in himself. But he goes on to locate the origins of the feeling of 'being indissolubly bound up with and belonging to the whole world outside oneself' in the infant's experience of the 'all-inclusive ego' in early life.<sup>16</sup> According to Freud, this limitless feeling resurfaces in pathological states and in the experience of love. Milner's version of this state foregrounds embodiment and an earthy, undifferentiated kind of

materiality. Ten years prior to her Athens paper, Milner suggested in *On Not Being Able to Paint* that it was through awareness of the body that the division between self and other could be transcended. She observed that:

in order to 'realize' 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.<sup>17</sup>

For Milner, the transcendence of the division between self and other is crucial for the recognition of alterity. Her choice of words here is interesting. 'Realising' is a polyvalent term, meaning, on the one hand, the cognitive act of coming to awareness (becoming conscious of the other), and on the other, the creative act of 'making real' (making the other 'real' to oneself). Milner uses a striking artistic metaphor to describe this embodied 'realisation' – an artist beholding a model in the act of life drawing or painting. In her schema, the process of putting 'oneself into the other' takes place through the imaginary anatomy. Milner argued that the encounter with the other required a temporary resignation of the self, an intentional letting go of the division between self and other. She valued such experiences of 'oneness' highly and in many ways her work represented a drive to rediscover states of experience that did not separate subject from object. But Milner's preoccupation with such states went beyond a nostalgic return to primary unity. Fusion was, in the words of her biographer Emma Letley, at 'one end of a constantly alternating polarity which is the basis of all psychic creativity, and therefore of symbol formation and psychic growth'.<sup>18</sup> Milner saw the individual oscillating between separation and fusion and argued that the task was 'neither to go wholly over to the opponent's side, nor yet retreat into armour-plated assertion of one's own view-point'.<sup>19</sup> In this sense, Milner seems to advocate for a kind of Winnicottian transitional space – an area that exists between the internal world of the infant and external reality.<sup>20</sup> The space occupied, then, is somewhere between self and other, an area in which there are no stable subject positions but nor is there a total merger. This space, Milner suggests, can be found in the analytic environment, 'a setting in which it is safe to indulge in reverie, safe to permit a con-fusion of "me" and "not-me"'.<sup>21</sup> Milner's pun on 'confusion' calls attention to the way in which she is arguing for a willed

'coming together with', a 'con-fusion' between self and other, rather than an unconscious 'confusion' of subject positions.

Milner conceptualised the unconscious as the realm of nondifferentiation *par excellence*. As she writes in 'Psychoanalysis and Art', 'the unconscious mind, by the very fact of its not clinging to the distinction between self and other, seer and seen, can do things that the conscious logical mind cannot do'.<sup>22</sup> It is this very lack of distinction between subject and object that gives the unconscious the creative capacity that Milner ascribes to it. But for Milner, the process of entering into a space of nondifferentiation is always twofold. On the one hand, it involves, as she writes, 'a letting go of the discriminating capacities which distinguish differences' and, on the other, a kinaesthetic relaxation ('a letting go of all voluntary control of the muscles').<sup>23</sup> Milner believed that it was in art that we could 'restore the split' between subject and object, which she referred to as the 'primary hate'.<sup>24</sup> Building on the claims of art critic Adrian Stokes, Milner suggested that 'this is what the artist strives to recreate, a sense of fusion, thus renewing the oceanic feeling but combined with object "otherness"'.<sup>25</sup> This renewal of the oceanic feeling – aimed for also in Milner's process of 'wide attention' – is, very importantly, different from the primary experience of fusion. It is a form of narcissism that is paradoxically 'combined with object "otherness"'. Its dialectical pathway might thus be traced: self–other–return to self.

The practice of wide attention is significant for Milner both in terms of aesthetic experience and psychoanalysis. In *On Not Being Able to Paint*, Milner describes a deeply physical encounter with a tree she draws: 'In drawing that tree, the spread of the branches and leaves gives an awareness of my shoulders and arms and fingers and I feel its roots in my feet'.<sup>26</sup> This is an experience in which the distinctions between subject and object waver and a heightened sense of bodily awareness occurs through a process of feeling oneself into the object of perception itself. The form of the tree is felt in the body of the perceiver. Milner terms this 'a spreading of the imaginative body in wide awareness ... [which] somehow included one's physical body as well as what was being drawn'.<sup>27</sup> This mode of bodily concentration which enhances the capacity to perceive the object, was also used by Milner in her analytic work. Discussing 'wide attention' as a form of analytic technique, Milner writes:

What I mean by body attention or body concentration in the analyst is this: it is a state in which the direct proprioceptive body-self awareness, which I suppose is best called the body presentation, as distinct from the body representation or body image,

becomes the foreground of one's consciousness rather than the pre-conscious background. As I see it, this kind of attention in the analyst differs from the free-floating kind [...] because it is not 'in the air'; it deliberately attends to sinking itself down into a total internal body awareness, not seeking at all for correct interpretations.<sup>28</sup>

Here Milner has a phenomenological focus. Attention is not concentrated on any representation of the body, but on the experience of inhabiting one's own body. That is to say, the material, fleshly body in which one feels oneself kinaesthetically. The analytic process is reformulated as deeply material and grounded in embodied knowledge. By directly contrasting this corporeal perception to that of the 'free-floating [analytic] kind', Milner suggests that the analyst's attention in the traditional psychoanalytic setting is somewhat disembodied. It is 'in the air' as opposed to suffused in the material/corporeal. Further distinguishing her normative conception of the operation of the analyst's attention from that offered in classical psychoanalytic technique, Milner notes that 'wide attention' is 'not seeking at all for correct interpretations'. In this sense, we can discern the presence of Milner's two kinds of thinking – 'wide attention' on the part of the analyst is set against a kind of disembodied 'narrow' attention that would seek 'correct' interpretations. If the 'free-floating' attention of the analyst attempts to attend to the verbal, Milner's embodied attention is as much concerned with the non-discursive and the material. Feeling oneself into one's body in this way is a method by which the being of the other can be imaginatively entered into. Milner links this bodily concentration directly to the analytic process, claiming that at the end of analysis, 'it is not only the repressed that is discovered, but also some sort of active direct feeling contact with a primary body awareness'.<sup>29</sup> With her concept of 'wide attention', Milner de-centres the verbal in the analytic setting and describes a form of analysis that situates the lived body at its heart. In so doing, though perhaps in a rather quiet fashion, Milner makes a radical break with Freudian theory and its privileging of the linguistic.

### **Redeeming the body**

At the heart of Milner's work is a project of 'redeeming the body' – refusing the 'splitting' of Cartesian dualism and bringing about 'dialectic reunion' of mind and body. This strand of her thinking builds throughout her *oeuvre* and culminates in *Eternity's Sunrise*, a book she wrote towards the end of her life and to which I shall now turn. Examining the



ways in which Milner redeems the body in this text, I consider how her work is concerned with, and enacts, the difficulties of articulating bodily experience discursively. Milner's writing performs a struggle to articulate embodied states in words, seemingly finding relief in imagery and the visual. Her vocabulary around bodily experience is slippery – she moves between various overlapping terms throughout her life, such as 'wide attention', 'wide looking', 'wide focus', 'wide concentration', 'primary body awareness', 'incarnation' and 'one's body presentation' to capture the experience of deeply inhabiting one's own body. But the mobility of her language around the body, and what may sometimes be perceived as vagueness, can be understood as reflecting a struggle to 'hold on' to the ineffable bodily experiences that preoccupy her. The way in which language falters or needs to be continuously reworked as Milner endeavours to grasp these embodied states reflects the non-verbal nature of these experiences themselves, which always exceed the linguistic realm. Taking up her reflection that *Eternity's Sunrise* was another way of thinking through the ideas about embodiment that she explored in 'Painting and Internal Body Awareness', I argue that what Milner terms her 'beads' – a word she uses in the text for significant objects, memories and images from her travels that provoke deep insights and profound reflections – can be understood, in part, as a response to the difficulty of representing the experience of inhabiting one's own body in language.

Discussing her Athens paper in *Eternity's Sunrise*, Milner writes: 'I had ended the paper with an attempt to state in intellectual, psychoanalytic terms what, I could see now, my trophy of the Delos snake-skin had led me to ponder over in ordinary language'.<sup>30</sup> The 'trophy of the Delos snake-skin' is one of Milner's 'beads'. These 'trophies and keepsakes' – remnants from her trips to Greece, Kashmir, and Israel – become highly condensed poetic images through which Milner explores her ideas about the relationship between self and other, internal body awareness, and hate, amongst other things. At first seeming to Milner like a 'tangled mass of fragmented images', these objects and images ('the beads') become something quite different over the course of the text – more akin to Christopher Bollas's 'evocatively nourishing objects' through which the self is elaborated.<sup>31</sup> 'Telling the beads', meditating on the dreamwork of her objects, Milner takes us on a psychic journey that she interweaves with her actual travels. Hugh Haughton has likened Milner's beads to Joycean 'epiphanies', Virginia Woolf's 'moments of being', and Proustian revelations,<sup>32</sup> with such literary comparisons reflecting not only a certain modernist sensibility in Milner's work, something that has been highlighted by a number of scholars, but also



the literary qualities of her writing.<sup>33</sup> Others, such as Naome Rader Dragstedt, have noted the ways in which Milner works within a Romantic tradition, inheriting from the English Romantic poets 'a sensibility of true feeling, a thinking with the body rather than dissociated from sensations, and an appreciation for the creativity involved in seeing the world freshly and truly by yielding to feelings of identification and oneness with the things that are perceived'.<sup>34</sup> It is precisely this 'thinking with the body' in Milner's work that I'm concerned with in this paper.

The Delos snakeskin is the 'sloughed-off skin of a snake' that Milner finds on the island of Delos – the birthplace of Apollo, as she tells us – in 1959. It is a very distinctive bead as it is literally the membrane that separates a living being (the snake) from the surrounding world, providing Milner with fertile ground to imaginatively inhabit the skin of another (formerly) living being. Her meditation on the snakeskin begins with the feeling that:

Instead of seeing with my eyes it feels as if I am seeing through them [the snake's eyes] ... And the difference is that I have become deeply aware of the double aspect of space, this outer one that surrounds me, this room in which I am writing, lit by the flickering wood fire and the lamplight, and this inner one which is the space my body takes up and is not lit at all, it's dark and incommunicable in words, indescribable – but not empty, it's warm and rich, full of an odd sort of joy, though a profane kind, almost.<sup>35</sup>

As with the moment discussed above in which Milner contemplates the form of the tree she draws, the snakeskin is an object that Milner 'feels herself into'. Paradoxically, however, seeing through the eyes of the snake leads Milner to an enriched perception of inhabiting her own body. This lived body is imagined as 'dark' and hard to grasp, as in 'Painting and Internal Body Awareness'. It is slippery and ineffable ('incommunicable in words, indescribable') but strongly grounded in affect and sensation ('warm and rich'). Continuing, Milner writes: 'the more I attend to this, the more rich and full of being the things *outside* become, the texture of things'.<sup>36</sup> Sinking down into this bodily awareness via the snakeskin, Milner finds that her perception of the external world is enriched and intensified. Once again, there is a dialectical movement from the object (outside) to the body (inside) and back to the external world.

Milner goes on to describe the difficulty of sustaining this heightened mode of perception, finding that she oscillates between it and a disembodied state in which she exists only in her own thoughts, 'only

in the struggle to find words for this process', while the process continues 'above and in front of ... [her] eyes'.<sup>37</sup> 'But once one starts being behind one's eyes, attending to what one's body feels like from inside', she writes, 'especially to the totality of the feeling of its weight, it's then that there is liable to come what I once called the "answering activity", something seems to open up ... and one's breathing gets deeper'.<sup>38</sup>

The phrase 'being behind one's eyes' draws a line between *Eternity's Sunrise* and *The Hands of the Living God* (1969), an extended account of Milner's treatment of a young woman named 'Susan' that began in 1943 and lasted seventeen years. As a psychoanalytic case study it is rather unique, spanning over 400 pages and including at least 150 of Susan's drawings. Susan, who suffered from acute dissociation following electroconvulsive therapy, described to Milner feeling that she had 'lost her background', was 'shot forward' and 'not behind her eyes'.<sup>39</sup> Milner interprets these symptoms in terms of a regression to a psychic state 'in which there is as yet no distinction between what is "out there" and what is inside oneself, thoughts, feelings, bodily sensations; in other words, before having reached any recognition of subjectivity, or the privateness of what is behind one's eyes'.<sup>40</sup> Like *Eternity's Sunrise*, *The Hands of the Living God* firmly locates subjectivity within the body – 'behind one's eyes'.

Milner tells us that the beads continually return her to a mysterious and evasive thing she calls the 'answering activity' (which she sometimes capitalises). This is another concept that can feel vague and hard to grasp, partly because of the difficulty she has describing it in words, but might be understood as something akin to the 'receptive unconscious' that we find in the work of Bollas. It represents an unconscious which is not the repressed unconscious but something altogether more expansive, creative, and contactable. First introduced in *An Experiment in Leisure*, the answering activity is both 'other' and part of the self, something unconscious that can be 'contacted' or 'plugged into' through the cultivation of bodily awareness. Milner evokes the idea impressionistically through images, likening 'plugging into' the answering activity to 'suddenly remembering to open a kind of little trap-door inside and finding a great expansion of spirit'.<sup>41</sup> But there are also moments when she cannot 'find' the 'inner other' of the answering activity and 'one is alone in one's ego-island and it's a desert'.<sup>42</sup> It is deeply bound up with the capacity to oscillate between 'being one and being two' – feeling that one is a lone ego and being able to shift to a position in which one can find the other within.<sup>43</sup>

Embodiment is central to Milner's notion of the answering activity, as she writes in *Eternity's Sunrise*:

So – incarnation, finding in one's body the answering activity or whatever one wants to call it. Surely this is all ways of redeeming the body, not feeling it an enemy, not splitting it off and calling it the 'flesh' and lumping it with the devil. Nor yet giving in to its unredeemed state, its laziness, its hatred of pain or its terrible slowness, resistance in learning anything new.<sup>44</sup>

In this sense, Milner aims to counter the longstanding devaluation of the body in Western thought and its negative reduction to 'flesh' in the Christian tradition. Janet Price and Margrit Shildrick note that 'the post-Cartesian modernist period is marked by a rejection of the body as an obstacle to pure rational thought. As such, the body occupies the place of the excluded other, and can be dismissed from consideration altogether'.<sup>45</sup> The body, historically aligned with 'woman', occupies the position of the 'other' in post-Enlightenment thought. Writing against this epistemic and gendered rejection of the body, Milner attempts to incorporate the 'excluded other' within the self. Milner's project of centring embodiment might thus be fruitfully read alongside feminist psychoanalytic work seeking to 'redeem' the body. We might say, for example, that Milner is deeply engaged with Luce Irigaray's question: 'How does a psychoanalyst look at, conceive of or listen to the body?' Although less forthright in its critique and unclear on its position on gender, Milner's work brings the body to bear on psychoanalysis and questions of intersubjectivity.

It is through 'incarnation' – being embodied – that one can contact and open up the depths of the answering activity, Milner's receptive unconscious. Discovering, as Milner puts it, that 'I am always a couple' seems to be suggestive of how the process of incarnation might bear on the ethics of intersubjectivity.<sup>46</sup> Enlarging perception to an oceanic level, as Milner's method of bodily concentration aims to do, is a way of reconfiguring the relationship between self and other. Transcending the boundaries that separate the self from others – a task that, for Milner, involves a synthesis of mind and body – might enable a kind of beneficent surrender to alterity that makes for a deepening of intersubjective relationships. Milner locates this intersubjective potential precisely at the site of the body; it is attendance to embodiment that leads us to the other.

Yet, as has been seen, Milner's writing is also marked by an ambivalence towards the body. The undesirable, 'unredeemed' body – slow, lazy, averse to pain – is also present in the quotation above. For Milner, the 'unredeemed body' is something to be guarded against. We see this potential anxiety about the body again later in *Eternity's Sunrise* when

Milner asks herself, 'What about inborn defects and deformities?'<sup>47</sup> This question leads Milner to doubt the status of the body:

In 1932 I quoted Nietzsche: 'The body is a big sagacity', etc. But surely not so much sagacity when the D.N.A. produced monstrous or idiot children? Does anybody know just what causes this to happen? But then there is also the astonishing capacity of the body to learn to compensate for disabilities, if given a chance, even to correct the distortions that one has oneself caused through years of mistaken ways of using one's own body.<sup>48</sup>

On the one hand Milner valorises the body, but on the other, she conceives of the disabled body as non-normative, abject, and undermining the idea of the body's sagacity. She conceptualises the 'deformed' body as a manifestation of the limitations of the body's knowledge. It would thus seem that when she writes of 'the body' in an idealised sense, Milner has a very particular body in mind. Her project of redeeming the 'othered' body, then, struggles to avoid enacting its own 'othering' – marking the disabled body as different, undesirable and 'other'. This tension risks reproducing a hierarchal binary (ability/disability), despite Milner's intention elsewhere to transcend such divisions. At the same time, however, Milner's writing is itself dialectical. Rather than presenting a 'finished' argument, Milner uses questions to work out her argument with the reader. Her doubt about the body's wisdom yields somewhat in the last line of the quotation, as she reflects on the body's fluidity and lack of fixity. She seems to return once again, via a dialectical method, to a conception of embodiment as unfixed and mobile, more in keeping with her notion of the body as the potential site for 'dialectic re-union'.

### **'Not expressible in verbal form'**

Contrasting the work of 'the beads' with her paper for the Athens Congress on Aesthetics, Milner writes: 'The Athens paper was in discursive language, an attempt at an intellectual statement in explicit and logical terms, while the beads were, I supposed, nearer to poetry than logic, in that they contained many layers of implicit meaning all condensed into each image'.<sup>49</sup> It is through poetic images – the Delos snakeskin and other beads, such as a memory of Giorgione's painting of *The Virgin and the Gypsy* – that Milner can attend to 'being embodied', a state that always seems to be beyond the discursive. The beads offer an imagistic medium through which Milner can meditate upon

the complexities of embodiment and its material and affective dimensions. It is in this mode, rather than with 'discursive language', that Milner seems most 'at home' and able to explore her preoccupations with the body. This is no surprise given the 'undifferentiated' quality of the bodily states that Milner is concerned with. Language, for Milner, was aligned with the 'separated state of mind ... our very speech depends on it (subject, verb, object)'.<sup>50</sup> Visual images, on the other hand, enabled Milner to 'express a concept which is actually paradoxical, not expressible in verbal form'.<sup>51</sup> Writing about Freud's idea that some people thought in visual images, Milner admits in *Eternity's Sunrise* that she had 'slowly [...] come to accept that I was one of them'.<sup>52</sup> As Rye Dag Holmboe notes elsewhere in this themed issue, Milner saw images as deeply connected to visceral experience and her writing was 'close to drawing, or indeed to scribbling'.<sup>53</sup> Milner's ideas about language and her tendency to think in images, however, placed her in a somewhat uneasy position in relation to the psychoanalytic emphasis on the verbal, as is evident in Anna Freud's foreword to *On Not Being Able to Paint*:

[W]hen anxieties and the resistances resulting from them are overcome, and the 'surrender of the planning conscious intention has been achieved', both – painter and analysand – are rewarded by 'a surprise, both in form and content'. It is at this juncture only that we meet the essential difference between the analytic process and the process of creation. The legitimate result of analysis is the inner experience of formerly unknown affects and impulses which find their final outlet in in the ego-processes of verbalisation and deliberate action. The creative process in art, on the other hand, 'remains within the realm in which unknown affects and impulses find their outlet, through the way in which the artist arranges his medium to form harmonies of shapes, colours or sounds'; whether deliberate action is affected or not in the last issue, the main achievement is, according to the author, a joining of that split between mind and body that can so easily result from trying to limit thinking to thinking only in words.<sup>54</sup>

In this passage, Anna Freud is keen to set a limit on the parallels between the analytic process and the creative process, arguing that the irreducible difference between the two is whether or not the unconscious is verbalised. We might detect an anxiety here on the part of Anna Freud around Milner's interest in what could not be verbalised, as Dragstedt has suggested.<sup>55</sup> Milner's analytic work, however, does not quite fit Anna Freud's description. Reading *The Hands of the Living*

*God*, it is easy to discern the significance Milner attributed to the non-verbal in her analytic work. In a review of the text, Geoffrey Gorer remarks, 'I know of no other study where the bodies of both the analyst and the patient are so solidly present'.<sup>56</sup> Milner's ability to convey the physical presence of her and her patient is indeed remarkable. She is highly attuned to both bodies in the room and reflects on the bodily dimension of their analytic relationship throughout. Early on in her treatment of Susan, Milner reflects on the importance of the body in her approach:

I came to think that one of the things she so needed from me was the continued evidence that I did both ponder about her 'in my heart' and see her as a person in her own right [...] Very slowly also, I came to suspect that this pondering would have to have a deeply physical aspect; in fact I was beginning to believe more and more that what I said was often less important than my body-mind state of being in her sessions.<sup>57</sup>

Milner is describing a kind of psycho-somatic holding of the patient, a revision of the idea of 'keeping someone in mind', one that instead involves the mind in so far as it is located in the body. Milner's emphasis on the non-verbal is particularly significant; in her version, the 'body-mind state' deauthorises the sovereignty of speech. Importantly, she also raises the neglected question of bodily transference. Throughout the text, Milner describes cultivating an embodied analytic mode, 'holding' Susan 'warmly' in her attention. The communicative powers that Milner ascribes to the still body of the analyst would seem to offer an alternative way of thinking about the body as an active entity in psychoanalysis. Milner proposes a mode of listening that is infused with the body, but that does not require gesture or movement to affect the corporeality of the other. Focusing specifically on texture and sensation – Susan's 'spikey anger' and her own 'warm holding' – Milner reworks the conventional psychoanalytic understanding of listening, bringing its unacknowledged physicality to light. Verbal interpretation becomes secondary to the embodied dimension of analysis.

This article has traced a central but rather neglected motif in Milner's work – the experience of inhabiting one's own body. Embodiment and its relationship to the 'answering activity' clearly preoccupied Milner throughout her life. It is the body, 'this so mysterious other that the body is', that lies at the heart of her thinking about the relationship between self and other, and in turn, analyst and analysand.<sup>58</sup> For Milner, it was through deep engagement with this 'other' within that

the boundaries between self/object and self/other could be partially overcome.

Although Milner’s ideas about the body were crucial for her later analytic work with Susan, psychoanalytic theory was not always an easy medium through which she could think about this domain of experience. At times, classical psychoanalysis seems to be implicitly aligned with ‘narrow attention’ in her schema, with her form of embodied analysis offering a potential corrective to its logocentrism. In the words of Michael Parsons, ‘One of her distinctive contributions to psychoanalysis is to make us listen with our bodies as well as our ears’.<sup>59</sup> While Milner’s critique of classical psychoanalysis was quiet, indirect, and often couched in her debts to other psychoanalysts with whom she was in dialogue, she undoubtedly problematised and rejected the psychoanalytic privileging of the verbal and sought to address the neglect of the lived body in psychoanalysis and beyond by ‘redeeming the body’. These two interventions, as Milner’s imagistic writing attests to, were deeply intertwined.

## Acknowledgements

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## Notes

- 1 Marion Milner, ‘1986: Afterthoughts’, in *The Suppressed Madness of Sane Men: Forty-Four Years of Exploring Psychoanalysis* (Hove: Brunner-Routledge, 2005), 234–42 (p.235).
- 2 There is no discussion of Milner in Nitza Yarom’s, *Psychic Threats and Somatic Shelters* (London: Routledge, 2015) or *Relational Perspectives on the Body*, ed. Lewis Aron and Frances Sommer Anderson (London: Analytic Press, 1998) and there are only two very brief references to her in Sletvold’s *The Embodied Analyst: From Freud and Reich to Relationality*, ed. Jon Sletvold (London: Routledge, 2014).
- 3 Marion Milner, *Eternity’s Sunrise: A Way of Keeping a Diary* (Hove: Routledge, 2011), 48–9.
- 4 Marion Milner, ‘1960: The Concentration of the Body’, in *Suppressed Madness*, 194–9 (p.195).
- 5 *Ibid.*, 198.
- 6 Marion Milner (Joanna Field), *A Life of One’s Own* (London: Routledge, 2011), 78.
- 7 Milner, ‘Concentration of the Body’, 196.
- 8 *Ibid.*
- 9 Milner, *Eternity’s Sunrise*, 178.
- 10 Marion Milner, *On Not Being Able to Paint* (Hove: Routledge, 2010), 99.
- 11 Milner, *Eternity’s Sunrise*, 50.
- 12 Marion Milner, ‘The Ordering of Chaos’, in *Suppressed Madness*, 181–93 (p.189).
- 13 *Ibid.*



- 14 Ibid.
- 15 Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents*, trans. David McLintock (London: Penguin, 2004), 1–2.
- 16 Ibid.
- 17 Milner, *On Not Being Able to Paint*, 143–4.
- 18 Emma Letley, *Marion Milner: A Life* (London: Routledge, 2014), 248–9.
- 19 Milner, *On Not Being Able to Paint*, 167.
- 20 Ibid.
- 21 Ibid., 150.
- 22 Marion Milner, ‘Psychoanalysis and Art’, 179.
- 23 Milner, *On Not Being Able to Paint*, 150.
- 24 Milner, ‘Ordering of Chaos’, 189.
- 25 Milner, ‘Psychoanalysis and Art’, in *Suppressed Madness*, 161.
- 26 Milner, *On Not Being Able to Paint*, 124.
- 27 Ibid.
- 28 Milner, ‘Concentration of the Body’, 198.
- 29 Ibid., 195.
- 30 Milner, *Eternity’s Sunrise*, 48–9.
- 31 Christopher Bollas, *Being a Character: Psychoanalysis and Self Experience* (London: Routledge, 1997), 25.
- 32 Hugh Haughton, ‘New Introduction’, in *Eternity’s Sunrise*, xi–xxxi (p.xx).
- 33 See, e.g., Helen Tyson, ‘“Catching Butterflies”: Marion Milner and Stream of Consciousness Writing’, *Literature Compass*, 17 (2020), 1–14.
- 34 Naome Rader Dragstedt, ‘Creative Illusions: The Theoretical and Clinical Work of Marion Milner’, *Journal of Melanie Klein and Object Relations*, 16 (1998), 426–536 (pp.456–7).
- 35 Milner, *Eternity’s Sunrise*, 36.
- 36 Ibid.
- 37 Ibid., 37.
- 38 Ibid.
- 39 Marion Milner, *The Hands of the Living God: An Account of a Psycho-analytic Treatment* (London: Hogarth Press, 1985), 46.
- 40 Ibid.
- 41 Milner, *Eternity’s Sunrise*, 59.
- 42 Ibid., 63.
- 43 Ibid., 169.
- 44 Ibid., 76.
- 45 Margrit Shildrick and Janet Price, ‘Openings on the Body: A Critical Introduction’, in Shildrick and Price (eds), *Feminist Theory and the Body: A Reader* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 1–14 (p.2).
- 46 Milner, *Eternity’s Sunrise*, 76.
- 47 Ibid., 185.
- 48 Ibid.
- 49 Ibid., 48.
- 50 Marion Milner, ‘1977: Winnicott and Overlapping Circles’, in *Suppressed Madness*, 228–33 (p.229).
- 51 Heather Glen, quoted in ‘1986: Afterthoughts’, in *Suppressed Madness*, 236.
- 52 Milner, *Eternity’s Sunrise*, 171.
- 53 Rye Dag Holmboe, ‘A Line around a Think’, *Critical Quarterly*, 63:4 (2021). See Holmboe’s article for an analysis of the role of drawing in Milner’s thought.

- 54 Anna Freud, ‘Foreword’, *On Not Being Able to Paint*, xiii–xv (p. xiv).
- 55 Dragstedt, ‘Creative Illusions’, 504–6.
- 56 G. Gorer, ‘The Hands of the Living God: by Marion Milner’, *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 51 (1970), 531.
- 57 Milner, *Hands of the Living God*, 41–2.
- 58 Milner, *Eternity’s Sunrise*, 75.
- 59 Michael Parsons, ‘Marion Milner’s “Answering Activity” and the Question of Psychoanalytic Creativity’, *International Review of Psychoanalysis*, 17 (1990), 413–24 (p.415).