'Catching Butterflies': Marion Milner and stream of consciousness writing

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Catching Butterflies:
Marion Milner and Stream of Consciousness Writing

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Abstract: This article explores the use of stream of consciousness writing in the early work of the British psychoanalyst, life-writer and artist, Marion Milner. Focusing on Milner’s 1934 book, A Life of One’s Own (first published under the pen name Joanna Field), the first part of the article situates Milner’s use of stream of consciousness writing alongside the work of her contemporaries Virginia Woolf, May Sinclair, and Dorothy Richardson. Building on Vanessa Smith’s recent archival work on Milner’s reading of Woolf, this article provides further insight into previously unpublished archival material that reveals Milner explicitly identifying her “method” with that of T. S. Eliot in The Waste Land, and commenting on Dorothy Richardson’s use of free indirect discourse while she worked on A Life of One’s Own. Reading A Life of One’s Own alongside the writing of Milner’s modernist contemporaries, I argue not only that Milner’s writing contains striking formal and thematic echoes of modernist stream of consciousness prose, but also that she uses forms of free writing as the basis for her own distinctive experiment in disentangling her own wants and desires from those manufactured by the forces of patriarchal capitalist modernity. The second part of the article demonstrates how Milner’s experiments with stream of consciousness writing became, in the political context of the 1930s, fraught with an uncertainty about the boundaries of the individual mind. Examining Milner’s anxieties about the forms of personal surrender solicited by modernist artworks, I show how Milner’s own experiments with stream of consciousness writing became, increasingly in the 1930s, part of an experiment in trying to extricate the individual from the rising currents of fascism. Tracking Milner’s, Richardson’s, and Woolf’s dramatization of the pleasures and perils of aesthetic abandon, I argue that, although Milner struggles to negotiate her own immersion within the rising socio-political currents of history, the significance of her writing lies not only in the vividness with which it dramatizes this fragile encounter, but also in the argument that it makes for the value of creative and critical processes in an age of fascism.

Keywords: stream of consciousness, Marion Milner, Virginia Woolf, Dorothy Richardson, May Sinclair, modernism and psychoanalysis, modernism and fascism
I feel I am groping in a very dark forest, with all sorts of strange & […] ominous shapes & flitting things […]

18/9/

“Stream of consciousness”

[…]

21/9/. There are books to tell you what to aim […] at, but not to tell you what to expect by the way. So I have often found strange creatures & thought I must be on the wrong path. (Milner, 1931a)
In her 1934 book, *A Life of One’s Own*, published under the pen name Joanna Field, Marion Milner asked the apparently simple question: “What do I like?” (Milner, 2011a, p. xxxiv). *A Life of One’s Own*, like Milner’s later books *An Experiment in Leisure* (1937) and *On Not Being Able to Paint* (1950), is a generic hybrid, made up of fragments of diary entries, stream of consciousness writing, self-analysis, doodles, drawings, literary quotations, psychoanalytic theory, self-help book, and essay. As Vanessa Smith has noted, *A Life of One’s Own* occupies “a space athwart disciplinary and generic axioms;” Milner’s “stream of consciousness style” is, Smith notes, “reminiscent of Dorothy Richardson, but is presented as social-scientific rather than literary experimentation” (Smith, 2018, p. 96). *A Life of One’s Own*, Smith continues, both “sidles up to and then shies away from the two dominant discourses through which selfhood was rethought between the wars: psychoanalysis and Modernism” (p. 96).

Following the publications of her first two books in the 1930s, Milner trained as a psychoanalyst; she qualified in 1943, and became a central, celebrated figure in British psychoanalysis. Yet, just as Milner’s first book both evokes a modernist literary style, and then retreats from it, *A Life of One’s Own* also (like the work of so many modernist writers) holds psychoanalysis at bay. Milner hoped, she wrote, to “devise a method which might be available for anyone,” regardless of either their inclination to wade through the psychoanalytic literature or their financial ability to “submit themselves as a patient” (Milner, 2011a, p. 159).

Although Milner does not cite *A Room of One’s Own* directly, *A Life of One’s Own* has, of course, been read as an unacknowledged tribute to Virginia Woolf’s 1929 essay.¹ Despite critical interventions by Lyndsey Stonebridge, Rachel Bowlby, Maud Ellmann, Hugh Haughton, and Vanessa Smith, however, there has been relatively little discussion of Milner’s writing within the field of modernist studies, and a tendency, within much of the existing

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¹ See Stonebridge, 1998; Bowlby, 2011; Ellmann, 2011.
scholarship on Milner, to view her work as standing apart from the contexts of literary modernism. And yet, throughout both Milner’s published and unpublished writing, references to modernist writers and texts abound: in *A Life of One’s Own* and *An Experiment in Leisure*, Milner’s literary references are not only to John Bunyan, Michel de Montaigne, Daniel Defoe, William Blake, and John Keats, but also span a range of modernist writers, including Dorothy Richardson, Virginia Woolf, James Joyce, T. S. Eliot, Joseph Conrad, Sylvia Townsend Warner, D. H. Lawrence, and Aldous Huxley. Milner was connected both socially and professionally to the world of Bloomsbury modernism: she counted Woolf’s brother and sister-in-law, the psychoanalysts Adrian and Karin Stephen, amongst her friends and colleagues, and her notebooks, housed at the Archives of the British Psychoanalytical Society, also reveal that she attended the 1917 Club, which was founded by Leonard Woolf and frequented by numerous figures of Bloomsbury modernism (Letley, 2014, p. 40; Milner, 1926). “The Milner archive,” as Vanessa Smith observes, “certainly discloses side glances at Bloomsbury in general and Woolf in particular” (Smith, 2018, p. 103). A notebook entry for 8th September 1929, cited by Smith, reveals Milner worrying about “taste”: “‘Taste’”, Milner observes anxiously, “is the God of the Bloomsbury school” (Smith, 2018, p. 104). Another notebook entry for 22 January 1929, again cited by Smith, reveals Milner meditating on the

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2 In *The Destructive Element: British Psychoanalysis and Modernism*, Stonebridge explores Milner’s characteristically modernist attempt to negotiate and theorise “the relation between the destructive element within” and the “theatricals of cruelty which dominated contemporary cultural politics” (Stonebridge, 1998, p. 144). Both Rachel Bowlby and Maud Ellmann, in their introductions to the Routledge re-issues of Milner’s writings, consider her early books in relationship to Woolf’s writing, stressing Milner’s literary craftsmanship and feminism, as well as, in Ellmann’s case, examining Milner’s encounters with fascism (Bowlby, 2011; Ellmann, 2011). Hugh Haughton has pointed out the affinities between modernist “epiphanies” and Milner’s “moments”, and Vanessa Smith, more recently, reiterates Woolf’s importance for Milner, while also highlighting the challenge that Milner presents to scholarly models of influence (Haughton, 2013; Smith, 2018). Ellmann has also written about Milner’s *On Not Being Able to Paint* (1950) alongside Woolf’s “study of inhibition”, *To the Lighthouse* (1927) (Ellmann, 2016, p. 100; Ellmann, 2017). Besides these accounts of Milner’s work in relation to modernism, existing scholarship on Milner has focused on her romantic and mystical sensibilities (Sayers, 2002); her interest in transcendence and religious experience (Raab, 2000); her extension of a Romantic and nineteenth-century model of essayistic tact to the world of the psychoanalytic clinic (Russell, 2018); her work on creativity and its importance in shaping the aesthetic preoccupations of the British middle school of psychoanalysis (Jacobus, 2005); and her role in theorising art as therapy (Letley, 2014).
satirical mock—“Preface” to Woolf’s *Orlando* (1928), and wondering, in relation to her own work in progress: “Can the mood be like ‘Orlando?’” (Smith, 2018, p. 104). In an article that focuses on Milner’s complex negotiation of her evidently uneasy relationship to both modernist and psychoanalytic authorities, Smith argues that Milner’s curious refusal to name *A Room of One’s Own* as a literary antecedent to *A Life of One’s Own* “can be understood [...] not as unacknowledged debt,” but “as both jocular and shy homage to an author who has communicated to her the mood that enabled her to find her voice”:

In the spirit that she has assimilated from *Orlando*’s preface she cites and doesn’t, joking with the writer who taught her to laugh at literary forebears. (Smith, 2018, p. 106)

For Smith, Milner’s determined refusal to cite both modernist and psychoanalytic sources constitutes a challenge to “scholarship’s reliance on models of authorial indebtedness” (Smith, 2018, p. 98). Indeed, a further root around in the Milner archive reveals another shared interest with Woolf: Milner’s determination to write for a figure that she, like Woolf, refers to as “the common reader” (Milner, 1931a). “[I]t is an attempt,” Milner writes of *A Life of One’s Own*, “to find a method by which the ordinary man can be himself, not dependent on experts” (Milner, 1931a).

Despite (and in part because of) the challenge that her work presents to scholarly preoccupations with “influence” and “experts”, Milner holds a unique place at the notoriously uneasy crossroads of modernism and psychoanalysis. In light of Milner’s interest in modernist writing, her role in shaping the aesthetic and creative preoccupations of British psychoanalysis (see Jacobus, 2005; and Russell, 2018, pp. 142-63) constitutes one of the major sites of historical intersection between modernism and psychoanalysis, which has too
often been conceived solely in terms of a question about the extent to which modernist writers did or did not approve of Freud. My aim in this essay, however, is not so much to trace the direct influences of modernist writers on Milner, nor to track Milner’s explicit borrowings from these writers, but rather to focus on their shared use of what May Sinclair described in 1918 as “stream of consciousness” writing (Sinclair, 1990, p. 443; Milner, 1931a). Milner’s notebooks from the early 1930s reveal not only that she was a close observer of modernist experiments with form, but that she explicitly understood some of her own compositional practices in relationship to modernist formal innovation. While a diary entry from 27th October 1931 reveals Milner commenting on Dorothy Richardson’s rejection of authorial omniscience—she notes the “Pointed Roofs technique—no omniscient observer…”—another diary entry from 1934, titled “Next Book, (intimations of)”, shows Milner comparing her own method to that of T. S. Eliot in *The Waste Land*:

Isn’t this, (ie my method) in a sense what T. S. Eliot was trying to do in his Waste Land? A series of emotionally important pictures.. (organic symbols..) which he has tried (unsuccessfully?) to link, give coherence to, by a system of notes. (Milner, 1931b; Milner, 1934).

In the first part of this essay I demonstrate how Milner develops her own version of the stream of consciousness literary forms of her modernist contemporaries, while nonetheless deploying these modernist forms as part of her distinctive “method” for understanding her

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3 On modernism and psychoanalysis, see Abel, 1989; Frosh, 2003; Stonebridge, 2004; ffytche, 2010.

4 In 1964 Milner published a letter in *The Guardian* stating that she was “making a study of Dorothy Richardson’s twelve books which she called ‘Pilgrimage’” and that she would “be glad if anyone who knew her personally would get in touch.” I am grateful to Adam Guy for alerting me to this and for giving me the references to the relevant papers in Milner’s archive. The archive includes a copy of Milner’s letter, along with two responses that Milner received, one from Bernice Elliott and another from the modernist poet, Bryher. (Milner, 1964).
own wants and desires. Like Smith, I stress that although Milner’s writing shares some of the formal features and feminist concerns of writing by modernists like Richardson and Woolf, she frames this not as literary writing, but as part of her own project to develop a “method” of creative experiment and self-analysis that, through the act of writing and publication, she makes “available for anyone,” going against the grain of both high literary modernism and pay-per-session psychoanalysis (Milner, 2011a, p. 159).

In the second part of this article, I demonstrate how Milner’s experiments with stream of consciousness writing became, in the political context of the 1930s, fraught with an uncertainty about the boundaries of the individual mind. Examining Milner’s anxieties about the forms of aesthetic self-surrender both enacted within and solicited by stream of consciousness artworks, I show how Milner’s own experiments with stream of consciousness writing became, increasingly in the 1930s, part of a troubled experiment in extricating the individual from the rising currents of fascism. Drawing on the work of Lyndsey Stonebridge (1998) and Maud Ellmann (2011), I suggest that Milner’s “forebodings about fascism” appear, not just in her explicit references to the rise of fascism, but also in her encounters with artworks—specifically in her encounters with artworks that, like stream of consciousness writing, enjoin the reader, spectator, or listener to immerse themselves in an experience of oceanic oneness with the aesthetic object (Milner, 2011b, p. 82). Milner’s writing, I want to suggest, can help us to identify one of the central political ambiguities of modernist form: that despite the often-held assumption that stream of consciousness prose affords writers and readers new forms of political freedom—freedom from the patriarchal tyranny of the realist novel, for example—the forms of immersion solicited in the readers of such prose might also represent a perilous form of self-abandonment. Tracing Milner’s worries about self-abandonment in the artwork, I show how her project uses stream of
consciousness writing in a unique fashion, as part of her own attempt to navigate the dangers of 1930s political life.

1. “Catching Butterflies”

In the “Preface” to A Life of One’s Own, Milner described the “aim” of her book: “to find what kinds of experience made me happy” (Milner, 2011a, p. xxxiii). For Milner, however, the “reason for writing the book was not the same as the reason for publishing it:”

The reason for publishing the book is that although what I found is probably peculiar to my own temperament and circumstances, I think the method by which I found it may be useful to others […]. The need for such a method in these days is obvious, a method for discovering one’s true likes and dislikes, for finding and setting up a standard of values that is truly one’s own and not a borrowed mass-produced ideal. (Milner, 2011a, p. xxxiii-xxxiv)

This experiment in pursuing the question “What do I like?” is cast not as another form of experimental writing, nor even as a path on the “royal road” to the unconscious, but, instead, as a new “method”—a set of techniques that Milner offers up to her reader as a way of freeing himself or herself from the shackles of the “borrowed mass-produced ideal[s]” and “ready-made” wants foisted upon us in capitalist patriarchal modernity (Freud, 1953, p. 608; Milner, 2011a, p. xxxiv, p. xxxviii).

In a gesture characteristic of many of her modernist contemporaries, Milner rejects what she calls her “Sunday paper mind” and attempts to cast off “influence from custom, tradition, fashion,” refusing to be “swayed by standards uncritically accepted from my
friends, my family, my countrymen, my ancestors” (Milner, 2011a, p. 3, p. 5). Echoing Virginia Woolf’s 1924 description of the “smashing and crashing” of nineteenth-century traditions, Milner records that “everywhere around me I saw old ways of doing things breaking down and proving inadequate” (Woolf, 2008, p. 51; Milner, 2011a, p. 5). Not only does Milner feel “dubious about trusting the dictates of a social tradition which had landed us in the war,” A Life of One’s Own also shares a typically modernist anxiety about the pervasive and noxious influences of mass culture, refusing the “standards” unconsciously picked up from “romantic stories, plays, [and] films” and rejecting “the voice of the herd, tradition, accepted codes” (Milner, 2011a, p. 5, p. 81, p. 19). For Milner, stream of consciousness writing forms part of a psychological experiment in understanding her own desires—an experiment that is presented as a “method” for securing what Milner describes as her “vacillating will,” so that it is “kept in the ways that I love,” “Instead of [being] pulled this way and that in response to the suggestion of the crowd” (Milner, 2011a, p. 30).

In her essay on “Modern Fiction”, published in the 1925 edition of The Common Reader that Milner both read and quoted from, Virginia Woolf rejected the realist predilections of her “materialist” male contemporaries and exhorted the modern novelist to “Examine for a moment an ordinary mind on an ordinary day” (Woolf, 2008, p. 9). In what has become—despite Woolf’s own ambivalence about the term—one of modernism’s most celebrated manifestoes for stream of consciousness writing, Woolf described the bombardment of the modern mind by “a myriad impressions—trivial, fantastic, evanescent, or engraved with the sharpness of steel,” insisting that it was the duty of the modern writer to record the “incessant shower of innumerable atoms” (Woolf, 2008, p. 9). In A Life of One’s Own, although Milner did not cite A Room of One’s Own directly, she did refer to The Common Reader, quoting Woolf’s essay on Montaigne, in which Woolf described the elusive, discordant and shifting nature of the “soul”—a “creature” that Woolf describes as “so
complex, so indefinite, corresponding so little to the version which does duty for her in public, that a man may spend his life in merely trying to run her to earth” (Milner, 2011a, p. 10). Milner, like Woolf, sought to describe the “myriad impressions” that flit across the mind, training her “searchlight” on the processes as well as the objects of consciousness and perception, while also embarking on an attempt to capture the “butterflies” of inner life—the memories, thoughts, feelings, and emotions that lurk in the “fringes” of the mind (Woolf, 2008, p. 9; Milner, 2011a, p. 110, p. 53, p. 81, p. 141, p. 77).

In chapter three of *A Life of One’s Own*, “Exploring the hinterland,” Milner comments on her frustration with diary-keeping:

> Diary-keeping had not brought me as far on my way as I had hoped. […] The more I had tried to find the facts [of my life] the more I had become convinced that my own mind was something quite unknown to me. […] And since it was my own mind I needed to understand […], I did not search in books, but began to try and observe what happened when I wrote my thoughts freely without any attempt to control their direction. (Milner, 2011a, p. 34)

Although “normally only aware of the ripples on the surface” of her mind, Milner turns to a process of free writing and free association, and discovers that the “act of writing a thought was a plunge”, taking her to a place where “the past was intensely alive” (Milner, 2011a, p. 38). Developing this, her own form of stream of consciousness writing, Milner attempts to grasp at her “wandering thoughts,” and finds that the “glimpses of the inhabitants of these deeper waters of the mind were rather disquieting,” presenting her with unfamiliar “creatures whose ways I did not know” (p. 38). “Plung[ing]” into the deeper recesses of her mind, Milner, like Richardson, disposes of the “omniscient observer” of conventional life writing,
and offers her own version of the “tunnelling process” (as Woolf referred to it) that appeared on the first page of *Mrs Dalloway*: “What a lark! What a plunge! For so it had always seemed to her when […] she had […] plunged at Bourton into the open air” (Milner, 1931b; Woolf, 1981, p. 272; Woolf, 2000, p. 3). Milner also echoes the language and metaphors used by May Sinclair to describe Dorothy Richardson’s “plunge” into “Miriam Henderson’s stream of consciousness:” Sinclair described Richardson as having taken a “plunge” into a “reality” that was “too thick and too deep, and at the same time too fluid to be cut with any convenient carving knife” (Sinclair, 1990, p. 443, p. 444).

Not only does Milner share these novelists’ fascination with (and metaphors for) the submerged depths of the mind, she also embarks on a series of “exercises in concentration” that bear a striking resemblance with modernist explorations of the “myriad impressions” of everyday life (Milner, 2011a, p. 66, p. 67). Milner describes a thought experiment in which, by focusing on everyday objects—a table, a lump of coal, and a small tin mug—she discovers a “window” onto “unexplored delights” (pp. 68-9). Focusing on a “lump of coal” Milner describes how:

> From having been aware of it simply as something to burn I began to feel its blackness as a quite new sensation, to feel its “thingness” and the thrust of its shape, to feel after its past in forests of giant vegetation, in upheavings of the land passing to eons of stillness, and then little men tunnelling, the silence and cleanliness of forests to make up London’s noisy filth. (p. 68)

The resonance with Woolf’s short stories—in particular, “The Mark on the Wall” (1917) and “Solid Objects” (1920)—is notable: while “Solid Objects” narrates its protagonist’s intensely felt passion for the “thingness” of fragments of stone, glass and metal, in “The Mark on the
Wall”, one of the inaugurating texts of Woolf’s literary modernism, Woolf described a thought experiment undertaken by focusing on a single “mark on the wall.” Tracing her “train of thought” as it travels from the mark on the wall to the more fugitive recesses of the mind—roaming via memory and fantasy, before landing back again on the mark on the wall—Woolf’s narrator describes while enacting the “smashing” of the realist conventions of fiction, imagining an “intoxicating sense of illegitimate freedom” from the “real standard things” of Victorian England and from the “masculine point of view which governs our lives” (Woolf, 2001, p. 3, p. 7). For Milner too, the value of her thought experiments lies in their capacity to release her from the standards imposed (often unconsciously) on everyday perception in a patriarchal society: “by fixing my thought upon a single object I automatically restrained it from purposes and forced disinterestedness upon it” (Milner, 2011a, p. 82).

Having “deliberately restrained that continual effort after purposes which seemed the natural condition of everyday perceiving,” Milner finds herself freed from what she sees as a patriarchal and capitalist obsession with “purposes” and released into new experiences of unfettered delight (p. 81, p. 82, my emphasis).

For Woolf, Sinclair, and Richardson—whatever their reservations about the phrase itself—stream of consciousness writing was a form of writing that, compared with the “materialist” conventions of their patriarchal forebears, offered a more authentic representation of the experience of individual consciousness (Woolf, 2008, p. 8). Both Richardson and Woolf suggested that this new form of writing possessed a unique capacity

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5 Milner’s reference to the “little men tunnelling” for coal to power “London’s noisy filth” also suggests a reading in line with Bill Brown’s interpretation of Woolf’s “Solid Objects”. For Brown, Woolf’s story about a politician who becomes obsessed with collecting fragments of broken glass, china, and iron, “bears witness” to “the domestic crisis of wartime scarcity in London and the postwar industrial crisis provoked by the British commitment to free trade.” Brown argues that Woolf’s “story about accumulating materials in the months of the war’s close” can be read not only as “an allegory of that war’s origin”, but as “an allegory with a difference—the difference marked by the bricoleur’s confusion of ends and means, by an alternative economy where value results from a noninstrumental passion for things.” Milner’s thought experiments can be read in a similar fashion as an attempted reorienting of value in which the lump of coal is valued for its “thingness”, and not as the raw material of industrial and imperial expansion and competition. See Brown, 1999, pp. 3-4, p. 17.
for the excavation of the female mind: while Richardson, in her 1938 foreword to Pilgrimage, described the novel as an experiment in “feminine prose” (Richardson, 2002, p. 12), Woolf, in her review of Pilgrimage, claimed that Richardson had “invented [...] a sentence which we might call the psychological sentence of the feminine gender” (Woolf, 1979, p. 191). In An Experiment in Leisure, Milner takes as one of her epigraphs a quotation from Pilgrimage in which Richardson laments the inadequacy of a “man’s statement”—described as a “brief poetic lie”—to sink beneath the “surface of life” (Milner, 2011b, n.p., para. 1; Richardson, 1979, p. 184). In A Life of One’s Own, and in her notebooks, Milner, like Richardson and Woolf, reflects at length on the relationship between literary form and gender, claiming in one notebook entry that the pre-existing forms of scientific writing, psychoanalytic writing, the diary, and even the novel, were all inadequate for the attempt to “give expression to the facts of being a woman: which has so rarely been done” (Milner, 1931a).

Although Richardson, Woolf, and Milner, do all experiment with prose as part of a quest to break free from the patriarchal forms of writing that dominated the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, this is not the “écriture féminine” of a later generation of feminists.⁶ In A Room of One’s Own, although Woolf begins by referring to the “man’s sentence” on display in the novels of Dickens, Thackeray, and Balzac, as “unsuited for a woman’s use,” she also (in a turn that famously enraged some feminist critics) goes on to develop a theory of writing as androgynous, arguing that “it is fatal for anyone who writes to think of their sex”: “It is fatal to be a man or woman pure and simple; one must be woman-manly or man-womanly” (Woolf, 1998, p. 100, p. 136). As Toril Moi has argued, rather than presenting her readers with an essentialist form of women’s writing, Woolf’s writing, disrupts and deconstructs the “fixed gender binaries” of literary tradition (Moi, 2002, pp. 1-18).

Similarly, in A Life of One’s Own, Milner develops both a method of writing and a theory of

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psychical bisexuality that are, as Rachel Bowlby argues, another striking point of intertextual connection both to Woolf’s account of “androgyny” in *A Room of One’s Own* and to her portrayal of shifting gender identities in *Orlando* (Bowlby, 2011, p. xxviii). At the close of *A Life of One’s Own*, Milner invokes the critical tendency to distinguish between “man-made forms” and “feminine style,” referring to “criticisms of women’s work, usually written by men, maintaining that they should not make the mistake of trying to express themselves in man-made forms but should develop a characteristically feminine approach” (Milner, 2011a, p. 169). “This sounded sensible,” Milner writes, “but apparently I was so imbued with the man-made forms that I was always puzzled about what, in practice, a feminine view-point and style might mean” (pp. 169-70). Although Milner seems, initially, to have found the idea of “a feminine view-point and style” appealing, she concludes *A Life of One’s Own* with another strikingly Woolfian recognition: “So it was,” she writes, “that slowly […] I had come to realize that there are two fundamentally opposite ways of approaching experience, both of which are necessary” (p. 170). Like Woolf, Milner unsettles any fixed, binary, or essentialist account of the relationship between gender and writing. Rejecting the idea of a purely “feminine view-point and style,” Milner insists upon what she calls—in a curious anticipation of Ali Smith’s *How to be Both* (2014)—the “capacity for both” (p. 169).

For the modernist writers that I’ve been discussing, stream of consciousness writing threw off the yoke of a realist patriarchal tradition, offering a new capacity to tunnel down into the gendered experience of consciousness in all of its diversity. In *A Life of One’s Own*, the forms of free writing that Milner develops are, unlike the highly wrought modernist novel, often unedited—for Milner, stream of consciousness writing is the basis of an experiment, not an end in itself: it is messy and, despite Milner’s poetic framing of excerpts from her notebooks, frequently departs from the lyricism of Woolf or Richardson. For Milner, the process of writing is crucial in capturing the “butterflies” of her mind. When
Milner embarks upon a “study” of her “wandering thoughts,” she finds that “this free-drifting thought was a shy creature”: “If I did try to watch it too obviously it would scuttle away into its hole only to appear again as soon as I turned my head the other way” (Milner, 2011a, p. 86). The “effect of writing things down” is, Milner suggests, as if I were trying to catch something and the written words provided a net which for a moment entangled a shadowy form which was other than the meaning of the words. Sometimes it seemed that the act of writing was fuel on glowing embers, making flames leap up and throw light on the surrounding gloom, giving me fitful gleams of what was before unguessed at. (pp. 46-7)

For Milner, the act of writing is not just a means of representing or recreating the processes of thought, it is itself part of an individual quest to concretise hitherto unrecognised thoughts and desires. More than this, the act of writing is also part of Milner’s effort to cure herself from falling into states of what she calls “blind submergence in which I passively followed my nosing thought in its wanderings,” “slipping away to irrelevant subjects when [I] should have been [concentrating] on my work” (p. 86). Struck by the “inconsequence and irresponsibility” of her own mind, Milner describes her thoughts as “like the swarm of tiny beetles which skate on the surface of a pond […]—an airy skimming in endless mazes” (p. 88).

The metaphors and language that Milner uses here begin, however, to suggest something more toxic than mere “irresponsibility” and distraction from capitalist efficiency. As Jan Abraham has argued, the “implicit questions in this first publication […] relate to the issues of compliance and non-compliance—true and false self experience—and the capacity to develop freedom of thought” (Abram, 2012, p. 1341). Milner is also alert to the political
dangers of succumbing to “blind submergence”, describing her tendency to “believe implicitly whatever I read in any paper about political affairs, finding it almost impossible to remember to withhold my acceptance of what was said until I had also heard other opinions” (Milner, 2011a, p. 86, p. 88). For Milner, an unreflecting submission to “blind thought” leaves the individual vulnerable both to an unthinking adherence to the newspaper editors, and to the irrational demands of what she calls “childish thinking:”

Like a traveller in a dark forest, my imagination seemed able to people the unknown with fearsome creatures, malevolent faces and sounds of evil intent, ghosts which vanish only when in the light of his lantern he recognizes them for familiar things, for twisted tree trunks and the creak of the branches in the wind. (p. 111)

The only way to avert blind submission to the fantastical creatures that populate the depths of the mind is, for Milner, to “flash my attention on the darkness, then haul [these ghouls] out of the bushes by the scruff of the neck” (p. 111). Through writing, Milner learns “how to think” (p. 105). The “method” of free writing, free association, and retrospective analysis that Milner experiments with in A Life of One’s Own gradually develops, not only into an attempt to concretise unacknowledged thoughts and desires, but also into an attempt to resist the forces—both internal and external—that, ever more threateningly in the 1930s, sought to dominate the individual mind.

2. Plunging into the Stream

As Hugh Haughton has demonstrated, there is a close affinity between Joycean “epiphanies,” Woolf’s “moments of being,” and Milner’s interest in capturing what she too describes as
enigmatic “moments,” when even “the very simplest things,” such as “the glint of electric
light on the water in my bath, gave me the most intense delight” (Haughton, 2013; Milner,
2011a, p. 46). Not only, however, does Milner share this modernist preoccupation with the
epiphanic moment, she also shares with her modernist contemporaries a particular fascination
with the way that her aesthetic engagements with works of art open up peculiarly intense,
even paradigmatic, moments of “delight”. In A Life of One’s Own, Milner reproduces a diary
entry that records having “Exulted in my body and clothes and red skirt and freedom to do as
I chose on Sunday morning;” this is followed by an “Evening delight in Chapter I of Ulysses.
Some queer spell […] like the trance from reading ‘The Hound of Heaven’ when I was
twelve” (p. 18). “I want,” Milner adds, “to be carried in the stream because the stream is
bigger than I am” (p. 18). Milner’s experiment in using the diary alongside doodles, free
writing, and other forms of stream of consciousness writing, reveals that one of her chief
“delights” lies in the pleasure afforded by being “carried in the stream” offered by other
artworks.

Milner discovers moments of intense pleasure not only in reading modernist forms of
stream of consciousness writing such as Ulysses, she also records her experiences of delight
in other artforms, including music, painting, architecture and sculpture. In a chapter on “The
coming and going of delight,” for example, Milner recounts an experience of looking at a
painting by Cézanne:

Slowly […] I became aware that something was pulling me out of my vacant stare
and the colours were coming alive, gripping my gaze till I was soaking myself in their
vitality. Gradually a great delight filled me, dispelling all boredom and doubts about
what I ought to like…. (Milner, 2011a, p. 53)
Although Milner describes the difficulties that she experiences—perhaps under duress from those Bloomsbury arbiters of “Taste”, Roger Fry and Clive Bell—in dispelling doubts about her own capacity to appreciate high cultural art forms such as post-impressionist painting and classical music, she also describes moments of triumph, such as when, while listening to music, she “slips” through the “barrier” and makes an “internal gesture” of self-negation that releases her into an experience of unhampered “delight” (pp. 47-48). In Dorothy Richardson’s *Pilgrimage*, Miriam Henderson undergoes similar experiences when listening to music: in *Pointed Roofs*, when Miriam listens to Chopin, she “slide[s] to a featureless freedom”—the music, Richardson writes, “carried her out of the house, out of the world” (Richardson, 2002, p. 43). For Milner, as for Richardson’s Miriam, music and painting hold the capacity to carry the listener or spectator “out of” herself, to dissolve the boundaries between subject and object, producing a liberating experience of oneness with the music or painting.

And yet, Milner also records her worries about “these gestures of feeling out:”

“Certain fears began to take form, shadowy and elusive […], but intense as a missed heart-beat” (Milner, 2011a, p. 54). “Chiefly,” Milner writes, “there seemed to be a fear of losing myself, of being overtaken by something” (p. 54). “Sometimes,” Milner writes, “in listening to music I would feel myself being carried away until neither I nor anything else existed but only sound, and in spite of the delight I would clutch wildly at some wandering thought to bring me back to the familiar world of bored self-consciousness” (p. 150). In a chapter titled “Discovery of the ‘other’,” Milner describes the precarious borderline between aesthetic pleasure and a fear of losing oneself within the artwork:

I was taken to see some sculpture (a form of art which I had always found rather puzzling). But this time I discovered that by keeping very still and forgetting
everything I had been told, I could slip down into a world of dark tensions, stresses and strains that forged themselves into an obscure but deep satisfaction. I felt it in my bones and in my feet and in my breathing. Soon after this I happened to be in Westminster Abbey [...]. Suddenly [...] I managed to strip my mind clean of all its ideas and to feel through the decoration to the bare structure of the building and to the growing lines of the stone. But in an instant I found a catching in my breath, for there was here an echo of terror. Here were the same stresses and strains as in the life-size sculptures but on such a super-human scale that they seemed to threaten my very existence. [...] But now that I had realized this terror of thrusting pillars and arches that loomed and brooded over me I found, as always before, the dread of annihilation merging into a deep delight. (pp. 150-1)

For Milner, the dissolution of boundaries between spectator and artwork, subject and object, opens up an experience of “deep satisfaction,” but the pleasures afforded by plunging into the artwork in this way are also matched by a fear of “being carried away” (p. 150). In looking at sculpture, Milner feels herself “slip[ping] down” into a bodily identification with an object-world of “dark tensions, stresses and strains” (p. 150). And yet, at the very moment that she succeeds in “strip[ping]” her mind clear of preconceptions and “feel[ing] through the decoration to the bare structure of the building,” Milner also feels an “echo of terror” (p. 150). The apparent erasure of boundaries between spectator and object is experienced as a threat to the ego, a challenge “to my very existence,” “the dread of annihilation merging into a deep delight.”

Articulating an unease, even a terror, produced by the forms of self-surrender enacted within these experiences of art, music, and literature, Milner encounters a dilemma that a number of modernist writers were forced to confront in the 1930s. Not only does Milner
share Woolf’s and Richardson’s tendency to present the moment of aesthetic pleasure (whether listening to music, looking at paintings, or reading books) as a paradigmatic “moment of being” (in Woolf’s terms) or experience of “delight” (in Milner’s), but for Milner, as for Woolf in a novel like *The Waves*, these aesthetic experiences also solicit a form of self-surrender that bears a worrying similarity with the forms of self-abandon demanded by fascism. In her 1931 novel, *The Waves*, for example, Woolf dramatizes the political risks of self-abandonment to what Jessica Berman describes as an “oceanic” aesthetic. Noting the parallels between Woolf’s “oceanic” aesthetic—her representation of states of blissful communion, in which, as Rhoda puts it, the “walls of the mind become transparent” (Woolf, 2011, p. 183)—and Alice Kaplan’s observation that “symbiosis and oceanic feeling” are produced in the “rhythms” and “intonations” of “fascism’s ‘gathering’ stages”, Berman argues that “the question of the politics of a certain communal aesthetic” is central to *The Waves* (Kaplan, 1986, p. 13; cited by Berman, 2001, p. 139, p. 140). Woolf’s novel doesn’t simply represent these moments in which the boundaries between subject and object appear to dissolve, it also, through modernist formal experiment (no omniscient narrator, the strange use of first-person continuous present-tense monologues) recreates these experiences for its readers. “I think then that my difficulty is that I am writing to a rhythm & not to a plot,” Woolf wrote to her friend Ethel Smyth, worrying that “though the rhythmical is more natural to me than narrative, it is completely opposed to the tradition of fiction & I am casting about all the time for some rope to throw to the reader” (Woolf, 1978, p. 204). For Milner, too, I want to suggest, a fear about the political risks of drowning in the stream is central to both *A Life of One’s Own* and *An Experiment in Leisure*. It isn’t until her second book, *An Experiment in Leisure*, that Milner explicitly links her desire to be “carried in the stream” to the contemporary fascist appeal to an oceanic experience of oneness with the crowd (Stonebridge, 1998; Ellmann, 2011). And yet, the challenge that Milner faces, in both books,
is how to distinguish her own personal desire for aesthetic self–abandonment from the surrender of the individual ego demanded by the totalitarian state.

Part of the answer, Milner claims, lies in the development of her “method,” a set of techniques that she offers to her reader as a way of distinguishing one’s own likes and dislikes from those imposed by newspaper editors, Hollywood movie–makers, and—by 1937—fascist dictators. Milner’s effort to distinguish between personal desires and the mass-produced fantasies of twentieth-century political and cultural life is precarious—as Lyndsey Stonebridge (writing of An Experiment in Leisure) notes, Milner’s attempts to insert a “frontier which differentiates what is inside from what is outside a self” founders on a “paradoxical logic” that is repeatedly threatened by the discovery staged within these texts that the boundary between individual and political fantasies is porous and slippery (Stonebridge, 1998, p. 156). Nonetheless, I want to suggest, although Milner may struggle to navigate the dangers of absorption in the stream, the significance of A Life of One’s Own resides precisely in its staging of these dangers. Milner offers her book to her readers as a model for a process: its interest to the reader, she suggests, resides not in what it might tell us about Milner’s personal life, nor in presenting an ultimate solution to the dilemmas that it stages, but rather in the way that it models a process of creative experiment and reflective analysis. For Milner, there is no short-cut and no easy solution to the difficulties that she traces, and the “argument” (although that’s not the right word for a text that is interested in creative process rather than logical ratiocination) of A Life of One’s Own is a solicitation to the reader (in the manner of a self-help book, but without the promise of the quick-fix familiar in that genre), to submit to the processes of creativity and self-analysis modelled
within the book. Like a modernist artwork, Milner’s project is about staging a process that involves the reader, rather than presenting a finished product for consumption.7

The Milner “method” may be risky and fraught with uncertainty, but, Milner insists, the conventional political sermons offered up in a period of political crisis overlook the crucial question of whether or not such exhortations ever work to bring about forms of personal or political change. In the “Retrospect” to A Life of One’s Own, Milner comments on the success of her “enterprise” in facilitating her own emergence “from the state of vague drifting in which I had originally found myself” (Milner, 2011a, p. 161). “But,” she asks, “what was the crux of my solution, where lay the critical point of my discovery?” (p. 161). Commenting on a pervasive sense of political malaise in the early 1930s—a time of rising unemployment, economic crisis, and political uncertainty—Milner writes:

In these days so much is written deploring the present state of affairs, present morals, present inertia, present ideals; everywhere it is said, “We must do this, we must do that, must be more courageous, must love our neighbours more, must get rid of lies and hypocrisy.” But hardly anywhere is heard the question, “What have we the power to do?” (p. 161)

Recasting her experiment in terms of a question about an individual’s power to effect political change, Milner concludes that one of her key findings concerns the limits on what an individual can or cannot bring about through an act of “will” alone:

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7 See also Jan Abram on Milner’s writing as an attempt to explore the “process of surrender to the unconscious” (Abram, 2012, p. 1340); and Peter Howarth on the way that both progressive pedagogy (which represents one of Milner’s many interests – she trained as a Montessori teacher) and modernist narrative share a commitment to “process thinking” and to “the way the world and the self are continually being formed” (Howarth, 2019, p. 274).
So it was that I had learned something about the “cans” and “can’ts” of willing, learnt that it was not any good willing myself to be more myself, or to live by my own standards, or to keep my personal integrity and be sincere with myself. (p. 162)

For Milner, such “sermons” and appeals to the will alone are doomed to failure (p. 162). But, she argues, instead of futile lectures about how to act in the world, what people need is a better route towards understanding the role of what she calls “blind thinking” (or what other psychoanalysts might call fantasy) in shaping, and frequently distorting, both individual desires and actions. Such an alertness to “blind thinking”, Milner argues, can only come about through the kind of creative processes performed in this book: the work of free writing, free association, and free drawing, accompanied by “continual watching” and a “vigilance, not against ‘wrong’ thoughts, but against refusal to recognize any thought” (p. 162). Refusing any crude attempt to pit reason against unreason, or to oppose what she calls “a life of consciousness” against “a life of natural impulse,” Milner discovers that “there was more in the mind than just reason and blind thinking, if only you knew how to look for it” (p. 163).

For Milner, the unconscious mind is not just the psychoanalyst’s “storehouse for the confusions and shames I dared not face,” but also the source of a form of “unconscious wisdom” (p. 163). But the quest for this “unconscious wisdom” is not simply a call for unfettered self-expression—it requires an ongoing creative and critical encounter with the self and with the world that must be accompanied by “rigorous watching and fierce discipline” (p. 162). This, Milner suggests, might be one step towards facilitating the kinds of personal and political transformation required to combat “the present state of affairs” (p. 161).

Deploying the fragmented forms of experimental modernist writing, thought experiments, and stream of consciousness writing, and using all of these as the basis for a
self-reflective analysis of her own wants and desires, Milner concludes *A Life of One’s Own* with the claim that, through her distinctive “method,” “I could develop my own rules for living and find out which of the conflicting exhortations of a changing civilization was appropriate to my needs” (Milner, 2011a, p. 164). Milner’s “method” is precarious—she struggles to negotiate her own immersion within the rising socio-political fantasies of fascism, often flailing in her attempts to erect barriers between personal, aesthetic and political fantasies of oceanic absorption. But it is precisely by dramatizing the fragility of this endeavour that Milner’s text enacts one of its most valuable insights for her readers: that the attempt to negotiate the dangers of absorption takes the form, not of a finished product, but of an ongoing and risky creative process, requiring constant vigilance. By using stream of consciousness writing as the basis for an experiment in living, Milner offers up a powerful argument about the value of such forms of writing as part of a quest for new forms of artistic, personal, and political freedom. This experimental “method” may take the shape of what Milner, in a later book, describes as a “dangerous plunge,” but it is also, she suggests, a necessary one (Milner, 2011c, p. 29)

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