

# MARION MILNER'S 'PLIABLE MEDIUM' AND THE ROLE OF THE PATIENT'S CREATIVITY IN THE ANALYTIC ENCOUNTER

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*This article explores British psychoanalyst Marion Milner's (1900–1998) understanding of how creative play and drawing for her child and adult patients is integral to transformation in the analytic encounter. Milner explicitly proposes the act of picture-making as providing a reparative experience of an attuned, reciprocal relationship with another. Her term the 'pliable medium' first coined in her book *On Not Being Able to Paint* (1950) is explored as a concept reflective of Milner's enduring commitment to art-making as an explicitly therapeutic activity. In this way, we come to see how Milner's clinical technique depends as much on facilitating the patient's creativity in the analytic situation as it does in considering what the patient-analyst relationship can do for the patient's psychic growth.*

**KEYWORDS:** MARION MILNER, PSYCHOANALYTIC TECHNIQUE, WINNICOTT, DRAWING, CREATIVITY, PLIABLE MEDIUM

In her foreword to Marion Milner's book on creativity and its inhibitions, *On Not Being Able to Paint* (1950), Anna Freud compares Milner's findings from her study of the amateur painter's experiences to that of the analysand in their initial period on the couch. 'Both ventures', writes Freud, 'the analytic as well as the creative one, seem to demand similar external and internal conditions' (Freud, 2010, p. xiii). These include, 'above all, the same terror of the unknown' (Freud, 2010, p. xiii). Both painter and patient must be able to tolerate a plunge into the unconscious and be able to tolerate the uncertainty of where the brush may take them, or what psychic material might arise out of the analytic encounter. The essential difference between the analytic process and the process of creation is, however, that the 'legitimate result of analysis is the inner experience of formerly unknown affects and impulses which find their final outlet in the ego-processes of verbalization and deliberate action', whereas the creative process 'remains within the realm in which

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unknown affects and impulses find their outlet, through the way in which the artist arranges his medium ... whether deliberate action is affected or not is the last issue' (Freud, 2010, p. xiv).

In contrast to Freud's claims, however, this article will demonstrate how Milner proposes painting and drawing enacts for her child and adult patients a transformation of action comparable to that of the analytic process. Milner explicitly proposes the act of picture-making as providing a reparative experience of an attuned, reciprocal relationship with another. Her term the 'pliable medium', first coined in *On Not Being Able to Paint* shall be explored as reflective of her enduring commitment to art-making as an explicitly therapeutic activity. We shall come to see how Milner introduces a new element into the patient–analyst relationship, whereby the patient's drawing acts play an integral role to the patient's psychic growth. Milner's psychoanalytic thinking and technique thus shifts the curative work of psychoanalysis away from the analyst–patient relationship to the relationship of analyst and patient to the patient's creative productions. Accordingly, her method is less preoccupied with the analyst–patient dyad (and the transference and countertransference) and attends instead to the set of relations between, analyst, patient, and the patient's artistic medium to understand therapeutic transformation. Milner's unique formulations will be considered in relation to her contemporary and colleague Winnicott, whose theoretical and clinical work I suggest bear resemblance with but ultimately part ways with Milner's thinking about creativity and the analytic situation.

#### THE PLIABLE MEDIUM

Milner first uses the term 'pliant medium' in *On Not Being Able to Paint* to describe a particular quality of mediums like pencil, chalk, paint and paper (Milner, 2010, p. 136). She comes to find that in work drawing with these materials as part of her experiments with 'free drawing' (a loose, free associative way of drawing technique not dissimilar from Surrealist automatic drawing techniques),

one could find an 'other', a public reality, that was very pliant and undemanding; pencil and chalk and paper provided a simplified situation in which the other gave of itself easily and immediately to take the form of the dream, it did not stridently insist on its own public nature, as I had found natural objects were inclined to do (Milner, 2010, p. 136).

By drawing with these materials, Milner finds she 'succeed[ed] in discovering a primitive reciprocity' (Milner, 2010, p. 139), a primitive reciprocity that she links to that of the mother–infant bond. She wonders whether the failures of reciprocity between child and caregiver might simply be for reasons such as the child's wishes being different from the adult's, or from failures in communication between them. 'Of course this failure of relationship is inevitable at times, it is part of the agonizing side of being a child', writes Milner, but the 'free drawing method ... apparently made it partly able to compensate for that failure' (Milner, 2010, p. 136).

The free drawings are felt to provide an 'essential basis' for an experience of intersubjectivity where for both self and other there is 'equal claim to the recognition of needs and individuality' of both parties (Milner, 2010, p. 136). This finding is elaborated in the following passage:

Could one say that by finding a bit of the outside world, whether in chalk or paper, or in one's analyst, that was willing to temporarily to fit in with one's dreams, a moment of illusion was made possible, a moment in which inner and outer seemed to coincide? ... Was it not a legitimate hypothesis to suppose that by these moments of achieved fusions between inner and outer one was at least restored potentially to a life of action, a life in which one could seek to rebuild, restore, re-create what one loved, in actual achievement? (Milner, 2010, p. 138).

Like the analyst, these artistic mediums are felt to be able to repair the disillusionments of childhood. I understand these fusions that Milner speaks of as an experience of a relationship in which good-enough care enables a creative relationship to oneself and the world, something like Winnicott's notion of creative apperception which he would later conceptualize in *Playing and Reality*.

This pliant medium comes later to be referred to as the 'pliable medium' in her clinical writing, notably in her paper 'The role of illusion in symbol formation' (1952) published two years after *On Not Being Able to Paint*, where Milner explicitly links the act of painting with the qualities of a good mother:

I had come to see how the medium, for instance, paint, by its special qualities of spreadability and the way it allows one colour to mix up with another and so make a new one, and because it does not intrude its demands, but just waits, submitting to things done to it, waits for the painter to become more and more sensitive to its real qualities and capacities; by this means it does for the painter, I believed, some of the things that a good mother does for her baby (Milner, 1987a, p. 108).

Milner also suggests that this kind of relationship can be found in the psychoanalytic setting in the 'analyst acting 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' (Milner, 1987a, p. 118). Here, it is a real separate person, the analyst, that can embody the therapeutic qualities of the free drawings so long as they remain in a receptive mode, giving back to the patient their original thoughts in clarified form.

But in a later interview with artist and educator Chris Crickmay in 1975, Milner elaborates on the nature of the pliable medium, making sure to emphasize the extent of its capacity for flexibility and adaptability that another person is ultimately not able to provide to the same extent. She states:

because it's pliable it doesn't insist. It's got the minimum of character of its own so that it makes a kind of bridge between us and the world, where the world has its own nature. And if it's people, they've got their own character

and one's got to recognise that they don't always fit in with what one wants. But the medium, although it's got certain character – and one mustn't go against that character and make it try and do something it can't do – still it does, as it were, make a bridge so that it takes its form from one's inner life. And yet it's outside (Milner, 1975).

The pliable medium seems to possess qualities that another, real person could never hope to provide in the same way.

In the following cases studies from Milner's clinical work, we see her not only using the qualities of the medium of paint as a metaphor for the kind of care the good-enough mother should ideally provide its baby with and that the analyst can also provide the patient. Rather, the patient's acts of creativity are felt to provide a real corrective for early failures in attunement, helping to bring about or make up for an emotional reciprocity that was lost or never established in the original relationship with the mother.

#### SIMON, 'THE ROLE OF ILLUSION IN SYMBOL FORMATION' (1952)

Milner writes about the pliable medium in relation to her clinical work for the first time her paper 'The role of illusion in symbol formation'. Recapitulating her earlier findings, in this paper she tells us how 'by the recurrent providing of a framed space and time and a pliable medium ... from time to time, it will not be necessary for self-preservation's sake to distinguish clearly between inner and outer, self and not-self' (Milner, 1987a, p. 75). We are presented with the case of Simon, who 'was suffering from a loss talent for school work' (Milner, 1987a, pp. 88–9). From the ages of 4 to 6, Simon had been very interested in and successful at school, but now as an 11 year old was close to failing his schoolwork and at times even unable to attend class. Milner carefully observes Simon's frequently aggressive play in the consulting room, where he would often wage a war on an imaginary village which in his mind belonged to Milner. Despite the ostensible violence of the play, Milner observes how when Simon could settle down 'to using the toys as a pliable medium' which were 'external to himself' but did not insist 'on their own separate objective existence, then apparently he could treat me with friendliness and consideration, and even accept real frustration from me' (Milner, 1987a, p. 68). Only then would Simon drop the usually bullying, hectoring attitude he would adopt towards Milner, a sign that analyst as other is tolerated and accepted to some degree, and the marker of some progress in the analysis. This leads Milner to consider the function of his play with these toys as equivalent to her own experiments with painting and free drawing: 'on days when he did play with the toys, there seemed to develop a relationship between him and them which reminded me of the process I had myself tried to observe introspectively when doing "free" drawings' (Milner, 1987a, p. 92). Indeed, Simon's play is attributed with an aesthetic quality: 'the boy's play nearly became "a play", in that there was a sense of pattern and dramatic form in what he produced' (Milner, 1987a, p. 72).

Analytic transformation is therefore understood as being produced via a relationship to an aesthetic medium; Simon's play provides him with the possibility for re-imagining reality 'just as in free imaginative drawing the sight of a mark made on the paper provokes new associations, the line as it were answers back and functions as a very primitive type of external object' (Milner, 1987a, p. 92). Interestingly, Milner likens the pliable medium in this paper to an 'intervening substance' in the analytic setting (following a dictionary definition of the word medium), writing how transformation occurred when Simon 'had become able to use both me and the playroom equipment as this intervening pliable substance' (Milner, 1987a, p. 74). The pliable medium is felt to intervene in the relationship in a positive way, precisely because of how little it is felt to intervene and impinge in the demanding way another person might.

Milner's account of play and creativity in her work with Simon is striking given a few biographical facts. Simon was in fact a pseudonym for Michael Clyne, Melanie Klein's own grandson. The account of this analysis was written as part of an edited collection of papers celebrating Klein's 70th birthday, and Klein supervised Milner's handling of the analysis. We might then assume that Klein's thinking would permeate Milner's work – instead, we see Milner part ways with classic Kleinian analytic technique in her presentation of the analysis, her own thinking and techniques becoming visible. In a Kleinian manner, Milner does acknowledge Simon's violent and aggressive feelings towards his parental internal objects through his play, but she pays little attention to how they enter the transference, instead understanding Simon's struggles to be about the 'problem of establishing object relationships at all, rather than on the restoration of the injured object once it is established' (Milner, 1987a, p. 97). Simon's play suggests to Milner that 'Clearly ... there was a great amount of resentment and fear to be worked through in the Oedipus situation', but diverting from the Kleinian narrative of reparation, this was not the only reason for the persistence of this type of play – it is related to something more basic, 'to do with difficulties in establishing the relation to external reality as such' (Milner, 1987a, p. 92). In other words, Milner finds Simon is suffering from a difficulty of accepting the 'not-me-ness' of his external reality (Milner, 1987a, p. 93). And it is the pliable medium of toys that provide a good enough experience of otherness, restoring his faith in having a creative relationship with his school-work, his relationship with his analyst and with his family and friends.

This case illustrates how in the analytic setting, the pliable medium plays a role in providing the patient with a simplified version of a good, attuned relationship, which then acts as a springboard for the patient to better engage with other interpersonal and external relations. Milner's role as analyst involves nurturing her patients' use of a pliable medium, and also taking on the qualities herself as much as possible of the pliable medium so that both can be put to use by the patient. Her understanding of the importance of the pliable medium thus shifts attention to the patient's use of a material object in the analysis, introducing another element into the attention customarily paid to the transference and countertransference. In Simon's case, it is the pliable medium of the toys that provides an essential foundation, a getting ready if you will, for the more daunting real relations between himself and another person.

## RUTH AND SUSAN, 'THE COMMUNICATION OF PRIMARY SENSUAL EXPERIENCE' (1955)

Another clinical paper, 'The communication of primary sensual experience' (1955) describes Milner's work with two patients, one a child called 'Ruth' and another adult patient named 'Miss. A' (later appearing as 'Susan' in *The Hands of the Living God*). Ruth's drawings were all made during the analytic sessions, with Susan's largely created in between sessions (Milner, 1987b, p. 86). These patients' drawings take centre stage in Milner's clinical writing, the paper being about 'what I had learnt from both Ruth and Susan through their drawings' (Milner, 1987b, p. 85). Rather than examining her patient's psyches through the prism of the here and now of the analytic encounter, Milner comes to knowledge about her patients' early relationships through their drawings. Once again she establishes this approach to thinking about her patients' creative products as differing from a Kleinian one, telling the reader:

In discussing the drawings I shall not be talking about the reparative aspect of them, but about the light they throw on the specific problem of how love and joy is to be expressed, communicated. I shall be talking about the interplay between the wish to communicate, to share feelings, and the strivings after primary narcissistic states; and how this interplay is shown in the drawings (Milner, 1987b, pp. 86–7).

Milner's concern here is with how her patient's drawings shed a light on their feelings around relating to others – she attends to how their conflicted desires around wanting to relate and communicate, and the desire to stay apart and withdrawn in a state of primary narcissism are expressed pictorially.

Most significantly, Ruth and Miss. A's drawings provide a basis for communication with Milner. She writes how:

I had been able to watch something of the process by which they externalized, threw out of themselves on to the paper, marks which, because of the pliable character of the medium, could take on an infinite variety of shape and thus provide a feedback, a basis for communication, both with the analyst and with themselves (Milner, 1987b, p. 108).

The pliable medium of drawing provides a 'bridge' between patient and analyst, rather than the potentially claustrophobic you-me entrapment. Milner's clinical technique seems to ensure that her patients are given the space to explore themselves in her presence without an insensitive imposition of her own presence or ideas. It provides a safe setting where no premature demand is made on the patient to engage with the analyst or themselves, letting the patient move at their own self-determined pace. With the help of the pliable medium and the analytic setting, the patient can build up a stable internal base, and only once this base is established, can they step out into the world. The following passage in the paper encapsulates this work with Ruth and Miss. A/Susan, as well as Simon, the drawing cure once again championed:

I have tried to show how these two patients could be seen as having been able to externalize this inner encounter, through their willingness to enter into an active relation with the blankness of the paper, as well as through the pliable medium of paint, chalk, water. Also, in the light of Susan's later drawings and my analysis of them, I had come to see how the drawings shown here did foreshadow the later working through of the problems they symbolized, but now in relation to the more complex reality of encounter with me, the analyst, as a whole person. Thus it could be said that, in order to achieve this, it had first been necessary for her to go through the stage of relating to me as the primary substances of the media she used, substances which, by their pliability, gave her something near to the illusions of primary omnipotence, for here I remembered Simon's insistence that I was his 'lovely stuff' that he had made (Milner, 2010, p. 108).

In the appendix to the second edition of *On Not Being Able to Paint* published in 1956, Milner mentions her work with two patients. Though she does not name them, given her description and time of writing, it is likely she is referring to Ruth and Miss. A/Susan. She describes both patients as having 'had mothers who were mentally extremely ill' (Milner, 2010, p. 192). 'I suggest that such a human environment', Milner writes, 'forces a child into desperate clinging to the phase of thinking that does distinguish between the "me" and the "not-me", because this is the only protection against an impossible confusion between their own and their parents' inner problem' (Milner, 2010, pp. 192–3). Based on what she has found in her own experiments, she writes:

What they are essentially in need of is a setting in which it is safe to indulge in reverie, safe to permit a con-fusion of 'me' and 'not-me'. Such a setting, in which it is safe to indulge in reverie, is provided for the patient in analysis, and painting likewise provides such a setting, both for the painter of the picture and for the person who looks at it (Milner, 2010, p. 193).

In her work with these patients, Milner as analyst provides both settings – the frame of creative activity within the frame of the session or its encouragement outside of it. These structures, in turn, help to consolidate the containing capacities of the analyst.

#### A DISTINCTIVE THEORY OF OBJECT RELATIONS

As we have traced, the pliable medium is first described in 1950 in *On Not Being to Paint* and expanded in Milner's theoretical and clinical writing of the 1950s and 60s. One year after the publication of *On Not Being Able to Paint*, Winnicott presents his concept of the transitional object in a paper read before the British Psychoanalytical Society in 1951 and later published in 1953 as the paper 'Transitional objects and transitional phenomena: a study of the first not-me possession' (Winnicott, 1953). Such chronology not only demonstrates the shared time frame these thinkers belonging to the Institute of Psychoanalysis were working within, but that Milner's concept

of the pliable medium preceded at the very least the public dissemination of Winnicott's transitional object. Whilst it is impossible at the level of theory to precisely determine the degree to which one thinker was influenced by another, it is worthwhile nonetheless to introduce Milner's thinking into the mix, situating it within the object relations tradition, while also acknowledging her singular contribution.

In describing the quality of relationship to an external, material object, Winnicott's transitional object bears comparison with Milner's pliable medium. Such a comparison, does, I think, highlight the distinctiveness of Milner's approach. For Winnicott, the transitional object is for the child a material object, typically something soft like a blanket to which the child attributes a special value, enabling it to make the necessary shift from the earliest oral relationship with the mother to genuine object-relationships ('transitional object'). As the first not-me possession the transitional object, like the pliable medium, provides an experience of object otherness that functions like a steppingstone for the move into relations with other people. Later on, the establishment of the reality principle and the inevitable disillusion associated with this will be tolerated by virtue of the transitional object, which allows the child to exercise its feelings of omnipotence in a playful manner ('transitional object'). As early as 1951, however, Winnicott warned against the risk of this thinking about the relationship to a real object being reified, and in 1971 in his introduction to *Playing and Reality* he wrote how 'what I am referring to ... is not so much the object used as the use of the object' (Winnicott, 1971, p. xii). It is the baby, not the object, who is in a state of transition. In the concept of the pliable medium, however, it is the qualities of the object, the material adaptability of paint, for example, and how this provides a tolerable experience of otherness that is of fundamental importance.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, whereas the transitional object pertains to a particular stage in childhood development, the pliable medium might be engaged with throughout one's life, and as in Milner's case, in middle-age.

In relation to clinical technique, Milner's interest in images and their creation may have influenced that much more widely known use of drawing within the psychoanalytic session: Winnicott's squiggle game. 'It is in Milner's free drawings that squiggles of Winnicott ... are deeply rooted', writes Alberto Stefana (2019, p. 132). In this game, Winnicott would 'squiggle' a simple form on a piece of paper and ask his child patient to 'make it into anything', and the squiggle-making would be passed back and forth from analyst to child (Winnicott, 1989, p. 302). Describing a typical session in which the squiggle game is played with a child patient, Winnicott writes how 'Often in an hour we have done twenty to thirty drawings together, and gradually the significance of these composite drawings has become deeper and deeper' (Winnicott, 1989, p. 302). Throughout the process, Winnicott would invite his patients to talk about the meaning of these collaborative constructions. The purpose of this game was to allow for the child's 'communication of significance' with the analyst (Winnicott, 1989, p. 302). (Prior to the development of the squiggle game, Winnicott also employed what he called the spatula game, described in his 1941 paper 'The observation of infants in a set situation' which involved observing how an infant would play or react to a spatula to understand the mutuality between



mother and baby (Winnicott, 1941). Winnicott's interest in Milner's free drawings can then be understood as building on this interest in the use of objects from within this observational setting.)

In her article 'Squiggle evidence: the child, the canvas, and the "negative labor" of history', Lisa Farley traces the history of the origins of the squiggle game. Though Winnicott's first published mention of the game appears in 1953 and the first case study is not published until 1965, Farley finds evidence in Winnicott's notebooks from 1945 that he was already drawing with children during this period (Farley, 2011, p. 14). Like Stefana, Farley speculates that it was Milner who influenced Winnicott's use of drawing in the clinical setting. Considering Milner was a colleague of Winnicott's since 1939, 'The significance of this relationship is that Milner, who was deeply interested in the place of the visual in communication, very likely influenced Winnicott's own visual turn' (Farley, 2011, p. 19).

Despite the likelihood of Milner's influence, Milner and Winnicott each turn to the production of pictures in the consulting room for decidedly different purposes. Milner never tells us of her own participation in a creative game with the patient. Instead, her technique is to allow the patient (child or adult) to create independently in the room with her or outside of it, and she would attend to their drawings created both inside and outside the session. By contrast, the squiggle game produces composite drawings made up of both Winnicott and the patient's mark making in the session, helping to foster a productive analytic relationship between analyst and patient. In the case study of one girl patient, 'L', the squiggle game shows Winnicott that L is able to enjoy playing and is capable of entering into a playful relationship with him (Winnicott, 1989, p. 311). Winnicott does briefly touch on what the symbols L draws might mean, a charging goat for example is understood as 'a symbol of male instinct' (Winnicott, 1989, p. 312). But Winnicott writes that the squiggle game 'will not be found to dominate the scene for more than one session, or at most two or three ... one can say that the Squiggle Game or its equivalent is useful as a first-session technique' (Winnicott, 1989, pp. 316–7). He distinguishes this kind of work from psychotherapy and psychoanalysis, preferring instead the term 'psychotherapeutic consultation' to describe its use (Winnicott, 1989, p. 299). Ultimately, the squiggle game is used as a way to make a preliminary contact with the child patient and, unlike Milner, Winnicott does not consider the curative qualities of the acts of drawing for the patient in and of itself. For Winnicott, the squiggle game is a technique that helps foster a relationship between patient and analyst, which is where the main therapeutic relationship takes place.

As another way of demonstrating Milner's distinctive drawing and painting cure as part of, but also separate from the rest the psychoanalytic tradition, I want to end on a paper published in 1981 by the child analyst Lore Schact, entitled 'The mirroring function of the child analyst'. It helps, I think, to bring Milner's distinctive formulations greater clarity. Milner supervised Schact's work with a boy patient, Jasper, and Schact writes in her paper how 'I want to express my gratitude for the help given by Mrs. Marion Milner under whose supervision I was able to conduct this analysis' (Schact, 1981, p. 79). Whilst it is to Winnicott's concept of the mirror role

of the mother and analyst that Schact turns to for analytic understanding, I think we can see some inflections of Milner's preoccupations around a relationship to a medium – in this case study, an actual mirror – in Schact's paper. Schact writes how in one significant session Jasper first engages with a 'mirror in the lock of my handbag', but then quickly 'prefers the living mirror and asks me: "Can you see me?" Out of an experience of his relationship with me he demands my contribution' (Schact, 1981, p. 84). Schact goes on to consider the meaning of a child's engagement with a real mirror versus the mirroring of mother or therapist:

I assume that, amongst other things, a child who has to look time and again into a real mirror to find himself, has looked into 'emptiness' when looking in mother's face ... A child who tries to arouse and to release the mirroring function of the mother or the therapist shows hope and trust in his mother and therapist. A child, however, who is exclusively dependent on the real mirror as such, has given up hope – he has to fill the emptiness himself by going to the mirror. But what he gains by it is not more than a self-made image which can dissolve itself again at any time and has therefore no reliable continuity (Schact 1981, p. 84).

For Schact, a relationship to the object mirror cannot hope to provide a sufficient substitute for the mirror found within a relationship, in the mother's or therapist's face. Milner I am sure would not disagree: the object of the mirror lock cannot provide an equivalent mirroring function. But by engaging with painting, drawing and creativity more generally, pliable mediums might be found and paper mirrors created, all of which is felt to aid in providing the self with a sense of reliable continuity, and to facilitate psychic growth and development.

#### NOTE

1. The concept of the pliable medium might make us consider Winnicott's one mention of a painter and painting in his paper 'Mirror role of mother and family in child development' (1967) differently. He finds in the British twentieth century painter Francis Bacon's self-portrait an example of failure in mirroring role of mother. For Winnicott, Bacon 'seeing himself in his mother's face, but with some twist in him or her that maddens both him and us. I know nothing of this artist's private life, and I bring him in only because he forces his way into any present day discussion of the face and the self. Bacon's faces seem to me to be far removed from perception of the actual; in looking at faces he seems to me to be painfully striving towards being seen, which is at the basis of creative looking' (Winnicott, 1971, p. 114). From a Milnerian perspective, painting might have provided Bacon with a substitutive relationship to something more attuned and reciprocal.

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