



Revisiting Marion Milner's work on creativity and art

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ABSTRACT

This article outlines the thinking of the English psychoanalyst and painter Marion Milner (1900–1998) and examines the issues of creativity and art, showing how her theory was influenced by the artistic and psychoanalytic milieu in which she was immersed. Milner, as a result of personal research on the inability to paint, came to believe that the creative artistic process, intended as the creation of new symbols that attribute a personal and subjective meaning to the newly created reality, occurs during moments of “primary madness” (of illusion of unity, of pre-logical fusion between subject and object), making it possible to have a relationship of reciprocity between internal and external reality. In such a process, the aesthetic experience of the artist at work plays a key role. Using Milner's ideas about the creative process as a base, the author investigates the links between psychoanalysis and the unconscious processes in symbol formation and artistic creation, showing that Milner's work is still relevant to psychoanalysis today.

KEYWORDS

Marion Milner; art; creativity; symbolization; aesthetic experience

Marion Milner (London 1900–1998) was a passionate painter. “For years,” she says, “I had had to decide each weekend, should I shut myself away and paint or should I just live?” (Milner 1950, 156). Her interest in the unconscious was born long before her psychoanalytic training. The initial stirrings of interest came from a vague sense of dissatisfaction in her youth. This led her to keep a diary (see Milner 1934) in which she used to jot down observations on her “butterfly thoughts,” sensory experiences (“wide attention”) and self-discovery (those aspects of her personality she had previously disavowed: pettiness, fear, vanity and anger). The “pre-analytical” Milner (when she used to sign her work under the pseudonym Joanna Field), just like the analytical Milner—it should be remembered that besides the strictly psychoanalytic articles and books, Milner (1934, 1937, 1987, 2012) published four diary books, which make up an experimental autobiographical quartet written under the sign of self-analysis (Haughton 2011; Walters 2012); “Indeed Milner's diary quartet consists of meta-diaries rather than diaries” (Haughton 2014, 350)—approached the themes of perception, concentration, drawing and art in a completely personal and original way. Her discoveries gradually gave rise to her distinctive way of looking at reality (both internal and external) and also greatly influenced her approach to psychoanalysis. She was part of the Imago Group founded by the art historian Adrian

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Stokes. This was a group of about ten people, in the orbit of Melanie Klein, who met regularly to discuss issues related to art (Wilfred R. Bion, Donald Meltzer and Roger Money-Kyrle, among others, were involved). In addition, she was personally acquainted with the Bloomsbury Group, an influential “group” of writers, philosophers, intellectuals and British artists, united in their attribution of importance to the arts (it included figures such as Virginia Woolf and Edward Morgan Forster).

It is worth mentioning that Milner’s cultural pursuits went far beyond the limited and limiting boundaries of psychoanalysis, and embraced philosophy, literature, poetry and, last but not least, figurative art (it is interesting to note that Milner’s passion for drawing and painting can be read as an identification with her own mother, Caroline, passionate about painting). Emma Letley (2013) provides a very interesting portrait of Marion Milner’s life.

In this article I will describe Milner’s original and substantial work on creativity and art, showing how it was influenced by the artistic and psychoanalytic milieu in which she was immersed. Furthermore, using her ideas about the creative process as a base, I will investigate the links between psychoanalysis and unconscious processes in symbol formation and artistic creation, showing that Milner’s work is still relevant to psychoanalysis today.

A brief introduction to the relationship between psychoanalysis and art in Freud and in Kleinians

Psychoanalysis, at least according to the intention of its founder, Sigmund Freud, aimed at providing the basis for a *Weltanschauung* (worldview). Thus, within a short time, a form of “applied” psychoanalysis became juxtaposed with clinical psychoanalysis. The most implicated areas of application and exploration were literature, poetry, music, painting and so on. Freud himself was committed to making use of the psychoanalytic method in investigating works of art, and he did so by adopting two different methods: the “archaeological” method, through which he tried to decipher the latent content of the works in question (see Freud 1906), and the “psycho-biographic” method, in which the biography of the artist constituted the starting point for their interpretation (see Freud 1910). However, such a psychoanalytic investigation into the essence of artistic creation has some significant limitations, which Freud himself recognized (it should be pointed out, however, that what most interested the Viennese Master was the psychology of the artist, not the creative process that led to the creation of artistic work). Thus, a new kind of research was born where psychoanalysis, far from adopting an interpretive position, looked for extra-analytical confirmations of clinical insights and theoretical constructs in works of art, since, as Freud argued, poets and artists in general were seen as valuable allies, having in-depth knowledge of the human spirit, able (as opposed to mere mortals) to draw from sources inaccessible to “science.” This is why the precious legacy of these poets and artists (their artistic creations) must be carefully considered (Freud 1906). To comprehend the impact of this new current of research on psychoanalysis, one has only to examine the role of Sophocles’ *Oedipus Rex* on the conceptualization of the oedipal triangulation, a mainstay of Freudian psychoanalysis.

A discussion of the Freudian point of view on art is beyond the scope of this article (Glover 2009; Blum 2017). For our purposes, it is enough to acknowledge that Freud (1929) saw talent and artistic skills as closely related to the sublimation of inhibited

sexual drives (libido), art being a substitute for satisfaction, an illusion able to counteract the harshness of life. The artist is considered a neurotic saved by artistic creativity (Freud 1913). Freud, however, never arrived at a definitive theoretical position and never fully resolved the issue of art and artist.

As has been previously stated, Freud believed that relinquishing the object forms the basis for sublimation and artistic creation. What follows is the possibility of having an aesthetic experience—endowed with specific emotions—developing out of the ability of the ego to cope with the effort of grieving. The work of art, whose form expresses the deepest of unconscious emotions, is the result of this unconscious processing of conflicts with the principle of reality. However, it would be Melanie Klein who would more fully do justice to Freud's intuition by theorizing the paranoid-schizoid and depressive positions, highlighting the role of intrapsychic fantasy and reparation.

As opposed to Freud, who stated that the child's first relationship with the world is a narcissistic one, Klein claimed that from the beginning the child has a relationship with the object. This bond, however, is partial in the sense that the child initially connects to the breast, a partial object (which might also be considered the first aesthetic object, at least in those moments when the breast has become non-essential, i.e. after the baby's basic needs are satisfied, thus transcending its biological and psychological functions). This configuration of the child's relationship with the partial object defines what Klein called the paranoid-schizoid position, in which the new-born uses primitive defence mechanisms (splitting, denial, projection and introjection) to defend himself/herself against the anxiety aroused by the fantasy that the persecutory object (unpleasant sensations, such as hunger) annihilates the self. Around the fifth to sixth month of life, the child comes to recognize its mother as a whole being, no longer partial (just a breast). This leads him/her to a fear of having damaged the beloved object, through his/her own destructive impulses and greed. Since the anxiety experienced is predominantly depressive, one may conclude that upon achieving this perception of the whole object (mother as an entire being), the passage from a paranoid-schizoid position to a depressive one has been initiated. At the same time the little one is seized by guilt and a burning desire to preserve the object and repair the damage. This propensity to repair will continue to play a key role in the development of the processes of sublimation and in the building of relationships with others throughout his/her life (Klein 1959).

According to Klein (1929), artistic creativity is linked to the concept of reparation, as depressive feelings mobilize enormous creative and reconstructive impulses. The process of creating art seems to belong to the depressive position; later, however, Klein (e.g. 1958, 1960) actually specifies that for the success of the creative process, integration of the paranoid-schizoid and depressive positions is required, an integration critical to achieve a more balanced personality structure.

The Kleinian concept of art as reparation would be subsequently developed by several psychoanalytic students who followed Klein, including Hanna Segal and Adrian Stokes, a painter, poet and art historian who had been in analysis with Klein. They transitioned from the notion of art as reparation for the damage (for which the subject believes he is responsible) to the beloved object through his/her own aggressive attacks, to the concept of aesthetic conflict (see Gosso 2004; Glover 2009). The outside of the object is beautiful, but what about its inside? (In this respect, it is worth stressing that these questions apply to both the real external object and to the internal, phantasmatic one.) Segal (1952) linked

the process of artistic creation to the depressive position and to the process of mourning, in the sense that a work of art comes from the artist's ability to recognize and communicate his fantasies and depressive anxieties, and in expressing them he recreates a harmonious inner world which is then projected onto the work or creation (a totally new reality articulating the inner world of the artist). Therefore, art for the artist represents the best way to rebuild destroyed objects (in fantasy) and to soothe the remorse and despair of the depressive position. For his part, Stokes (1955), in agreement with Segal, highlighted how the creative process develops out of the union of life drives (*Eros*) with death drives (*Thanatos*).

It is within this historical and theoretical framework (when psychoanalysis begins to consider the issues related to the creative processes and not simply the results of artistic production, something previously ignored in the early twentieth century) that we see the original contribution of Marion Milner.

The discovery of “free drawings”

Around 1920, the artistic movement known as Surrealism was born in France. There are recognizable elements of continuation from Dadaism (in that Surrealism attempted to put some order into Dadaism's radical disorder), and among these elements we find primarily: the exaltation of non-sense and irrationality; and the wide use of mechanisms of the unconscious (psychic automatism) and of randomness. The sur-reality resides in attributing to dream work the same quality of presence, solidity and definiteness typically attributed to external reality. The compelling influence of Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams* is noticeable here, to such an extent that, according to René Magritte (1938), “Surrealism demands for our waking life a freedom comparable to the one we enjoy when we dream.”¹ The definition of the surrealist movement is provided in the *Manifestes du Surréalisme*, where we read:

Psychic automatism in its pure state, is the proposal to express—verbally, and by means of the written word, or in any other manner—the actual functioning of thought. It is dictated by thought, in the absence of any control exercised by reason, exempt from any aesthetic or moral concern.

[...] Surrealism is based on the belief in a superior reality of certain forms of previously neglected associations, in the omnipotence of dream, in the disinterested play of thought. It tends

¹It is interesting to note that even though the artistic avant-garde indicated Freud as a proponent, in reality his aesthetic tastes were deeply rooted in the classical *Bildung* tradition, and he did not shy away from expressing extremely negative judgements in relation to Surrealism and Expressionism. For example, when Breton asked Freud to contribute to an anthology on dreams, the father of psychoanalysis refused, and in his letter of response wrote: “a mere collection of dreams without the dreamer's associations, without knowledge of the circumstances in which they occurred, tells me nothing and I can hardly imagine what it could tell anyone” (Freud, cited in Gombrich 1954, 402). Freud's distancing himself from the art of the avant-garde was motivated by the fact that he believed that they confused the primary process mechanism with art. Freud maintained that it was not so much the content that was owed to the unconscious but the figurative form most appropriate to provide the underlying idea's specific appeal (Gombrich 1987). Nevertheless, after having met Salvador Dalí, who showed him the oil-on-canvas painting entitled *Metamorphosis of Narcissus*, his opinion of the artists of the avant-garde changed: “For until then I was inclined to look upon surrealists, who have apparently chosen me for their patron saint, as absolute (let us say 95 per cent, like alcohol) cranks. The young Spaniard, however, with his candid fanatical eyes and his undeniable technical mastery, has made me reconsider my opinion” (Freud 1938, 448–449). Later on, he continues: “From the critical point of view it could still be maintained that the notion of art defies expansion as long as the quantitative proportion of unconscious material and preconscious treatment does not remain within definite limits. In any case these are serious psychological problems” (ibid.).

to ruin once and for all, all other psychic mechanisms and to be a substitute itself for them in solving all the principal problems of life. (Breton [1924] 1972, 26)

Milner knew the surrealist movement; we know that between January and February 1939 she visited the joint exhibition of Reuben Mednikoff and Grace Pailthorpe (also a psychoanalyst) at the Guggenheim Jeune Gallery in London. Their work, which was defined by Breton as “the best and most truly Surrealist of the works exhibited by the British artists” on the occasion of the International Surrealist Exhibition in London in 1936 (Walsh and Wilson 1998), featured extensive use of automatic drawing.

The previous year (1938), tired of her own drawings that seemed more like accurate copies of external reality, and in conjunction with the initiation of her personal analysis (which a year later became part of a process of psychoanalytic training), Milner began her study on how to learn to draw. This research and subsequent reflections upon her drawings she eventually used as a kind of internal dialogue, even in the analysis with Sylvia Payne (Sayers 2002). Milner believed it might be interesting to try to draw something without any conscious intention,² and was shocked to discover, almost by chance, that sometimes it is possible to execute sketches or drawings, allowing eye and hand to be free to do exactly what they wished, without the conscious seeking of a preordained result, without the inclination to draw “something.”³ Milner thus began to look at drawings in the way Freud approached dreams, and she realized that in implementing this “free” method, as she termed it, moods and ideas, represented by the signs of the pencil on paper, could emerge, and that these, on a conscious level, seemed totally absent. Therefore, free drawings were permeated by the shape of emotions and pure thoughts (conscious and unconscious) of the one who produced them. This conformed to what the psychoanalyst Herbert Silberer (1951) described as a “functional phenomenon,” that is, the phenomenon by which, in the dream images, the emotional state of the dreamer is represented, not the content of thought. As a result, a drawing can turn out to be interesting only if it represents a mix of the external world and aspects of the artist’s self, and this is expressed by the unique signs the artist leaves on a sheet of paper expressing his inner processes. One must bear in mind that by the mid-nineteenth century, with the studies on *Einfühlung* (empathy) by Friedrich Theodor Vischer and his son Robert, together with the later contributions of key thinkers such as Theodor Lipps and Aby Warburg, a certain emphasis began to be put on phenomena such as the tactile values of a work of art, the bodily responses that can be elicited in the viewer and, more generally, the importance of empathy in the viewer’s aesthetic experience of an artwork. According to

²It is in Milner’s free drawings that the squiggles of Winnicott (1968, 1971a; see also Stefana and Gamba 2018) are deeply rooted (Stefana 2018). They are a method for relating and encouraging a mutual exchange between the analyst and the patient, enabling them to enter into a dialogue about the patient’s deeply unconscious issues. It must be remembered that Milner (see 1969) also resorted to the method of free drawing within her psychotherapy work itself, encouraging her patients to use this type of drawing as a means to communicate those feelings for which they had no words. These are methods that facilitate therapeutic work by creating “a context in which the absence of conscious intentions will allow feelings to emerge” (Mitchell 2000, 131).

³It is worth mentioning here another passage of the *Manifestes du Surréalisme*: “After you have settled yourself in a place as favorable as possible to the concentration of your mind upon itself, have writing materials brought to you. Put yourself in as passive, or receptive, a state of mind as you can. Forget about your genius, your talents, and the talents of everyone else. Keep reminding yourself that literature is one of the saddest roads that leads to everything. Write quickly, without any preconceived subject, fast enough so that you will not remember what you’re writing and be tempted to reread what you have written. The first sentence will come spontaneously, so compelling is the truth that with every passing second there is a sentence unknown to our consciousness which is only crying out to be heard” (Breton [1924] 1972, 29–30).

these theorists, it is the identification with the artistic work, similar to what you can experience with another person, that makes it possible to experience beauty and its modifications, such as the ugly and the sublime. The artwork is therefore considered no longer as a mere object (in a non-psychoanalytic sense) but as an expressive structure (Pinotti 2010).

It became clear to Milner that painting is deeply connected to the problems of distance and separation between subject and object, and she realized that the edges of objects in the reality of nature are not so fixed, clear and compact as “reasonable” and reassuring common sense would want: “When really looked at in relation to each other their outlines were not clear and compact, as I had always supposed them to be, they continually become lost in shadow” (Milner 1950, 18). Behind this certainty of the existence of borders, Milner saw a defence against the fear of being crazy, “fear of losing all sense of separating boundaries; particularly the boundaries between the tangible realities of the external world and the imaginative realities of the inner world of feeling and idea” (19). We may affirm that the reading of Harold Speed’s *The Practice and Science of Drawing* helped Milner to visualize the objects that surrounded her in a new way. We cite the following passage to that effect:

Most of the earliest forms of drawing known to us in history [...] are largely in the nature of outline drawings. This is a remarkable fact considering the somewhat remote relation lines have to the complete phenomena of vision. Outlines can only be said to exist in appearances as the boundaries of masses. But even here a line seems a poor thing from the visual point of view; as the boundaries are not always clearly defined, but are continually merging into the surrounding mass and losing themselves to be caught up again later on and defined once more. (Speed 1913, 50)

In fact, it was at one time Leonardo da Vinci who used the technique of *sfumato*, consisting of the smooth transition from one colour tone to another, blending the colours into each other instead of putting them side by side for a contrasting effect. From his scientific studies, Leonardo had come to believe that no form in nature ever occurs fixed, so in his paintings the edges of the objects portrayed vanish, and the plastic relief of the images thus becomes attenuated. The English painter and father of romantic landscape as well as precursor to Impressionism, Joseph Mallord William Turner, also made an important contribution to this discourse on contours in painting. Indeed, due to the particular use Turner makes of light and colour, the lines marking the boundaries of the objects, in his paintings, become obliterated. Shapes seem to lose their sense of definiteness and material quality because those very lines that should circumscribe the various figures and separate them from the background have been eliminated. We must also note the important contributions of the Post-Impressionists, such as Paul Cézanne and Vincent van Gogh. Such a list of artists may appear—and from the perspective of an art historian it indeed is—a naïve grouping of painters belonging to different centuries and different artistic movements; however, the common thread that binds them together is Milner’s knowledge of their paintings (see, for example, Milner 1950, 1987).

The book entitled *On Not Being Able to Paint* (Milner 1950) was the result of numerous creative experiments made by Milner starting from September 1939, which were inspired to some extent, as she herself said, by her seeing Pailthorpe and Mednikoff’s work (MacLagan 1992, 50). She conducted an analysis of the content of her drawings and of her own

mental processes that accompanied these creative experiences. The work turned out to be “an attempt to discover, within the confines of a specific field, something about the nature of the forces [supplementary] that bring order out of chaos” (Milner 1957, 216), and at the same time, an attempt to reveal something about the inner workings of psychic creativity.

The process of symbolization

With the writing of *On Not Being Able to Paint*, Milner became more and more aware of not being able to precisely define “psychic creativity.” Only later did she manage to define it as the ability to form a symbol for the emotions⁴ in art and for knowledge in science. This meaning is in keeping with the ideas of the scholar of aesthetics, Susanne K. Langer, who considers art as the creation of symbolic forms representing an expression of the artist’s own conception of his/her feelings. For Langer (1942, 1953), the artist does not express his/her feelings directly, but articulates them through forms of organization—those symbolic forms of which the artist avails him/herself during the act of creation, in order to convey the emotion that the self-same symbolic forms embody.

There are also traceable points of contact with the thinking of the poet William Wordsworth (1800), mentioned by Milner (1950) herself. He claimed that:

Poetry [...] takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity: the emotion is contemplated by a species of reaction where tranquillity gradually disappears, and an emotion, similar to that which was before the subject of contemplation is gradually produced, and does itself actually exist in the mind. In this mood a successful composition generally begins, and in a mood similar to this it is carried on. (Wordsworth 1800, 183)

According to Milner (1952b), symbol formation is preceded by an identification of a primary with a secondary object, whereby the latter is different from the former in reality, though they are equivalent from an affective point of view (of course this affective equivalence does not mean that the subject actually confuses them). For clarity, it should be noted that by primary object we mean the object, or that part of it, to which the child initially relates. It is in this primary object that the subject tries to find a representation of his moods, the acquisition of which would remove the need to abandon these feelings. The secondary object is another piece of the world (a person, a work of art etc.) that becomes significant as a result of the process of symbolization.

There are two concepts to which Milner refers when reflecting on this process of fusion: fantasy, because only in internal reality can two separate items merge into one; and illusion (which refers to potential space as described by Winnicott [1953]), implying a fantastic relationship with an object perceived externally. Milner (1950, 1952b)⁵ understands

⁴The concept of artistic creation as the representation or symbol of emotions appears today to be an extreme simplification. Presently, artistic creation is conceived, rather less poetically, but surely less naïvely, as the consequence of the united and coordinated action of cognitive processes (perception, thought, imagination, attention, memory etc.), of affective processes (see Argenton 1996; Tan 2000), as well as somatic ones. In addition, the idea of the work of art as a representation of the emotions of the artist who has created it is extremely limited; it has to be amplified to the point of including the internal world of the artist, his/her way of “seeing” and “understanding” reality and existence (Bartoli 2003).

⁵It is worth remembering that “Aspects of Symbolism in Comprehension of the Not-self” was written between 1950 and 1951 (see Milner 1969, 249), that is, before Winnicott read his paper “Transitional Objects and Transitional Phenomena” (Winnicott, 1953) at the British Psycho-Analytical Society, on 30 May 1951. Milner anticipates some aspects of Winnicott’s transitional phenomenon concept showing that if the patient finds that the therapist (or better still, his/her mind) is not acquiescent (that is, not capable of taking the form of the patient’s fantasy), but his toys are, he thus finds an escape route from the act of hitting the therapist, which causes anxiety, because neither of them should surrender. The child’s

illusion as a necessary tool for a healthy adaptation to reality, and not at all as a failure in the adaptive process. Indeed, she argued—following the thought of the American philosopher George Santayana (1920)—that the existence of boundaries between “me” and “not-me” is not known innately, but is something that is experienced even though one might not be aware of it. The acquisition of this knowledge is in fact a slow and painstaking process for the baby:

our inner dream and outer perception both spring from a common source or primary phase of experience in which the two are not distinguished, a primary ‘madness’ which all of us have lived through and to which at times we can return. (Milner 1950, 33)

Thus, Milner grounds her notion of illusion in the sensorial experience of fusion between self and object. As the mother steadily becomes less attuned to the needs of the baby, the development of transitional phenomena and potential space will take place, and it is in this context that mental space, alongside the space for playing and symbolizing, is created. Here we have a modification to the Freudian hypothesis: Freud implies the necessity of overcoming illusion, whereas Milner implies the necessity of maintaining a degree of illusion.

But what brings the infant to shift its interest from the primary to the secondary object? According to Klein (1926, 1930), what moves the subject to pass from the primary to the secondary object may be either the actual loss of the object or alternatively the existence of an internal conflict which forces the child to transfer its attention and invest in another object in order to protect the primary from its own (the child’s) aggression, and itself from guilt feelings. Milner agreed with Klein’s statement that symbolization is the basis of all talents, or precisely those skills that allow a connection with the surrounding world. She agreed that premature ego development inhibits the capacity for symbol formation, but she did not accept the idea of *inborn* envy. Milner believed that envy was related to premature ego formation due to a childhood in which primary omnipotence had found too little space to develop. Having seen the need to establish object relations, Milner deviated from the Kleinian view as it was limited to the need for reparation and integrated it with the one already outlined by Ernest Jones (1918), who identified the need to endow the external world of aspects of the self that make it familiar as the basis of this process of identification. The projection of the self onto the world, of which Jones speaks, is taken from the essay by Sándor Ferenczi (1913), in which the author describes the ways in which the child tries to experience and filter external reality, therein discovering his/her own organs and their functions. Following a line of thought similar to Ella F. Sharpe’s (1935), Milner distances herself because she did not see this process as an “obstacle to progress,” but as the only possible way to understand the world.

The imaginative concentration

Beginning in the 1930s, Milner began to think about Zen Buddhism and the mystical traditions of both the East and the West in an attempt to learn more about methods to produce changes in consciousness by means of concentrating on the inner awareness

experience in this case is just like the experience of a person who, for instance, while drawing, concentrates on what the lines sketched on the paper can mean for him/her (Milner 1950).

of the body. In this way, she came to support the need for a particular type of imaginative focus (active and immobile at the same time), a contemplative action that enriches the outside world of certain qualities matching the subject's own (Milner 1956). Such a state of deep concentration is a sensory experience in which you find an empty space,⁶ a "uterine space" from which something new can be born. Focusing on this creation of an imaginative illusion is ecstasy: the emotional experience of searching and finding a substitute, the familiar in the unfamiliar (the reference here is to Wordsworth [1800], according to whom the pleasure that comes from perceiving the similar in the dissimilar is essential for maintaining mental activity). Being in such a state of ecstasy is like being in touch with one's own overwhelming ability to create the world. In this sense we can say that "Art creates Nature," that is:

By suffusing, through giving it form, the not-me objective material with the me-subjective psychic content, it makes the not-me 'real', realizable. [...] So what the artist [...] is doing, fundamentally, is not recreating in the sense of making again what has been lost (although he is doing this), but creating what is, because he is creating the power to perceive it. By continually breaking up the established familiar patterns (familiar in his particular culture and time in history) of logical common-sense divisions of me-not-me, he really is creating 'nature', including human nature. And he does this by unmasking old symbols and making new ones, thus incidentally making it possible for us to see that the old symbol was a symbol; whereas before we thought the symbol was in 'reality' because we had nothing else to compare it with.⁷ In this sense he is continually destroying 'nature' and re-creating nature—which is perhaps why the depressive anxieties can so easily both inhibit and be relieved by successful creative work in the arts. (Milner 1957, 228–229)

What Milner tells us is that the poetic genius⁸ hidden in all of us, the one that "creates" the outside world, discovering something familiar in what is unknown, needs a particular kind of imaginative concentration, a contemplative widespread attention that enriches what one recognizes as a particular quality of one's self. This concentration within the self and within the body is not to be seen exclusively as a regressive movement, but also, if not more, as a pre-logical subject-object fusion, as well as a body-mind fusion (Milner 1960, 1969). Concerning the "poetic genius" belonging to every individual, it is interesting that even the philosopher Jacques Maritain (1953) believed that every person is potentially capable of having "poetic intuition" (he places it at the root of the creative process). Ronald Britton (2015) helps us to fully understand this, suggesting that "poetic revelation is psychic reality," and that therefore "psychic reality is the only reality" (119–120). The

⁶It is worth keeping in mind that such a void, linked to the abandonment of reassuring logical thought, is potentially also a space where anxiety and terror can lead to an irreversible depression. In order to bear the horror of such an empty space, Milner affirms the need to be able to accept doubt and uncertainty. Already in 1943 she speaks about this, hinting at the "Negative Capability" that the romantic poet John Keats writes about in a letter to his brothers on 21 December 1817: "when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason" (Keats 2004, 57). For a discussion about Bion's O and Milner's zero (pregnant emptiness), see Michael Eigen (2015).

⁷The poet and art historian Herbert E. Read (1951) highlights the need to distinguish two very different meanings attributed to the word "symbol": one possesses a sense of the mingling together of two tangible objects, or a tangible object with an immaterial idea; the other a sense of losing that initial separation, thus making the symbol a form of original expression. Concerning this second way of interpreting the word "symbol," Segal (1950) speaks of "symbolic equation": the symbol is confused with that which is symbolized; there is no distinction between the two (a famous example is that of the violinist who when asked by the doctor why he had stopped playing since he got sick, answered that he had no intention of masturbating in public).

⁸The poet, painter and engraver William Blake (1788) writes: "That the Poetic Genius is the true Man, and that the body or outward form of Man is derived from the Poetic Genius. Likewise that the forms of all things are derived from their Genius, which by the Ancients was call'd an Angel & Spirit & Demon."

creative person is thus the one who permits himself this ability, even at the cost of experiencing the pain of being in contact with that specific wound, which, however, is also a source of creativity.

Some implications for clinical psychoanalysis

Milner's contribution to psychoanalytic understandings of creative and aesthetic experience is also relevant in the clinical practice of psychotherapy and psychoanalysis in the consulting room (see also Stefana 2011, 2014; Caldwell 2014), and constitutes a sort of indicator of the way in which much post-Kleinian thinking in the British School has increasingly viewed the psychoanalytic encounter in terms of aesthetic dimension (Glover 2009).

Beginning with the above-mentioned attempts to understand more about methods for producing changes in consciousness, Milner ultimately realized the enormous importance of the "variations in the feeling of the existence or non-existence of the body boundary" (1952b, 187). In her vision, the psychic health—or better yet, the psycho-physical health—of a subject rests on his/her ability to pass with ease from a state in which fantasy and reality, self and not-self, inside and outside are not clearly distinguishable one from the other, to a state in which separateness is recognized. However, before such an alternation can take place, it is necessary for the subject to experience a good enough environment, one that functions as a protection from outside intrusions and allows the subject to feel a sense of security, to be able to indulge in fantasies without having to seek refuge there and reject an "external" reality that is too painful; otherwise there is a risk of a premature and thus defensive development of the ego, which would trigger an inability to move from one state to another, creating an excessive concentration either on the logical and external world or on the pre-logical and internal world. The result in both cases is a sinking into psychopathology on the part of the subject. In this way, for a person entering into psychotherapy, the resumption of the psycho-emotive developmental process often emerges from being able to fully experience an undifferentiated reality, the basis upon which the resurrection of one's own body and one's own personality and the acceptance of subjectivity and reality will rest. Obviously, such an illusion of unity must be temporally limited and cyclical, or rather must alternate with a state of duality, if one does not want to risk a pathological loss of contact with reality (delirium).

It is interesting to note that the potential space about which Winnicott (1971b) speaks—possessing a somewhat visual connotation, as Milner had noted—corresponds to the transition from a state of unity to a state of duality, or to the dialectic between the experiences of fusion and separateness (Hernandez and Giannakoulas 1997). Thus, it becomes clear that potential space fits in between the field of the intrapsychic and that of the intersubjective, and "defines a field where emergent processes of both self and object occur, and where transitions between the intrapsychic and the intersubjective take place" (ibid., 159), a passage that leads to experience. With the progressive development of transitional phenomena and potential space, mental space will come into being, as well as the space to play and create symbols. We can see here the transition from the Freudian hypothesis of the necessary overcoming of illusion (a hypothesis founded on illuminist rationalism) to the hypothesis of the necessary maintaining of the illusion—which Milner conceives as an essential means to a healthy adaptation to reality, rather than as a failure of adaptation.

According to Milner, it is within the illusory situation created by analysis itself that the analyst must encounter the patient's need to have the kind of experience that in the initial developmental phases was such that it could not lead to a healthy enough process of development. The analyst thus plays the role of environment-mother (Winnicott 1963), being a psycho-physical presence—and, as such, a support—able to experience the absence of sense without feeling the necessity of attributing meaning to it, learning to wait, observe, and allow the patient to understand that he/she (the analyst) is there. The primary task of the analyst is therefore that of creating and maintaining a setting—either mental or concrete-formal—by means of which he/she can provide the patient with a type of relationship, a situation of “total active adaptation,” progressively waning in adequate fashion, so that it may become an environment good enough to satisfactorily meet the needs of assuring separateness and promoting integration (Milner 1969).

We have seen that for Milner analytic work is meant to promote the patient's regression to states preceding differentiation, in order to be able to process them, so that development may resume or begin to take place. What I would like to point out is that the experience of fusion (which can be either between the self and the object, or between a new and an archaic situation) requires the subject's profound concentration, the “quality” of which will influence how good the result is: so, for example, in the case of a person totally immersed in the flow of his/her drawing experience, indeed someone who is deeply concentrated on this activity, the result will be good, notwithstanding whether the final product is technically of high quality, but if, in the creating of it, the subject was profoundly involved in the transformations that every mark on the paper produced in his/her way of seeing the paper. In therapy, when the patient focuses on the creation of an illusion (a state of concentration that we can often either visually perceive, in that the patient can, for example, change his/her facial expression, posture, speech etc., or notice through countertransference [Stefana 2017]), the analyst gains nothing from interrupting such creative acts and getting the patient to re-emerge from his absorption. In fact, it could prove useful for the analyst to awaken his/her own imagination in an effort to grasp important aspects of the patient's pre-verbal communications, his attempts to communicate particularly important experiences that he/she is living through. What follows is that the analyst must allow for a lapse in his/her own Aristotelian logic by paying attention to the patient's concentration. This also proceeds from the concentration in the body (not only in the head, which would coincide with logical thought) of the analyst: a state in which the direct proprioceptive awareness of the body-self—with regard to the relationship that is occurring in the here and now of the session—which derives from observing and not from forcing one's own thoughts, moves from the preconscious background to the foreground of consciousness, in both the patient and the therapist. This psychic and somatic concentration, even though it may appear to be a distraction with respect to the patient, seems to help the patient in uncovering his/her own material, and the clinician in his/her ability to understand, share and experience. This absorption in the self and in the body is not to be seen exclusively as a regressive movement, but also, if not above all, as a pre-logical subject-object fusion, as well as a body-mind fusion (Milner 1960, 1969). It must also be pointed out that it is not the simple concentration in the body-self, but its processing and working through that make *reverie* possible. However, it should also be noted that the resulting work is often uninteresting and unintelligible, and might not be called “art” at all.

The experience of the artist

At this point it should be understood that the core around which Milner's study on creativity and art has revolved is the personal affective experience of the artist at work. An essential part of this experience is contained within the artist's body. In this regard, she argues that in order to achieve balance and stability one needs to create a relationship of reciprocity between the bodily rhythms of the subject and the person who so dedicatedly and lovingly cares for this body. Moreover, it is equally important that there be a possibility of reciprocal exchange between the individual qualities of the chosen medium of expression (see Rayner 1991). The psychophysical rhythm of a person immersed in creating a work of art, whatever it may be, is unique and unrepeatable. It is the source of life that animates true works of art, those creations that are an externalization, through lines and colours (in the case of the painting), of the uniqueness of the artist's own psychophysical structure (remember that in 1935, Sharpe, after a careful study of the qualities that distinguish the artist, had identified the rhythmic movement of the body of the artist who is creating as the source of the beauty of the work). Consider a child who, in his imaginative scenario, creates his mother. Of course we know that it is not like this, but he will dedicate himself entirely to this illusion, at least while he is building it, that is, while he is in a state of ecstasy because of the subjective reality of what he is creating (it is true that this may be somewhat simplistic because the child may also create a monstrous mother when he needs her to be so, and this experience is hardly one of ecstasy for the child). In this case, the expressive means—the amenable material—is the mother who “places the actual breast just there where the infant is ready to create, and at the right moment” (Winnicott 1953, 95). Milner (1957) tells us that the psychophysical organism of everyone has an intrinsic rhythmic potential that can acquire a more stable order with respect to the belief in an either externally or internally imposed order (the conscious planning mind).

More generally, we can say that:

what the painter does conceptualize in non-verbal symbols is the astounding experiences of how it feels to be alive, the experiences known from inside, of being a moving, living body in space, with capacities to relate oneself to other objects in space. And included in this experience of being alive is the very experiencing of the creative process itself. (Milner 1957, 227)

This attempt to preserve experience is the unconscious attempt to recreate the relationship with the primary object that was lost, either because of the unconscious aggressive feelings aroused by the separation from the not-me, or because transience is a characteristic of the emotional experience. Let us be reminded, however, that the primary function of art is not the recovery of lost objects, but the “creation” of new ones.

The bodily experience—more specifically those interests invested in the various stages of psychosexual development (the oral, anal and phallic stages)—plays a key role in generating those symbols that everyone uses in the creative process. This is what is meant when we say that metaphors originate in the body.

Some considerations of aesthetic experience within artistic creation

A key element in psychic creativity, or more specifically in the formulation of a symbol, is the necessity of finding the familiar in the unfamiliar or vice versa, with similar results.

Fulfilling this requirement allows the author of the symbol to overcome natural fears (the unknown being inherently disturbing), to gain knowledge of the reality of detachment and separation, with all of the accompanying anxiety, and to establish object relations. This process is made possible by

the basic identifications which [...] require an ability to tolerate a temporary loss of sense of self, a temporary giving up of the discriminating ego which stands apart and tries to see things objectively and rationally and without emotional colouring. (Milner 1952, 189)

The mental state of the subject immersed in this process is what the art historian Bernard Berenson describes as the “aesthetic moment”:

In visual art the aesthetic moment is that fleeting instant, so brief as to be almost timeless, when the spectator is at one with the work of art he is looking at, or with actuality of any kind that the spectator himself sees in terms of art, as form and colour. He ceases to be his ordinary self, and the picture or building, statue, landscape, or aesthetic actuality is no longer outside himself. The two become one entity; time and space are abolished and the spectator is possessed by one awareness. When he recovers workaday consciousness it is as if he had been initiated into illuminating, formative mysteries. In short, the aesthetic moment is a moment of mystic vision. (Berenson 1948, 84–85)

This mental state of deep and harmonious interaction between internal and external, me and not-me, subject and object, in which the variations in the perception of existence or non-existence of the boundary of one’s body play a key role, involves the feeling of enclosing the whole world (both good and bad objects) inside one’s own body (Milner 1950, 1952). Such a feeling corresponds to the “oceanic” one described by Romain Rolland (quoted in Freud 1929) as “an indissoluble bond, of being one with the external world as a whole” (65), “of limitlessness and of a bond with the universe” (68), which Milner (1969, 29) called “a sea of undifferentiated being.”

It is during this “aesthetic moment” that the viewer of the work of art identifies with it and dissolves completely into it. It is clear that the anxiety that the subject feels in these moments of immersion into creative depths is an integral part of the creative process, therefore it should not be avoided or denied. On a perceptual level, the subject must be able to arouse a contemplative, extensive attention, implying a kind of deconstruction of the mind’s conditioning, which opens up the possibility of having a more complete experience of both one’s own self and the external world, to “actively” abandon oneself to the moment. It should be noted, in this regard, that when such moments occur they are not always conscious.

According to Milner (1956, 195), the creative process, resulting in a cancellation of the separation between subject and object (a separation upon which logical thinking is based), takes place within the context of the gaps in our mental activity on the surface: “it must be clear to anyone who looks inward that our mental life does progress with a movement rather like a porpoise,” where there is a cyclical sequence of immersing and re-emerging with respect to the surface of the water, or more precisely the border between the conscious and the unconscious. Milner (1957, 217) considers that

the logical terms in which the capacity for symbol formation is thought about are perhaps less important than the pre-logical. I want to suggest that it is the terms in which we think, on the deeper non-verbal levels of the psyche, about this specifically human capacity for making symbols that in part determines the way the capacity works in us.

Here, too, we can trace a meeting of minds with Langer (1942), whose work was well known by Milner (see, for example, 1950, 1952b, 1956), who differentiates the verbal discursive thought processes from the non-verbal non-discursive ones (whose rules, as Langer highlights, were initially formulated by Freud). But to be more accurate, one can see the substantial influence that Jacques Maritain and Anton Ehrenzweig have on Milner's view of the creative process; she has frequently acknowledged her debt towards them (see, for example, 1950, 1952b, 1956). Maritain (1953) believed that modern painters are more focused upon the painting itself—or better, on the particular, psychological process in which they are fully engaged as they create the *objet d'art*—rather than being goal-directed (i.e. representing something); this does not mean that the art object is not important, but that being driven by a relentless search for a deeper reality, the artist necessarily goes beyond the appearance of things. The driving force of this process resides in the impossibility of the artist's creative subjectivity reaching the conscious level unless in communion with what is outside of the self. For the French philosopher, at the moment of creation, the self and “things” are simultaneously grasped, because here the splitting between subject–object, typical of logical thinking, has ceased. Ehrenzweig (1953) speaks of a tendency towards articulation on the part of surface mental activity (logical-rational thought), and he also speaks of deep mental activity (unconscious pre-logical thought), whose working manner seems chaotic to the surface mind, but in actuality is able to understand a greater number of things than the surface mind. Moreover, Ehrenzweig points out that Freud, William James and the *Gestalt* psychologists were among those who had indicated this tendency towards articulation on the part of surface mental activity.⁹

Reviewing once more the concept of creativity according to Milner (1956), it is possible to assert that creativity cannot simply be attributed to the mental state, defined as “oceanic feeling”—the feeling of being one with the universe—but it is strictly tied to the continuous oscillating between the state in which the ego of the child (and then of the healthy adult) is not yet differentiated from the surrounding external world, and the state characterized by the surface mind activity, in which things and the self are grasped separately.¹⁰ Such cyclical alternating is in part passively experienced, but it is also used actively with the intention of producing something. But for it to take place within the subject, a situation is needed that makes it possible to surrender to *reverie* and to the illusion of oneness, a context that is offered by painting, both to the artist and the consumer (Milner 1957). Therefore, what needs to be reached or recovered is a mental state (with respect to the material, the subject or the work of art) resembling that of childhood's dual union, where the self and the not-self are not very distinct, because only in these mental states is it possible to experience creativity (Spitz 1985). This mirrors the position of Christopher Bollas (1987). He sees the first human aesthetic experience within the idiom of formal aesthetic experience—understood, in this instance, as the way in which the child experiences the idiom of his mother's care. However, the

⁹The *Gestalt* psychologists had also examined the problem of the ambiguity of objects, specifically the problem of ambiguity and the non-definition of the object in relation to its context. Pictorial perception was also part of this branch of study.

¹⁰Ernst Kris (1952), an exponent of Ego Psychology, talks about the creative process in terms of a controlled regression of the ego to the primary process, where the ego, partially reducing the control of its superior functions, maintains a certain autonomy with respect to the id.

attempt of some authors to ground creativity and aesthetic experience on the mother–child encounter raises an important question: what about the exquisitely original artists who had little, or not good-enough maternal care?¹¹ As Gregorio Kohon (2016, 4) points out,

it may be something more mysterious and complex than [the vicissitudes of the encounter with the primary object]. [...] It is conceivable that the existential memory present in aesthetic *jouissance* takes place in the context of experiences other than that mythical primary encounter. Its significance may have started somewhere else, in a psychic place other than with the mother, and progressively moved back and forth along different paths.

Furthermore, outside of a psychoanalytic clinical context, wondering why aesthetic experiences exist, rather than how they operate, is perhaps of minor importance (Maclagan 2001).

Taking Otto Rank's (1932) work based on art and artists as her starting point, Milner (1952b, 1956) opted to characterize art as a bridge between inner reality and outer reality, where the boundaries merge and not without getting a bit confused. Therefore, art is a method that allows the adult to escape the mortal sterility inherent in a fixed and exclusively "objective" perception of the world. This can occur because art makes the illusion of unity and a pre-logic fusion between subject and object possible, allowing a relationship of reciprocity between internal and external realities. In other words, art generates that necessary illusion in order to initiate a creative rapport with reality. Crucial to this process is the role of the surrounding framework. Its goal is to guarantee that all that is represented within it is not an objective reality but an illusion; in this sense what we perceive inside the frame has to be interpreted symbolically, as a metaphor (a way of knowing and communicating), expressive of the psychic reality (Milner 1952a). At the same time, in terms of what was said about the necessity of an oscillation between the illusion of unity and the absence of illusion, Stokes (1955) claims that it is by means of the double experience of a state of fusion between the artist and the material chosen in advance, something at once totally separate and connected, and of a state of separateness that the chaotic material can draw on in order to adopt an aesthetic form. It is curious to note that here Milner did not differ from classical psychoanalysis in its insistence on dualistic thinking, or rather that there are two discrete ways of thinking and seeing "one characteristic of infancy and one of adulthood, and that they are as distinct and distinguishable from one another as a painting is from the world around it by its frame" (Turner 2002, 1071). The originality of Winnicott's conception of the transitional object actually lies in the overcoming of this "polarization of distinction and merger" (Eigen 1983, 424) "into transitional space where one-ness and two-ness can coexist and one can inhabit *both* inner- and outer-world reality" (Marks 2014, 95).

It is obvious that, through the use of an expressive *medium*, artistic activity allows one to experience the act of creating an object. (If one's emotional development during childhood went reasonably well, this is actually a re-experience.) Milner (1952b, 1956) tells us that the expressive medium, being flexible, submits to what is done to it without imposing

¹¹Possibly, at least for some of these people, it is the creative use of the fusion between the self and the bad primary object. This hypothesis finds support in the fact that even ugly things (Eco 2004, 2007) or disturbing and disagreeable experiences (Tomlin 2008) create an aesthetic experience. Thus, similar to the good object, the bad primary object can elicit an aesthetic experience once it transcends its pragmatic value.

any constraints. (However, considering the wide variety of expressive media, you may note the partial truth-value of this statement; certain materials are hostile, as those who have carved wood or stone, tried to fashion a figure from warm wax, or used watercolours on a textured surface with brushes are well aware.) It allows itself to take the form of one's own fantasies, or according to Christopher Caudwell (1937), the artist uses his chosen medium of expression like a poet uses words. But the expressive medium is also something which, in all likelihood, the artist tends to idealize to a great extent. Only if the artist loves this medium to the extent that he can become sensitive to its real qualities and potential (and therefore take full advantage of the pliability of the material) will the object created live up to the idealization. After all, art and expression exist only where material is used as a means (Dewey 1934). From what has been said, it follows that artists can only be ambivalent towards their medium; they love and hate it and fight it constantly.

The creation of something new, and not the original subconscious wish symbolized by the object created, is the most important aspect of every work of art (a new piece of the external world that through the process of symbolization has satisfied the primary need for unity, shifting interest onto the real object). The artist moulds his own private experiences into a new form that can be incorporated into the social world of art, creating symbols that let the inner life leak through. In this way the artist reduces, without completely removing, the gap between experience itself and the linguistic and visual means of expressing feelings. If it be true that only feeling creates real art (Kandinsky 1914), then the work of art, via the "form" through which it has become visible, represents the vehicle of communication for the feelings of the artist. This means that the symbols already discovered by the artist acquire full meaning (for him/her) (Milner 1952b). It is worthy of note that, according to the historian Erwin Panofsky (1955), the "form" impressed on the artistic creation is one of those three elements (the other two are the idea [or the subject] and the content) that all come together in the aesthetic experience.

What Milner wants us to understand is that:

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. By being more sensitive to the samenesses rather than the differences between things, by being passionately concerned with finding 'the familiar in the unfamiliar' [...], it does just what Maritain says it does; it brings back blood to the spirit, passion to intuition. It provides the source for all renewal and rebirth, when old symbols have gone stale. It is, in fact, what Blake calls each man's poetic genius. (Milner 1956, 214)

What can be deduced from Milner's works is that in life there are moments, recurring and circumscribed, found both in children and adults, where there is a temporary renouncing of differentiation, where boundaries dissolve and Aristotelian logic loses its meaning. Milner (1950, 33), following her personal search into the inability to paint, suggests that it is exactly in these moments of primary "madness" that every man creates new symbols that attribute a personal and subjective meaning to the reality just built inasmuch as "the substance of experience is what we bring to what we see, without our own contribution we see nothing." This truism on the nature of perceptive activities today enjoys unanimous approval. Not merely being a process of passive stimulus registration

“naive realism” according to *Gestalt* psychology, which was based on the “constancy hypothesis”), perceptive activities are rather

assigned to the ‘mental’ domain, irrespective of the degree of consciousness and complexity. They entail precise programs for the selection and processing of information, which not only adapt and recognize external reality, but also inevitably distort it. A ‘reading’ is never the faithful transposition of a reality presumed to be objective, but the execution of a program for interpretation of the input. (Imbasciati 2006, 20)

To conclude, we can ask ourselves, along with Marion Milner, what is art?

Can we say that it is to do with the capacity of the conscious mind to have the experience of co-operating with the unconscious depths, by means of the battle to express something with the chosen medium? If so, then perhaps it is true to say that the measure of genius in the arts is linked up with the extent to which the artist does succeed in co-operating with his unconscious mind by means of his medium. (Milner 1956, 215)

However, this is only a partial definition of art, intrinsically “unipersonal.” Art is more than this. Art is a mediator that offers a safe and indirect means of connection with oneself and others (Schaverien 1997), it is an adaptive response to the human evolutionary need for communication (Dutton 2010); in this sense one might say that “Aesthetic creation is aimed at an audience” (Kris 1952, 254). Such a communication cannot be reduced to the artist’s priority purpose or to the formal properties of a work of art; rather, it also consists in the expression and projection of emotional experience, in the re-creation, on the part of the audience, of a psychological process that is similar but not identical to that of the artist (Kris 1952; Spitz 2012). In this sense, artworks can be considered mutual creations in which the aesthetic response of the viewer (who becomes a more active participant) takes shape from what he/she perceives, what associations are activated and what they represent for him/her. In other words, aesthetics can be fundamentally considered as a subjective experience connected to the formal qualities of the art object, a phenomenon that takes place within the potential space in which the subject’s creative engagement with the external world is experienced (Hagman 2005). In order to work aesthetically, the potential of the symbolism (deeper emotional meanings) embodied in the artwork needs to be realized so as to start the cyclical sequence of immersing and re-emerging with respect to the unconscious, a movement well described by Milner (1956). For the viewer—and even before that for the artist (the first critic of his/her own work)—art is a safe realm where he/she can afford to lose the boundaries that keep the self safe and sound (Milner 1957; Kohon 2016).

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