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## Alice Miller and Relational Psychoanalysis

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*Abstract:* The author shows the connections between Alice Miller and relational psychoanalysts such as Sandor Ferenczi, Karen Horney, Erich Fromm and John Bowlby, although she herself would have objected to being described as a psychoanalyst.

### Introduction

I shall describe Alice Miller as a Swiss psychotherapist, in order to defer to her wish not to be called a psychoanalyst. Née Alicija England, she was born in Poland in a Jewish family on January 12, 1923 and died in France, where she had moved from Switzerland, on April 14, 2010. She suffered from Nazi persecution. In *Breaking Down The Wall of Silence* she discusses Holocaust survivors, but does not say that she herself was one of them. She became Swiss after World War II and published all her books in German, 13 in all, including the second edition of her first book, *The Drama of the Gifted Child* (Miller, 1979). They were all translated into English and are all listed in the References (the date is that of the original German edition, followed by the English title and the date of the English translation).

Miller, after graduating in philosophy, trained as a psychoanalyst and became a member of the International Psychoanalytical Association. In 1973 she started to paint, and realized that in her creative work the pain of her childhood was emerging. A sample of this creative activity, with the reproduction of 66 watercolours,

was published in 1985 as *Pictures of a Childhood*. Many show her as a baby, confronted by an evil mother. Five years after she started to paint she began writing her books, all addressing childhood trauma and the ensuing suffering.

After her first two books, in 1980 Miller stopped seeing patients and devoted herself to writing. In the fourth chapter of her third book, *Thou Shalt Not Be Aware* (1981), she stated that traumatic experiences in early childhood often find expression in the creative works of painters and poets. In that same book she examined Kafka, and later many other creative people. For example, in her fifth book, *The Untouched Key*, she discussed Picasso, who experienced an earthquake when very small. This was undoubtedly a traumatic experience, but not man-made, and therefore did not undermine basic trust in human beings, and Picasso developed to be a very vital artist.

After her third book, in 1983 she underwent therapy with Konrad Stettbacher, a Swiss primal therapist, to whom she always remained grateful. In her Foreword to Stettbacher's 1990 book, *Making Sense of Suffering*, she pays tribute to his gradual method of "step by step".



This was a relationship alternative to those of her childhood and to her analyses – with a person whom she described as an "enlightened witness". In 1988 Miller resigned from the IPA and no longer wished to be described as a psychoanalyst.

The orthodox reacted by erecting a wall of silence around her (she used this expression in the title of her seventh book, *Breaking Down the Wall of Silence*, which referred to the silence surrounding childhood trauma), just as they had done with other heretics, such as Ferenczi and Fromm. Miller's rejection of psychoanalysis extended unfortunately to alternative, relational psychoanalytic authors, who, in circular fashion, reacted by ignoring her. On December 18, 2008, I sent her an email in which, in reference to her recent book, *The Body Never Lies*, I unwisely defined her as "by far the most advanced representative of psychoanalysis". She never replied. With this paper I hope to break down this other wall of silence, by showing the connections between her work and that of several relational authors.

### Connections

The distinction between the Freudian drive model and the alternative relational model was made by Greenberg and Mitchell in their 1983 book, *Object Relations in Psychoanalytic Theory*, which Miller never mentioned. Presumably, she was, or would have been, put off by the adjective "psychoanalytic" in the title of the book. At the beginning of *Thou Shalt Not Be Aware*, her third book, she speaks of "Two Psychoanalytic Approaches", then she dropped the subject. In their Chapter 4, on "Interpersonal Psychoanalysis", Greenberg and Mitchell list the key figures in this movement: Harry Stack Sullivan, Erich Fromm, Karen Horney, Clara Thompson and Frieda Fromm-Reichmann.

Miller would have found herself very much in agreement with Horney, an independent-minded woman who in 1941 walked out of the New York Psychoanalytic Institute. Of this group, Miller mentions only Fromm. In her second book, *For Your Own Good*, on p. 177 (Eng-

lish-language edition) she approvingly quotes Fromm's definition of Hitler as a "necrophilic beast", taken from Fromm's 1973 book, *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness*. She never mentioned Fromm again, although she shared with him the interest in Hitler, whom she discussed in six of her books (*Thou Shalt Not Be Aware*, *For Your Own Good*, *Banished Knowledge*, *The Untouched Key*, *Breaking Down the Wall of Silence*, and *Free From Lies*), possibly because of her personal experience with the Nazis.

Miller viewed Hitler's destructiveness as a consequence of the denial of trauma. Hitler was beaten every day by his father. He used to count the blows without uttering a sound, then displaced his resulting hatred onto the Jews and acted it out with them. As Miller points out in *Breaking Down the Wall of Silence*, on p. 65, there is an essential difference between experiencing a feeling, such as hatred, and displacing it and acting it out on others or directing it onto oneself. In addition to Hitler, she also shared with Fromm a concern with the similar case of Stalin. In addition, in *Breaking Down the Wall of Silence*, she also discusses the case of the Rumanian dictator Ceasescu. I report on this discussion at length in my book, *Paradigms in Psychoanalysis* (Bacciagaluppi, 2012).

Miller converged with Fromm on several other points. One point, which Fromm shared with the rest of the group listed by Greenberg and Mitchell, is the move away from Freudian psychoanalysis. This move is very obvious from a comparison between the two editions of *The Drama*. In the first edition, the title of the first essay is "The Drama of the Gifted Child and the Psychoanalyst's Narcissistic Disturbance". In the second edition, which appeared in 1997, this becomes "The Drama of the Gifted Child and How We Became Psychotherapists". On p. 21 of the first edition she says that her basic assumptions "are close to the work of D.W. Winnicott, Margaret Mahler and Heinz Kohut". In the second edition these names disappear. There is only one mention of Winnicott on p. 23, although an implicit reference to him is retained



in "the True Self" of the book's title. Her rejection of psychoanalysis includes the use of free associations (*Banished Knowledge*, p. 183). This may be true of free associations in the course of a session, but I find they are still very useful in moving from the manifest to the latent content of a dream.

Here is another point of convergence with Fromm. On p. 170 of *For your Own Good* Miller says: "The fact that Hitler had so many enthusiastic followers proves that they had a personality structure similar to his". This is Fromm's concept of the social character, first set out in his first book, *Escape from Freedom* (Fromm, 1941), whereby society, in order to perpetuate itself, creates in the child, through the family, the appropriate character structure.

Here is another point. In her second book, *For Your Own Good*, Miller challenges pedagogy: not only the overtly traumatic pedagogy of Schreber's father, which Schreber experienced in a delusional manner as "soul murder", but the whole idea of pedagogy. She maintains that "pedagogy fills the needs of parents, not of children" (p. 96). Miller's critique of pedagogy as an attempt by adults to wipe out "evil" from children is reminiscent of Fromm's critique of Freud's "Augustinian" view of the child as a small sinner, impelled by sexual and aggressive drives (Fromm, 1951).

There are other points of convergence with Fromm. Fromm addresses these subjects at various places in his work, and recapitulates most of them in *The Anatomy*. On p. 112 of *The Drama* Miller, as Fromm, criticizes "normalcy-worship". In *For Your Own Good*, on p. vii, she shares with Fromm a strong concern over nuclear warfare, and on p. 40 she criticizes obedience as a "supreme principle" (Fromm, 1981). Miller uses terms frequently employed by Fromm. On p. 124 of *Thou Shalt Not Be Aware* and elsewhere she speaks of the "power over" children exercised by adults. On pp. 175-176 of *For Your Own Good* she speaks of "the narcissistic, symbiotic unity between Führer and Volk".

Finally, both Fromm and Miller addressed fairy tales, dreams and myths, especially the story of Oedipus: Fromm in *The Forgotten Language*, and Miller in *Thou Shalt Not Be Aware*. Like Fromm, Miller was vital and active to the end. On p. 41 of *Free From Lies*, written when she was 84, in connection with "the process of aging and the increasing frailty of the body", she wrote: "even then I will know that I have lived my own, true life". In February 2010, at 87, she gave an interview that was published on her website, through which she constantly kept in touch with her readers.

One point on which Miller diverged from Fromm was Oriental meditation. Whereas Fromm was interested in Zen Buddhism (Suzuki, Fromm and De Martino, 1963), on p. 179 of *The Truth Will Set You Free* she defines attempts to arouse positive feelings by meditation to be "profoundly illusory".

One thing that Miller lacks, in comparison with Fromm, is the time dimension of prehistory. She ascribes the traumatic experiences of childhood to the lingering effects of observing the Fourth (what for other people is the Fifth) Commandment of honoring one's parents. This may be quite correct, but it only goes back to the patriarchal culture of the Old Testament. Miller omits to set this culture against the earlier, and much longer, matriarchal culture, as Fromm instead did when he discussed Bachofen in 1934 (reprinted in Fromm, 1970), although Miller herself, like Ferenczi, Fromm and Bowlby, obviously belonged to our innate matriarchal culture. She showed this with the original German title (*Evas Erwachen*, Eve's awakening) of *The Truth Will Set You Free*.

There is some social critique in Miller's work, as when, on p. 99 of *Thou Shalt Not Be Aware*, she says: "It requires no great effort to identify the apocalyptic features of our century: world wars, massacres, the specter of nuclear war, the enslavement of millions by technology and totalitarian regimes, the threat to the earth's ecological balance, the depletion of energy sources, the increase in drug addiction". However, her main contribution lies in uncovering



traumatic child-rearing methods (what she calls "poisonous pedagogy"), that are relevant to the formation of the various character structures described by Fromm. By referring to Marx and Bachofen, Fromm reveals the historic and pre-historic roots of our alienated society. These two authors may thus be viewed as complementary in contributing to a critical theory of society.

Another limitation of Miller concerns ethology and evolutionary theory. Although she mentions Bowlby in *For Your Own Good, Thou Shalt Not Be Aware, The Untouched Key* and *Paths of Life*, she does not refer to ethology and evolutionary theory, which Bowlby used as the underpinnings of attachment theory. Fromm, instead, mastered these two domains in *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness*.

In *The Anatomy*, Fromm addressed the effect of overpopulation, which is the result of the agricultural revolution - a major break with our hunter-gatherer past. This issue had been raised ever since 1798 by Robert Malthus in his essay on population. In this connection, Fromm reports on the findings in the late Twenties of Solly Zuckerman, who observed that the overcrowded conditions of a colony of baboons in London Zoo led to unnatural aggression, whereby the animals killed each other, and adults killed the young. Surely, these observations are most relevant to Miller's concern about the physical abuse of children.

Another author to be discussed is Ferenczi. On p. 182 of their book, Greenberg and Mitchell regard Ferenczi as having influenced the relational model on both sides of the Atlantic through two women analyzed by him: Melanie Klein in the UK and Clara Thompson the USA. Ferenczi's influence was indirect in the UK, because Klein, after moving to Abraham in Berlin, outdid Freud in applying the drive model. Thompson, instead, was very influential in giving rise to the interpersonal-cultural school in the USA. Miller mentions Ferenczi briefly on p. 45 of *Breaking Down the Wall of Silence*, in connection with his raising once more the subject of child abuse. He is not listed in the refer-

ences, and Miller does not refer to Fromm's twofold defence of Ferenczi, both before and after the war. In her books she often uses the term "identification with the aggressor", without tracing it to Ferenczi. Miller would have found Ferenczi very congenial, because of the constant reference to the suffering child within the adult, to be found in both authors.

Another very relevant author not mentioned by Miller is Jeffrey Masson, author of *Assault on Truth* (Masson, 1984), on Freud's abandonment of the seduction theory. Masson's book also contains Ferenczi's 1932 paper on "Confusion of tongues". Masson himself also underwent a Freudian analysis, then challenged it in *Final Analysis* (Masson, 1990). Also Miller, without referring to Masson, addressed the subject of Freud's change of mind. On p. 177 of *Banished Knowledge* she discusses two extreme cases of physical symptoms as a reaction to trauma. One is Galileo, who went blind after the Church obliged him to deny the truth. The other is Freud, who developed cancer of the jaw after repudiating the seduction theory in 1897.

Bowlby defined this as a "disastrous volte-face" in a 1983 paper, "Violence in the Family", published in 1984 in *The American Journal of Psychoanalysis*, and reprinted in *A Secure Base* in 1988, in which also he addresses abuse – physical, rather than sexual, after having acknowledged his previous neglect of the subject (in order to build his theory of attachment, Bowlby had studied the effects on children of a real-life traumatic event such as hospitalization, which, however, was not due to aggressiveness on the parent's part, but to the social neglect of the child's attachment need).

This move on Freud's part, which he announced to Fliess in a letter of September 21, 1897, had been preceded by two events. In 1896 his father died, and on February 8, 1897, in an earlier letter to Fliess, he had spoken of his father's "perversion" in connection with his sexual abuse of his children. Thus, Freud denied the traumas in his patients and replaced them by the child's fantasies, in order to deny his own traumas and to protect his father's reputation.



He then proceeded to impose this view on many generations of psychoanalysts.

The Freud-Fliess correspondence (edited by Masson) had already been published in 1985 when Miller wrote her book in 1988, but she may not have been aware of it, otherwise she would certainly have mentioned it. She had already discussed more briefly Freud's abandonment of the seduction theory in *For Your Own Good*, on p. 60.

Bowlby is another relevant relational author. Also he is placed by Greenberg and Mitchell within the relational model, on pp. 184-187 of their book. He speaks with appreciation of Miller's first book in *The Milan Seminar*, edited by me and recently published (Bowlby, 2013, p. 29). Miller mentions him at various points. On p. 275 of *For Your Own Good* she speaks about Bowlby's paper, which had recently appeared, "On Knowing What You Are Not Supposed to Know and Feeling What You Are Not Supposed to Feel", and which she obviously found congenial to the subject of her next book, *Thou Shalt Not Be Aware*.

In her work she repeatedly uses the terms "attachment figure" and "mourning", without however relating them to Bowlby's attachment theory, in particular to the third volume of his trilogy, *Loss* (Bowlby, 1980). When, in *The Drama*, she says that the gifted child is bound to fulfil the parent's needs, she is describing what Bowlby (1973) called the inverted parent-child relationship, or role reversal.

Her neglect of alternative psychoanalysis led Miller to overlook some outstanding contributions in the Nineties, such as the books by Davies and Frawley (1994) on the sexual abuse of girls and by Richard Gartner (1999) on the sexual abuse of boys. By reading these books she would also have re-discovered the importance of dissociation, described in the nineteenth century by Pierre Janet and now regarded as an emergency defence in young children. Since rivalry developed between Janet and Freud, also Janet and his concept of dissociation were surrounded by the wall of silence, and in this case

also Miller was its victim, because she always used the Freudian concept of repression – a horizontal split in the psyche, in contrast to dissociation – a vertical split. Bowlby, instead, as he states in Chapter Four of *Loss* (Bowlby, 1980), subscribed to the neo-dissociative position of Hilgard.

Outside psychoanalysis, another development neglected by Miller was the definition of PTSD and its incorporation into DSM-III in 1980. She would have found it important, because it was due to two strands: the protest of the women's movement against the abuse of women and children, and the protest of Vietnam veterans against the traumas of war.

Possibly, Miller's main contribution is the reaction to trauma through physical symptoms. Her discussion of Freud's cancer of the jaw has already been reported above. In this connection, the title of her 2004 book, *The Body Never Lies*, is very clear. The development of physical symptoms is one point on which Miller may be relevant to Fromm. In the Introduction to the recent book on Fromm, Funk and McLaughlin (2015, p. 9) address some "limitations" of Fromm. In Funk's 1983 biography of Fromm, he reports on p. 59 that, when Fromm developed tuberculosis in the Thirties, Groddeck ("the founder of psychosomatic medicine") very resolutely stated that this was due to Fromm's inability to separate from Frieda Reichmann, his first wife. This sounds very plausible, but it raises the question of why Fromm should have expressed this problem in physical terms.

Here Miller is relevant, with her insistence on reaching the feelings of the child within the adult. At an adult intellectual level, Fromm was quite aware of the fact that he had a "highly depressed mother" (Funk, 1983, p. 21) and an anxious father, who both tried to keep him bound to them. At an adult level, with the help of alternative models, he broke free. However, if he developed physical symptoms, it implies that he was not in touch with the *feelings* of the *child* within him. Frieda Reichmann was 10 years older than Fromm and had been his first analyst. She was obviously a mother figure for



him. Basically, the *actual* separation from Frieda Reichmann reactivated the experience of the *emotional* separation from the depressed mother.

Separation, as Bowlby (1973) says, leads to anger. Fromm's feelings as a child must have been, at first, rage at the depressed mother, and then at both parents for what Bowlby (1973) calls the inversion of the parent-child relationship, which leads to a dual frustration of basic needs: the initial need for a secure attachment, and the later need for autonomy. If this rage was turned against the self, it gave rise to physical symptoms. Of course, tuberculosis implies the presence of Koch's bacillus. The psychological component lies in the weakening of the immune system. Fromm himself may thus have fallen prey to what he called "cerebralization". As the title of Miller's 2004 book rightly says, the body never lies. Her discussion in *Thou Shalt Not Be Aware of Kafka's tuberculosis* is relevant. Ferenczi, who, after re-discovering trauma, was excommunicated by the orthodox and died at 59 of pernicious anemia, is another, more extreme, example.

This important contribution by Miller is ignored not only by relational psychoanalysts but also outside psychoanalysis. Bessel van der Kolk, a specialist on trauma, wrote *The Body Keeps the Score* (van der Kolk, 2014), the title of which is very close to *The Body Never Lies*, yet Miller is not mentioned in the index.

At a socio-historical level, the transgenerational transmission of trauma (a concept Miller shares with Bowlby) may be viewed as the means by which the patriarchal culture maintains itself through the perpetuation of the authoritarian personality (the subject of the famous Adorno study), whereby what one endures at the hands of someone stronger is then inflicted on someone weaker. Fromm had already anticipated this concept in 1941 in *Escape From Freedom*, although employing traditional psychoanalytic terms such as sadism and masochism.

## Conclusion

I hope I have contributed to overcoming the wall of silence between Alice Miller and relational psychoanalysts. Though they largely ignored each other, they have in common a subject of great social significance, namely the concern for the traumatized child and the effects of trauma on later life. This subject may still need to be stressed in psychoanalytic circles. When, in May 2009, I opened a discussion on trauma in OPIFER, the Italian alternative psychoanalytic association, there was only one response. It is no accident that it came from a Ferenczian. This confirms what Judith Herman (1992) states: "The study of psychological trauma has a curious history – one of episodic amnesia".

In 1985, after having discussed it with Bowlby, I presented a paper in which I suggested that a renewal of psychoanalysis could be accomplished by rejecting its metapsychology and adopting attachment theory as its alternative basis. This paper was later published in *The American Journal of Psychoanalysis* (Bacciagaluppi, 1989). I believe that the incorporation of Alice Miller's contributions could lead to a further enrichment of relational psychoanalysis.

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