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Talking Dirty, Analogically Speaking



by Robert Sweetman

Thomas Moore has obviously drunk deeply from the well of Carl Jung. I have not. The disjunction makes me nervous. It limits what I can say about Moore's project in *The Soul of Sex: Cultivating Life as an Act of Love* without limiting my impulse to speak. You see, I do not know what to think of Jung's archetypes and of their role in examining the contours of the human psyche. For all I know, they constitute a master key to the secrets within. But they could just as easily be a vulgar bit of quackery. Moreover, I do not know how one is supposed to

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think of them. To what do they refer? I am an historian of philosophy. Perhaps that history can come to my aid. Are Jung's archetypes to be thought of, in Kantian style, as a priori configurations of the human psyche? Or are they to be viewed aesthetically as playful presences, ontological metaphors, one might say, that point beyond themselves to psychic configurations that, strictly speaking, they are not? I leave such questions aside. I must find another way in.

I have read another fellow traveler of Jung, the cultural anthropologist of religion, the late Dr. Joseph Campbell. I must confess that my reading of him never fails to produce dyspepsia. I dislike his way of interpreting the breathtaking correlations he makes in the course of his research into comparative mythology.

I do not wish to be misunderstood here. At some level, I think he is right to say, for example, that the "Hero" has a thousand faces or wears a thousand masks. That is, I do not doubt the validity of comparative mythology as an academic pursuit, nor do I question the reality of the correlations it uncovers. I suspect, however, the leveling of difference that marks Joseph Campbell's interpretation of the similarities his justly celebrated erudition brings to light.

He surveys, above all, religious tales, some Christian, and others Jewish, Zoroastrian, Confucian, Islamic, Aboriginal, and so on. However, he is not interested in the contextual differences of these stories' religious homes. Nor is he interested in the integral fit of those tales within their religious environment. He is not interested in them as *religious* tales at all, unless religion be understood as the way in which we, human beings and communities, gain access to and express the shape of our inner needs,

drives, and feelings. My disappointment lies in this reduction of religion and religious meaning to its psychic moment.

Religion, of course, has such a moment. The psychic is ubiquitously present in and co-constitutive of religion and religious tales. However, religion and its tales cannot be reduced to their psychic moment. Such reduction results in an illusion, a flattened sameness, despite Campbell's undeniable virtuosity.

The reader might well wonder how these mutterings against Joseph Campbell further the present discussion. After all, we are speaking of Thomas Moore and his project in *The Soul of Sex*. Yes, we are, and the point is that he interacts with religious tales in disturbingly similar ways. He, too, is interested in such tales, first and foremost, for their capacity as containers of our psychic ichor, i.e., of the normative drives and needs that he sees persisting in pristine and stable purity deep below the conscious surface of our lives. From his vantage point, too, the religious sensibilities of his story tellers and the weight that their tales are asked to bear *as religious* tales are considered immaterial, mere husk to be stripped away in order to arrive at the psychological kernel nestled within. He, too, finds it hard to let Christian tales be Christian, Muslim tales be Muslim, or Greco-Roman tales be pagan. Indeed, he tends to be impatient with the narrow parochiality of these stories when understood in such religiously determinate ways. In short, he finds it hard to honour religious tales on their own terms, and I find it hard not to fault him for doing so. The gorge rises. I glimpse, to my chagrin, an "inner Puritan." It is not a pretty sight.

So, now that you are forewarned of my jaundiced eye, what do I manage to see through the yellow haze? In the first place, I see that the "sex" that Thomas Moore is speaking of in this book is not sex in the strict sense. You could say that in this book Thomas Moore inverts Sigmund Freud's point about cigars. It is one of his finest moments, a priceless, though I fear inadvertent, bit of cheek. What am I driving at here? For Moore, sex is *sometimes just sex*. However, the sex-that-is-just-sex is only a single if crucial component of the sex he wishes to celebrate. Indeed, his central notion of sex is stretched far beyond its ordinary usage if not beyond all recognition. It has ceased to refer primarily to the physical act of coitus and has come instead to refer to

the whole of human life and living. It names that whole *via sex* and hence *as* a crucible of Desire. He might conceivably have titled his book *The Soul of Desire* and thereby saved me a few embarrassing moments on the subway as Priapus and the other phallic figures lay exposed, so to speak, on my lap in full view of one or another of Toronto's distinguished blue-rinsed mavens. But, as we will see, there are good reasons for Moore to have stuck to his chosen "Sex."

In the second place, I see that the "soul" Thomas Moore is speaking of in this book is not soul in the traditional sense. We are not speaking of the scholastic philosopher's formula: soul is the

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immaterial rational principle informing matter such that they together form the psychosomatic unity we call a human being. Thomas Moore is speaking of something different and more interesting.

Throughout his book, he speaks of our human makeup in terms of an ancient triad of terms: body, soul, and spirit. From one perspective this triad, as he uses it, can be thought of as a continuum. Body and spirit mark out the poles of the continuum. Body marks our concrete physical being and action, those patterns of living that emerge from and subserve the needs of our spatial, physical, chemical, and biotic selves. These can be thought of as the mundane or non-transcendent patterns of living that constitute the surface of our lives. This is an essential component of human living. Human health demands attention to this surface. One risks much if one refuses to give the body its due. Nevertheless, in Moore's view, our being is not exhausted by its surface. We have an impulse upward as well, an ecstatic urge that thrusts us ever beyond ourselves, beyond what is tangible

and mundane, what comes to us out of our spatial, physical, chemical, and biotic needs. The sky is the limit. This impulse toward transcendence is the very contrary of body; it is spirit.

Body comes from and rests in the non-transcendent surface of things; spirit drives a body out of itself toward the vertiginous heights Beyond. These opposites set up divergent trajectories or dynamics within human living. Left to their own devices, they would tear a human life apart, unless one or the other were granted the upper hand. However, even then, the resultant peace is destructively unbalanced, a distorted life pattern that impedes the realization of a flourishing life, what in the Bible is called *shalom*.

Yes, body and spirit can be thought of as poles of a continuum, but only when thought of without a view toward human flourishing, for the demands of human flourishing seem to require a different and far more interdependent relation. The flourishing life, a life of integral living, should fit body and spirit together much as the concepts of “double” and “half” fit together. Body should be the body *of* this spirit; spirit the spirit *of* this body. They belong together; they are unthinkable apart from each other. Human flourishing demands a particularly harmonious relation between body and spirit, a correlation between them, forging their difference into a harmonious union. The name Moore gives to that integrating relation is “soul.” Soul comprehends and unites within itself both the corporeal surface, giving it its due, and the drive toward self-transcendence that is the spirit’s gift to human flourishing. Soul correlates them and comes to its task from out of the depths, below the level of parochial ethos (character) or ethnos (culture) or theos (religion), the things, in Moore’s world, that separate and divide.

Soul plumbs the depths where the shared meaning of our lives lies hidden, ancient of days, from before the very beginning. Moore’s optimistic assessment is that we can access the human depths, for there is a literature of the soul. That literature is made up of myth and fairy story, delicate palimpsests that surrender their hidden scripts to the infrared effects of the Jungian gaze. And because the depths that the soul plumbs are indifferent to human divisions, all myths and fairy stories from whatever source speak to us of what is always already the Same. They speak of the universal conditions of value in human living, we could say if we were old style Kantians. They

speak of the gods, as Moore insists in keeping with the language and literature of the soul.

Thomas Moore is interested in sharing his nose for the presence of soul. He means his book to be therapeutic. He is engaged here in modeling a cognitive diagnosis of personal and communal imbalance. That is, he means to illumine a pattern of living in which one or the other side of human being has come to predominate, in which body and spirit have gotten out of whack and work at cross purposes. In this instance, he fingers the predominantly surface and physical tyranny of our sex-soaked society. The only way out of such imbalance is not to substitute an abstemious dictatorship of the spirit but to hang on to the diverging poles and reunite them within the deep embrace of soul. All of this is promising. Almost, he has me on board. Like Festus before Paul, I am nearly a convert made. But then Moore loses me, for, in *his* cognitive therapy, soul can be seen again in the coy venusian exhibition of vaginal cavities, in the leering phallic *bonhomie* of Priapus, Silenus, and Dionysos, the bottle-blonded magic of Marilyn Monroe. Behold the golden key that unlocks the hidden unity between our “New Age” obsession with pornography on the one hand and fascination with mystic consummations on the other! If we but embrace the soul of sex we discover again the healing delights of Epicurean pleasure, a pleasure so tranquil that one is never knocked off one’s course, never opened up and vulnerable to the heaven and above all the hell that is other persons.

At the risk of loosing, yet again, the grimly pursed-lipped spectre of my “inner Puritan,” I have to say that this all seems wildly implausible. How is such muted and invulnerable pleasure different from a spiritual Onanism that can only recognize health in inviolate self-direction, in the energies released by self-projection, self-penetration? I can’t help thinking that someone is cooking the books, that *The Soul of Sex* might better have been named *Margaret Mead Does Ancient Greece*.

And yet it cuts against my nature to end this way. It is too cranky and one-sided. So I choose rather to close by recalling two things that I really appreciate about Moore’s analysis.

In the first place, I appreciated Moore’s sense that soul is an integrating dynamic that comes, so to speak, from out of untold depths to forge a unity of irreducibly diverse components of human being

and living. He might, for my money, abandon the triadic language of body, soul, and spirit that he appropriates from his beloved Greco-Roman antiquity and consider an expanded range of irreducible dimensions. Nevertheless, I find his insight congenial, for I hear an echo, however dim, of the biblical notion of the heart: that deep unity suffusing all our moments and deeds, a unity forged in a covenant of love with our Maker and Redeemer.

In the second place, I value his acknowledgment of the appropriateness of a candidly sexual dimension to the mystic's experience of union with God. Too often we observe the nuptial mysticism of Theresa of Avilla and others with a cluck and a wink. We know what *that* is; say no more. It is as if somehow the mere invocation of the words "sublimated sex" were a terrible doom exposing for all to see an "inner hussy" pantomiming in pious charade. We shiver in pleasurable disgust and thank our respective Gods that we were not made a sinner (neurotic) as one of these. We smile the smile of relieved complacency, for, sure enough, we can spot the blood-red intincture of self-delusion spoiling the pure white thread of devotion. No virgin here, or at any rate no Blessed Virgin.

Yet in my reading of the medieval mystics, I do not have the impression that their eroticism is unconscious and naïve. Rather, they assume the metaphors of eros because it is only that cluster of metaphors that will do. They seem convicted that the gift of self in gratitude to God, the One-Who-First-Loved-Them, is and must be unreserved. In other

words, they are sure that if we are redeemed for new life with God and if we find our flourishing in a love for God that encompasses all that we are and have, then surely that includes our sexuality, its drives and pleasures. I think it is just such a chain of inference that lies behind the persistent identification of the Song of Songs as the revealed love-language of God's intimacy with the soul. I am not completely comfortable with an identification of this love-language and the intention of the Song of Songs' human author. Nevertheless, I, like Thomas Moore, acknowledge and appreciate the boldness of the mystic's intuition. I, too, think that, however

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uncomfortable it makes us (and I admit my own sweaty palms), I think we need to consider more respectfully the mystical proposition that the God who is Love has Bette Davis eyes.