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## An Interview with Thomas Moore

Alexandra Eyle  
*Syracuse University*

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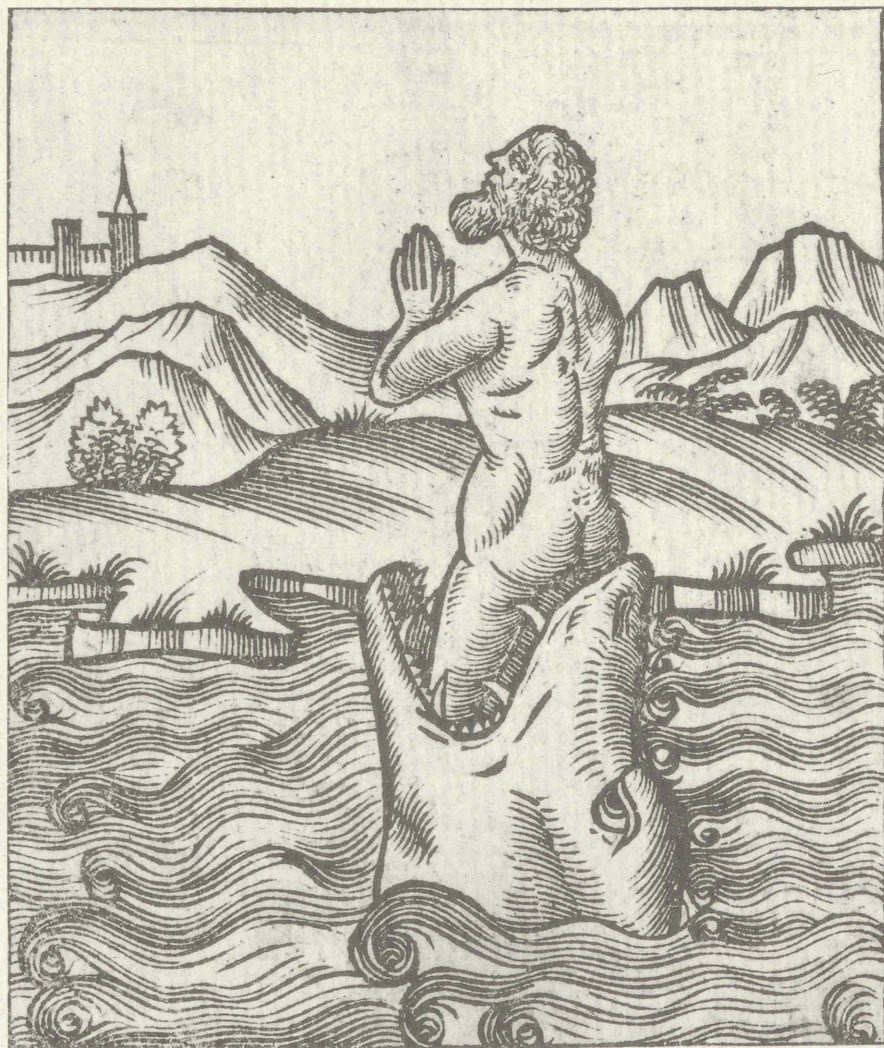
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*Dedicated to William Pearson Tolley (1900-1996)*

# An Interview with Thomas Moore

BY ALEXANDRA EYLE

INTRODUCTION BY DAVID L. MILLER

WHEN TOM MOORE was a graduate student in Syracuse University's Department of Religion in the early 1970s, he was interested in ancient Greco-Roman mythology, Neoplatonic philosophy, and Italian Renaissance astrology and musicology, as well as global religions and depth psychology. He had come to us with a background in Roman Catholic spirituality, and he had a talent for languages. While living in Skytop housing, Tom built a harpsichord, which he played beautifully.

I remember him as an exceptional student, and one who had a wonderful collegiality with his peers. He listened very well. When with him, I never felt that he had an agenda that he wanted to impose on me or that he was himself stuck in. His openness was stunning, but for all that he was not less critical.

I introduced Tom to the thought of the post-Jungian archetypal psychologist James Hillman. He learned from Hillman what I think he already knew in an intuitive way: that pathology can be learned from, that neuroses—whether individual or collective—may have a purpose, that one can understand a great deal by asking what symptoms and sufferings want. This understanding makes Tom's work so different from pop psychology, New Age, and self-help litera-

David L. Miller is the Watson-Leddon Professor of Religion at Syracuse University and was, with Stanley Romaine Hopper, one of the directors of Thomas Moore's doctoral study while he was at Syracuse University. Professor Miller teaches in the areas of mythology, psychology, and literary theory in relation to religion. He is the author of more than sixty articles and book chapters and seven books, the most recent being *Jung and the Interpretation of the Bible*.

Alexandra Eyle is a Syracuse University alumna and free-lance writer who specializes in profiles, especially about writers. For the *Paris Review* she has interviewed the French "new novelist" Claude Simon and the poet W. D. Snodgrass. She has also written a biography of the forester and conservationist Charles Lathrop Pack.

ture, which is often eager to fix us, to save us from the darkness and messiness of life.

Tom's work in his best-selling books, *Care of the Soul* and *Soul Mates*, is affirmative without promising sweetness and light. He does not promote impossible expectations which, when we ineluctably fail at them, produce shame, guilt, and anxiety. Tom writes, in *Care of the Soul*: "If we deny or cover up anything that is at home in the soul, then we cannot be fully present to others. Hiding the dark places results in a loss of soul; speaking for them and from them offers a way toward genuine community and intimacy."

In a way Tom has not completely wandered away from his Catholic background and experience. His secular works have a confessional feel and function about them. This was already true in his earlier books, *The Music of the Spheres* and *Dark Eros*. There is a deep spirituality about Tom's work.

What people seem to think they need and want today is more spirit. This is like saying that what a university needs is school spirit or that what a country needs is national spirit. But spirit in either the ethereal religious sense or in the rah-rah college or political sense divides rather than unites. It is my college against yours, or my country against yours.

Tom's notion of spirituality is more like Jack Gilbert's poem:

The spirit dances, comes and goes. But the soul is nailed to us like lentils and fatty bacon lodged under the ribs. What lasted is what the soul ate.

Tom's soulful kind of spirit sticks to the ribs. It has to do with body. I think that is what makes Tom's books best sellers. People feel the authority in the writing. It sounds real.

This is where Tom has carried on beyond James Hillman's insights. Hillman had clearly distinguished soul and spirit. But Tom reimagined spirit, not in the airy way, but in the manner of soul. This is Tom's originality: to add psychological depth and a sense of body to spirituality, and to add a reimagined spirituality to archetypal psychology.

Such an integrated vision comes as a solace and a help for the banality and boredom that so many persons experience today in

work, marriage, parenting, religion, television, and in the many other aspects of everyday life. This life lived without imagination is spoken to directly, but without accusation, in Tom's writings. He makes an end run around our literalisms, our fundamentalisms, and our political correctnesses. Tom already addressed this need directly in an early book, *Imagination and Rituals of Imagination*.

Above all, Tom can communicate complex and deep matters in ways that are accessible. He is a teacher in his writing. Like the nineteenth-century existentialist philosopher Søren Kierkegaard, Tom knows that in order to overcome resistances and habituated ideas, good pedagogy has often to "wound from behind." So in reading those teachers who know such a craft one finds that, before one knows it, one has been changed.

To say that Tom communicates well and that he knows the art of teaching may make him sound like a popularizer. This is not at all the case. It is rather that Tom refuses the conventional notion that there are some people who are thinkers and then there are the rest of us. Tom assumes, with Aristotle and others, that all people are thinkers and that they are thinking all of the time, even and perhaps especially when they don't think that they are. It is just that there are different vocabularies and lexicons, different modes of expression.

I think that the harpsichord and the music are a key. Tom writes about difficult matters well, and he teaches deep ideas well because he has a musical ear. He listens with imagination, and he thinks the same way. So Tom writes: "If we could feel the seriousness of our own imagination, we wouldn't need rationalizations in order to make life decisions without guilt, and our decisions wouldn't feel so incomplete if we made them soulfully, granting authority to the intuitions and expressions that come to us from within."

From the music of the spheres to the dark depths of the hurtful psyche, Tom writes soul-music.

## An Interview with Thomas Moore

AE: How do you account for the success of your books *Care of the Soul* and *Soul Mates*.<sup>1</sup> What have they touched?

TM: I'm not too sure. I hope it's because people are finally seeing through the formulas that so many popular psychology books are giving them. A lot of these books that look new are restating the same old paradigm over and over again, looking for the fatal flaw and the one solution. They are blaming the "dysfunctional" family for the ultimate flaw. I think that flaw's a mystery. It's not a problem we're going to solve. Theology says it's original sin. I think that makes a lot more sense. There is inherent in our nature an imperfection.

AE: What sort of responses do you get from readers?

TM: I get about a dozen letters a week. A lot of people say that the books do not give them new ideas so much as affirm what they are already doing. For instance, they could be making more money but they don't because they are doing something that really matters to them. People are sending me art pieces, slides, books of art, almost all of them having to do with ordinary things, because people are picking up this theme that soul is made or found in the most ordinary, simple things of life, the things we overlook, and that paying attention to these things is the way of restoring soul.

AE: Clearly you're touching people. You must feel good about that.

1. Thomas Moore, psychotherapist and author, earned his Ph.D. at Syracuse University in 1975. He has given the University Library's Department of Special Collections signed first editions of his books.

The interview took place in the spring of 1994, at Moore's house outside of Amherst, Massachusetts. It formed the basis for Eyle's profile of Moore, "Soul Man," which appeared in the fall 1994 number of *Syracuse University Magazine*.

Since its publication, *Care of the Soul: A Guide for Cultivating Depth and Sacredness in Everyday Life* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992) has sold more than a million copies; *Soul Mates: Honoring the Mysteries of Love and Relationship* (HarperCollins, 1994) has also become a *New York Times* best seller. Another book, *The Re-enchantment of Everyday Life*, will be released by HarperCollins in the summer of 1996.



TM: I do. Just last night I was in Northampton and spoke to 500 people at a church and afterwards signed lots and lots of books. I love hearing people's stories, what they're doing, how they respond—full of appreciation. I write some books, and people invite me to come and talk to them. I'm not a terribly social person. I'm kind of retiring and private, so it's like a ticket to be in the world more.

AE: Even before *Care of the Soul* entered the world there was a resurgence of interest in mythology, thanks in large part to Joseph Campbell.<sup>2</sup> Why is mythology so popular?

TM: I really don't know. But everywhere I go people tell me they're hungry for something. The word hungry appears over and over again. They're hungry for language, ideas, and images that have enough depth to touch whatever the word soul represents. Our psychological language is not profound; it is mechanistic language for the most part, structural language. Our images on television and in the movies are superficial. They don't give us an opening into the kind of imagination that moves the heart and offers deep reflection. And, these days, the arts are so personalistic that we can't find there the images that are big enough for us. Everyone is always talking about the personal biography and the intentions of the artist. But that is not deep enough. I read a lot of film scripts before they're made into films. I see wonderful scripts. But Hollywood transforms them back into the formula, over and over again. As a result, as a country anyway, we are plagued by superficial imagery and language. So Campbell comes along and presents the mythology of the world, and suddenly we're dealing with imagery that really has some guts. And it doesn't take much. All you need to do is present it and suggest that mythology has some meaning in everyday life, and suddenly that's pretty potent. I'm following up on that suggestion, certainly, but I don't do it the way that Joseph Campbell did it.

AE: How are you different?

TM: He was interested in presenting stories from all over the place. What he didn't do was take those stories very far.

2. Joseph Campbell (1904–1987), American mythologist and folklorist.

AE: Your approach goes beyond mythology?

TM: Yes.

AE: How does your therapeutic approach differ from the Jungian approach,<sup>3</sup> which uses mythology and archetype?

TM: First of all, mythology is not really at the heart of what I do. I never talked mythology in my therapy hours; I never said, “This must be the myth you’re living.” I deal with the dreams, images, and stories that are given. In my writing I use Greek mythology because I know it. It helps me to have a strong image to work off of.

I’m not interested in the idea, proposed by people who came after Jung, that one has to achieve consciousness through some sort of battle with the unconscious, which is like a great mother holding all things. I’m not trying to help a person individuate. I’m not trying to do anything really but to invite the soul in and let it reveal itself. I notice then that life does take on a deeper level of meaning. Some problems may ease because of the introduction of soul, and certainly there can be a change. But I’m not out to change a personality. I have no way of knowing if that’s going to happen.

AE: So you’re making, as you say, a home, for all the elements, dark and light.

TM: Yes.

AE: Can you tell us a little more about the shadow side? How can you explain to our readers how “a morality adequate to life is one sculpted in the presence of shadow” or how “the psyche serves the soul by allowing it to embrace more and repress less.” I think of Jeffrey Dahmer and say he surely wasn’t repressing anything. This isn’t a goal I want to achieve.

TM: Freud and Jung and all depth psychologists have said that repression fosters acting out. Jeffrey Dahmer was extremely repressed. It is when emotions have been repressed so much and are free floating that we have no control over them, like when a rage

3. Carl Gustav Jung (1875–1961), Swiss psychiatrist, founder of the school of analytical psychology.

comes over a person and they act out the rage and later say, “What did I do? I was out of my mind.” That acting out results from a total rejection of shadow material. So let’s say you’re feeling rage. Instead of talking about rage, you might explore more integrated and humane forms of anger and talk about being firm in life, having solid grounding, and asserting your own individuality. These mild forms of rage are actually very powerful, more potent than the raw emotion. If you’re going to work more imaginatively with the shadow, you must embrace those things that seem objectionable by imagining them more creatively. Our distaste for certain shadow qualities leads us to reject them. Then, in repression, they remain with us in an autonomous and destructive mode. When you deal with them over time and weave them into your personality and way of life they are not destructive.

AE: You’ve said that you’re not results-oriented, but can you tell me how this has worked itself out with your patients?

TM: I should say first that although my relationship to Jung is not terribly central, I draw upon Jung just as I draw upon Marsilio Ficino,<sup>4</sup> and Emily Dickinson, and others. But I obviously have this general purpose of offering some guidance to people who want to work with the emotional life, the life of the soul. What I’m saying though is that each individual is so unique that I don’t assume I can know what’s good for anybody. All I can do is hear what is being said and try to enrich and deepen those stories that are being told, whether they are stories about the problems of a person’s life, or dreams, or the family history. I try to hear more than what the person is saying. I try to get the deeper stories—always deeper layers of what is being told. Now when you do that, ultimately you begin to live from a place that is closer to the heart, to what gives meaning. I think part of the problem with us is that we live at a great distance from that place—a distance from soul, you could say. My work is to try to become more intimate with the life of the soul. As a result, there is an increased intimacy with one’s own life, a shift in the level from which you live. A lot of the symptoms may ease as a result.

4. Marsilio Ficino (1433–1499), known primarily as an Italian Platonic philosopher.

AE: You draw on Marsilio Ficino and James Hillman so much. When you sat down to write, fired up with ideas, what did you need to say that hadn't been said before? What is it that you, Thomas Moore, say that we won't find in Ficino or Hillman?

TM: Drawing on others can be a kind of creativity. It's an appreciation of the past and especially of people you really admire. You take that inheritance and you give it a twist. As we say today, you put a spin on it. And your spin is what counts.

AE: And what is yours?

TM: Well, in relation to Hillman, there are several things. Based on what I know of him, he is not very positive about the spiritual life. He's giving us an important contribution with his criticisms of spirituality and religion. What I'm doing is trying to offer a way to live a creative spiritual and religious life that does not insult our intelligence, that has psychological sophistication. A lot of times these things are in opposition. I think that's a major difference between Hillman and myself. I do want to make a positive contribution to the spiritual life.

AE: And Ficino? Not that I've read him.

TM: Not many have read him. He was a magus, an astrologer, a musician, a priest, a philosopher, a translator, a Neoplatonist, and an Epicurean. That's why I'm attracted to him, because I like to be all those things myself. One difference between Ficino and myself is that, at least in the present time, I'm not the mystic that he was. He had a transcendent side that I don't pick up on much. I might one day. I would like to write a book on religion one day. But at the present time I emphasize the earthier side of his work.

AE: And bring it into modern terms for us.

TM: His language is really very difficult to follow. It takes me forever to translate his Latin. Even if you read a translation of his work, it's not easy to know what he's saying or to see how it applies to anything. Yet, I continue to find in his writing a rich and inexhaustible source of insight directly relevant to our concerns.

AE: Let's talk about your background. Where did you grow up?

TM: In Detroit, with a brother seven years younger, and a very big extended family, lots of uncles, dozens of cousins. My father taught plumbing all his life. My mother is a homemaker who is still very healthy and active.

When I was thirteen I entered a prep school run by the Servite Order, a mendicant order founded in Italy in the thirteenth century. In this order people did not spend their whole lives within the walls of the monastery but worked in parishes and taught and did all kinds of other work as well. The order was a blend of this intense community life—monastic life—with an active life. We meditated for an hour every day, had mass every day, and chanted the office. We wore dark robes, even in high school.

The postulant year, the first year of college, is the year of making application to orders—the full life of the monk—a whole year of seeing whether you want to do this. Then comes the novitiate, when you're a novice for one year. You don't leave the monastery grounds. You don't even read newspapers or anything else. You focus completely on the spiritual life. The following year you take what are called simple vows, of poverty, chastity, and obedience. After a year of that, if you don't like the life, you can get out very easily. Then after three years you can take what they call solemn vows, which are very difficult to pull out of, like a marriage. I went through all that. I was doing a combined preparation for priesthood plus the monastic track, and I went through solemn vows and even came close to ordination in the priesthood. I had to get approval from Rome to be released from the vows about six months before I would have been ordained a priest.

It was a good leaving, for the most part. The official in charge of my order in the United States came to visit me in my room—a very nice man, a straightforward man. He had been my teacher for three years. He said, "Look, we know each other, and I know what's going on. You're going beyond this life somehow. You're going in another direction. It's very clear."

AE: How did your passion for archetypal psychology and Ficino develop?



Marsilio Ficino, from Jean Jacques Boissard (1528–1602), *Bibliotheca chalcographica* (library of engravings of the most outstandingly noble and learned men in all of Europe). The Latin inscription praises Ficino as an interpreter of Plato. The book is owned by Syracuse University Library.

TM: I didn't know anything about them when I was in monastic life. One of the reasons I left was that I began reading Paul Tillich. I had a very liberal open-minded faculty, and I felt that in certain ways I was educated out of the order. But I had a classical education. It was only at Syracuse that I discovered Ficino. He hadn't been translated into English. So the first thing I did was take the book of his that was most interesting to me and translate it for myself. That became the basis for my book *The Planets Within*, which is a complete rewriting of my dissertation. His book, a three-book set, was called *Da Vita, On Life*, and the title of the book I translated was *How to Arrange Your Life According to the Sky*.

AE: When you started reading non-Catholic authors in monastic life, was this hard to do?

TM: No. It was a pretty open-minded place. I was also reading Catholic authors like Teilhard de Chardin, a Jesuit who was a paleontologist and visionary who developed a theology based on evolution. His view was so poetic and far reaching, for me it was the beginning of deliteralizing Christianity. I don't know what else to call it: deliteralizing. I was reading theology poetically, at more and more levels, seeing the language as applying to ordinary individuals and social experience and not just statements about some theological world that exists outside of us. All of that was important to me in the monastery. It prepared me to read Ficino—

AE: But it prepared you to leave—

TM: It prepared me to leave.

AE: So you left not knowing where you would go?

TM: Not at all. I had studied music since I was in high school. I was writing music, playing, and directing choirs every day. While in the monastery I had studied music at De Paul University in the summers and taken a course or two during the year, so when I left there I was just about ready to get a degree and I did. Then I went to the University of Michigan, thinking I would be a musician the rest of my life. I got a master's degree in musicology. I wanted to do a doctorate in music and philosophy. I'm still interested in philo-

sophical music of the Middle Ages, but they didn't see the relevance, so I left. I knew that I wanted to explore things wider than just looking at old musical scores. So I resumed the study of theology.

AE: Someone pointed you to Syracuse.

TM: A professor of mine, Lonnie Kliever, who taught theology at the University of Windsor, told me he thought Syracuse was a place where I could thrive. I wanted to be free to study the arts and religion and psychology all together. So I wrote a letter to David Miller; I think that's how it worked—oh, and I guess I wrote Gabriel Vahanian.<sup>5</sup> They asked me to write a paper about my ideas on religion, and on the basis of that they gave me a three-year scholarship, without teaching, that included tuition and living expenses. It was great.

AE: So you really found a home, psychologically?

TM: Absolutely. It was a great education for me, exactly what I needed. I couldn't have asked for anything more than what I got.

AE: Dr. Miller said you were a special student, you had this wonderful classical education, you knew Latin, you had a passion for ideas.

TM: There was another side to it, too. I got there and realized how much I didn't know. I didn't know if I'd make it because I found most of my classmates knew literature so much better than I did. I had a classical education, but it was within a Catholic setting—parochial in comparison to the learning of my teachers and classmates at Syracuse.

AE: You hadn't heard of Hillman yet or Ficino?

TM: No. I had begun reading Jung, but I knew little of his specialized studies. I don't think I'd ever read a mythological story in my life. I wasn't one of these people who got myth when he was in

5. Vahanian taught at Syracuse University from 1958 to 1984. He wrote *The Death of God* (1961), among other books. Both he and Thomas Moore were speakers in the fall of 1995 as part of the Department of Religion's centennial celebrations.



high school or grade school. When I first went there I took a course with Stanley Hopper in the poetry of Rilke and Wallace Stevens. I had to give a presentation and I did such a bad job that Dr. Hopper told me he didn't know if I would be able to get through his course. He said, "You've got to do something." So I gathered my forces and I wrote up a piece for him that he told me was one of the best things he'd ever read about Wallace Stevens. So I made a big shift and I got some confidence. But I worked very hard at Syracuse catching up.

AE: So you left school, started teaching and writing, and eventually you did that beautiful introduction to James Hillman's *A Blue Fire*.

TM: I did that when I moved to New England, while teaching part time at Lesley College in Boston. One day I had lunch with Hillman—we'd been friends for years; I had met him through David Miller. I'd been reading Jung intensely with David's guidance and then he introduced me to one of Hillman's writings, and I was so taken by it that I started a correspondence with him while he was still in Zurich. We discussed doing an anthology of his writings. I told him I wanted it to be my book and yet completely in accord with his wishes.

AE: You taught at Glassboro State College for a year and at Southern Methodist University for eight years, but were denied tenure. Why do you think that was? They must be kicking themselves now. They would have a lot of students wanting to take courses from you now.

TM: I had a lot of students then. At SMU I taught a very large class in religion and psychology, but the faculty didn't seem to like it. It's been a mystery to me. I was very interested in opening this area up to more people. I saw that the department I was in was very small, and I thought it would be a good idea to open it up to a large number of people and to teach this material in a rather relaxed way. I was turning people away when I had 125 people in the course—all the other classes were very small. For some reason the rest of the faculty in my department did not appreciate what I was doing. And I was never able to write in academese. They kept asking me to

write in certain journals and in a certain style, and I tried but I just couldn't get myself to do it.

AE: In a way that has been to your advantage. As I was reading your books I was noticing the clarity of writing—even when dealing with complexity—and the empathy. You talk at one point of Hillman inserting the third person in first person accounts—

TM: I do the reverse.

AE: David Miller said that what sets you apart from other thinkers and teachers in the area is your ability to communicate.

TM: I would say that's probably true—and that's not widely desirable in the academic world. You do have to protect ideas from becoming too personal.

AE: Why?

TM: There's a possibility of personalizing things in a way that makes all your discussion self-expression, rather than taking the ideas as objects in themselves. There's a strong spirit in America these days, in the arts especially, to be self-expressive. And I'm working pretty much against that idea. One of my interests is to find ways to present the arts so that they're not just about self-expression, creativity, and all that, but rather to work with internal, archetypal, mythic ideas or some image that has been around forever that is universal and that doesn't just have to do with this individual person's life experience. For example, one could paint about love, to take a big broad topic, and not have to bring your own personal experience into it.

AE: Because love is a big, encompassing thing; we're in love, encompassed by it—

TM: Yes. It's not reduced to any individual's experience. So in that sense I can see a certain validity to the academic position. But I don't like it myself. The style I'm developing—it's not terribly conscious—has to do with using language that's more—this might sound the opposite of what I just said—individual. In my writing I am really trying not to use jargon; I don't use a lot of psychological

language. I try for the most part to use my own language, words I like that I think are expressive. Instead of “unconscious,” I prefer to use imagination, memory, fantasy, the unknown, the repressed, hidden, out of reach. Instead of abstractions I try to use more descriptive words that give body to the unconscious.

AE: Your editor at HarperCollins, Hugh Van Dusen, told me how *Care of the Soul* came into being. You had come to their attention when you did the introduction to *A Blue Fire*. Then your agent submitted your book proposal for auction. When you started that book did you have a clue how successful it would be?

TM: Not really. I thought it might sell more than the other books I’d written: *The Planets Within*, *Rituals of the Imagination*, and *Dark Eros*. Altogether they had sold only 2,000 copies. So I really didn’t believe it would sell a lot. I thought if it sold 30,000 copies I would be deliriously happy, even though that wouldn’t have matched the advance. The only reason I felt the book might do well was because HarperCollins put what for me was a considerable amount of money behind it. Let’s just say it was over \$100,000, which was huge to me.

AE: So you knew somebody thought it would sell a lot. How quickly did you write *Soul Mates* after *Care of the Soul*?

TM: Very quickly afterwards.

AE: So you hadn’t quite gotten onto the swell of the success of *Care of the Soul*—or had you?

TM: I wrote it so quickly because it was a natural sequel to *Care of the Soul*. I really wanted to write it. But I didn’t realize *Care of the Soul* would have such an impact until probably a year after it was out. Even now it’s a surprise to me when I go on the road and find how many people are reading it, showing up at bookstores to talk about it, and using it in their teaching.

I have had criticisms from writers who don’t seem to get the point of the book. In a major review in the *Los Angeles Times*, an academic from New York called my work “psychology for the Little House on the Prairie crowd.” Another reporter in a Los Angeles

tabloid wrote almost a parody of what I am. Both of them had the mistaken notion that what I'm doing is kind of middle-class, privileged. They think I'm saying, "Well, if you just get some antiques in your house and buy a really nice door for your home, you'll be taking care of your soul." My interest in caring for home and house and neighborhood and things, the world we live in, they see as an absurd reduction of everything to some very superficial thing. Now that's a huge misreading. I think that what I'm suggesting is quite radical, in an entirely opposite direction. I'm suggesting that we bring together all this transcendent spirituality that seems to have no effect on society and the incredible materialism that surrounds us, which is a kind of a symptomatic, aggressive, obsessive quest for a material world.

Making a soulful life is not a matter of money. It's a matter of imagination. I'm saying that soul is partly in the materials of the world around us. This is very Ficinian, by the way. Ficino says that you're going to attract the spirit of whatever materials you surround yourself with. So if you surround yourself with plastic and polyester, you're going to have a plastic and polyester spirit.

AE: What special objects do you surround yourself with?

TM: Mainly things I'm attached to. A harpsichord. I have some paintings, little sculptures and crosses I've had since my twenties at least that I have around me when I work. I have paintings made by friends—whether I think it's great art or not is beside the point. I have my wife's paintings. All that creates an incredible environment for me. Throughout our house the wood has been carefully done. We painted the house ourselves, picking colors we thought were important to us. We have a Russian icon on a religious theme that's very close to my heart and two or three Buddhas. We have a studio for my wife to paint in and a place for meditation. So all of that goes together to make a place that is not just functional.

AE: What are the important rituals in your life?

TM: To me a very important ritual is family dinner. We say grace every night for the children, that is, a grace that the children can understand. And just being together with the family for dinner is a

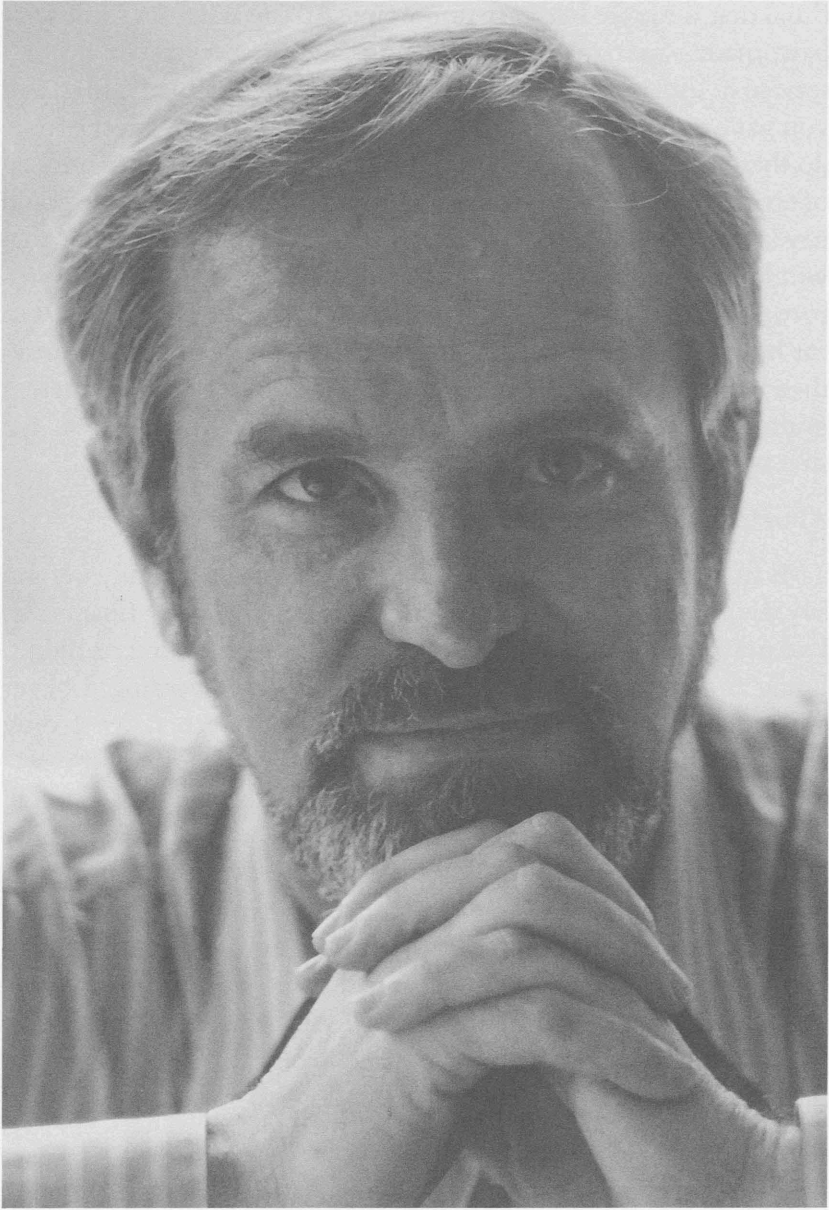
ritual that is simple but very important. All the religions I know of have made a sacrament out of eating—the Eucharist. You go to a service in India and there’s food cooking as they’re meditating, and you have the meal afterwards. It’s a very simple thing. Most people do these things. What I’m advocating is doing them more, instead of trying to figure out our marriages and personalities. If we could pay more attention to our rituals, that would be the glue that would hold us together. In Italy, people take a whole day to prepare one dinner. They close down stores for hours every day just to eat lunch. That’s a ritual act. It’s not that they need more calories than we do. You go to Rome, and everyone’s out on the streets at midnight at these little street cafes. In America, no one’s in the streets except people you’d rather not bump into.

AE: How has your life changed?

TM: In lots of ways. I have a family. I didn’t have a family before. My daughter was born when I was 51. I struggled along financially. I’ve never really worried about money, whether I had it or didn’t. Being an assistant professor was not financially rewarding. I never did much there. When I left SMU and private practice I only worked half time. I did that for a number of years. One of the reasons I wanted to write *Care of the Soul* was that I had experienced all of those ideas in the therapy room. I had practiced therapy in my own way, in a way that I thought was consistent with those ideas. I wanted to write up the two experiences together, the intellectual one and the experience of years of being one-on-one with people. What I’m saying is that my life changed in the sense that I was very private. I lived and worked in a small village west of here, West Stockbridge, and now I am traveling all over the place. I never did that before. I received very few invitations to speak. Now I turn down one a day.

AE: Tell me about your private practice. You don’t have a degree in psychology—how is it one can practice without a degree?

TM: When I was at Syracuse I took my electives in counseling psychology. I had supervision, clinical work. I also had some counseling preparation training when I was in seminary. I didn’t do any



Thomas Moore (© Nicolas Eyle, 1994).

therapy until I went to Texas. There is something called licensed professional counselor in Texas. You don't have to be a psychologist, but you do have to demonstrate that you have had training and educational background adequate to be licensed as a counselor. So I was licensed. When I came to Massachusetts I didn't need a license; I kept my Texas license since they are often reciprocal, one state to another. So I just practiced the same way I had always done. Now I don't practice anymore.

AE: You could make the time, turn down engagements.

TM: I couldn't write and I couldn't speak and do television work and all the radio interviews. It's too much. It's not just a matter of having an hour free. It's a weight you carry when you do therapy. You carry people's lives around with you.

AE: Do you miss it?

TM: Not really.

AE: It seems so integral to you.

TM: It is. But now I'm filling it in with all these other experiences with so many people. Just this month I don't know how many cities I've been in. And people come to me and they're very open to me, telling me their life stories, and they're right with me right away. I sign a lot of books wherever I go. So I have conversations one-on-one with people. And all that conversation and all that give and take and meeting people and being intensely connected to various groups around the country more than makes up for the therapy work.

AE: Do you feel as though you've become our society's therapist?

TM: No (laughs). No, I don't want that. I want to be a writer who invites conversation about some things. But I don't want to be anyone's guru or therapist.

AE: Do you feel people hang that on you?

TM: Yes, they do.

AE: How do you feel about that?

TM: I ignore it.

AE: Going back to an earlier question about why you began writing these books, was it in reaction against the self-help books?

TM: No. Not at all. I have no interest whatsoever in being critical. It's more positive than that.

AE: Was it at all in response to this urge that people have to tie everything up? You write in the prologue, page six, of *A Blue Fire*: "Soul-making is not interpretation, it is not change, and it is not self-improvement—all modern attempts to get the upper hand on fate and therefore to constrain the soul."

TM: I do try to move against the idea of interpreting things, explaining things, having them all tied up. Yes, I am speaking against that but that isn't really the motive of the writing.

AE: So the motivation—

TM: It's multilevel, that's the trouble. Part of it is a response to having been a therapist for a long time, sitting one-on-one with people, finding some very interesting things happening over and over again. I thought it would be interesting to write up my approach to that work.

AE: Interesting things—not just the symptoms being presented but the way of working through them?

TM: Yes. The way of working through them.

AE: Presenting a therapeutic model?

TM: Yes. But the trouble with this model is that it's a nonmodel. Therapy has almost to be turned inside out. I speak once in a while to groups of only therapists. This week in Indianapolis I spoke to a group of mostly Gestalt therapists. Two to three weeks ago I spoke in Newport, Rhode Island, to holistic counselors. I admire the work they are doing. I feel very close to it, having done it myself for a long time. I do not write that we should stop doing therapy,



but I do suggest that care of the soul is bigger and broader than therapy and that it is something we can do constructively every day.

A lot of times we think of therapy as solving problems. But care of the soul is not a problem-solving method at all. The tradition is that soul does fine as long as it is fed and nourished regularly. I'm trying to say there are things that will feed the soul. A lot of things we do won't. We live in a society that starves our soul, so we have to resist the culture somewhat to care for the soul. And if we choose our professions and the ways we spend our time and our homes in which we live, if we take care of our families and not see them as problems and nurture our relationships and friendships and marriages, then, if I promise any reward, it is that, if the soul is fed, it probably will not show its complaints so badly.

But I can't even promise that, because from another point of view soul is also a reservoir. It's always presenting new material. Either from within us, intuitions, or from the world outside, we are given new life, new relationships, new work to do. So I can't promise that if we nurture our souls life will have fewer problems. And yet caring for the soul has its own reward: living from a deeper place. If we did this we would then aim for more wisdom instead of understanding, more character as individuals, rather than some kind of improved product of the self. Then our work, our care of the soul, would be communal; we would be more connected to the world and people by the nature of the thing.

These are rewards, but they are not solutions to problems. They are another context of living. If that context were set up, therapy would look different, I think. Now we bring everything to therapy because we think we have a problem to be solved. But if we were all caring for the soul, therapy could focus more specifically on those moments of craziness or extreme pain or extreme difficulty in a relationship.

AE: Are you saying also that for many people therapy is the only time they try to care for the soul?

TM: Exactly. I think if you were caring for the soul you'd have millions of people leaving therapy. You wouldn't do it so much. It

would be like you don't go to the hospital all the time. You take care of your health (laughs).

AE: In your beautiful introduction to *The Planets Within*, you talk of astrology as a mirror of soul.

TM: Today people constantly make fun of astrology. But for centuries the astrological awareness allowed people to recognize that we are so profound in ourselves that we mirror that great universe; we are that deep and that big. We are not clocks, we're not biology, we are not chemistry and not even genes. Astrology maintains a certain sacredness in the world we live in. We secularize the world when we get rid of it. So I feel like a total anachronism talking about it. I lectured to the Connecticut Astrological Association about two months ago. They want to know how to solve a person's personality problems with astrology. They're in the same place that the therapists are, I think. Even the astrologers today don't have it.

AE: And your vision is that these connections, the Marsian, and the Venusian pulls, are too enormous. They can't be shrunk down—

TM: Personalized.

AE: They can be identified as being in the person—

TM: But they're bigger than the person. Today I look out the windows. I see all the green of the trees and plants. An astrologer of the past, 500 years ago, would have said Venus is making herself known. Green is her color. So we can talk of our feelings of sexuality and sensuality, and if we knew, or reflected upon, the beauty of nature, we might have a better sense of our own Venusian fantasies, our sexual fantasies. Because they're related to each other. Now I can't make that a simple explanation. But take a few weeks to talk about it and you probably could get deeper and deeper into your own personal beliefs.

AE: So if I have that recognition, I might be able to relax a little more?

TM: Absolutely. With that broader perspective you get less anxious and personalize it less; you don't ask, "What's wrong with

me?” When I was doing therapy I was interested in writing up what was happening. I was not personalizing those things, I was not trying to solve problems. I was trying to offer an inviting place for all of these feelings and thoughts to be present, to offer a deeper imagination for them all.