

A Lively Pas de Deux

Review of

Superabundantly Alive: Thomas Merton's Dance with the Feminine

By Susan McCaslin & J. S. Porter

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Reviewed by **Ron Dart**

“He footed it well – she answered the music handsomely.”

John Bunyan

The publication in 2009 of Christopher Pramuk’s *Sophia: The Hidden Christ of Thomas Merton* “footed well” the turn to a more in-depth reading of Merton and the historic Christian sophianic tradition and ethos. The recent publication of *Superabundantly Alive: Thomas Merton's Dance with the Feminine* answers the music of Pramuk’s wise insights handsomely. The American (Pramuk) and Canadian (McCaslin/Porter) Merton family have come together to offer a more capacious reading of Merton’s engagement with both the feminine and the Divine feminine. The dance of sorts between poets Susan McCaslin and J. S. Porter in *Superabundantly Alive* is well worth the watching as each, at times, does their own dance steps, footing it well, then they come together to answer the musical theme of Merton and the feminine handsomely.

McCaslin’s six essays (some published previously and others new to this book) cover a wide range of approaches to Merton and the feminine: “A Dream of Thomas Merton” (17-28); “Embodying Sophia” (111-39); “A Grotto of Sophia Icons” (141-63); “Love and Solitude: A Cache of Love Letters for Tom and Margie” (165-85); “Pivoting Toward Peace: The Transformative Poetry of Thomas Merton and Denise Levertov” (187-204); and “Sophia Awakening Merton, the Trees and Me” (205-22). The title of each essay highlights the breadth and depth that she is both traversing and probing in her reflections on her journey with Merton and the sophianic tradition. J. S. Porter has only one essay in the collection but it is considerably longer than most of McCaslin’s articles. “The Unbroken Alphabet of Thomas Merton” (29-94) uses the metaphor of alphabet as a most compelling way to understand the invitational welcome of Merton to a deeper life.

The one remaining article, “The Divine and Embodied Feminine: A Dialogue” (95-109) is jointly written and offers the reader a mature way of dancing out the intricate and nuanced steps

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of Merton and the feminine. I found myself agreeing with Lynn Szabo in her “Introduction” that “the axis of this volume” (13) is this timely and in some ways timeless dialogue between the two authors. The affinities and meshing between eternity and time, Divine and history, incarnation of spirit and mind into matter and flesh walks the attentive reader into many a sacred place and site – the Celtic “thin places.”

If Pramuk’s *Sophia* was a research-laden and scholarly approach to Merton and the wisdom tradition, McCaslin and Porter bring together a thoughtful, poetic, creative and more personal engagement with Merton and Sophia. Many are the dance steps done between the two in their literary dance and their round-dance of sorts with Merton. Each article moves ever closer to the center of the issue, then executes a stepping back again as the music and dance ever continue, each handsomely answering the other and Merton well and wisely.

The many endorsements of the book make it abundantly clear that this volume is a delight not to be missed. Lynn Szabo’s introductory reflection (11-15) provides a fine portal into the larger issue of the feminine and expresses her obvious respect for the creative dance steps of the authors as they engage Merton and the feminine. The Afterword by Jonathan Montaldo (223-25) makes for a thoughtful bookend to Szabo’s Foreword, and the Bibliography (227-33) serves as an enticing pointer to a variety of significant and substantive books on the topic (some explicitly by/about Merton and others referring to a host of other writers) that develop the issue in a further and reflective manner.

I found myself somewhat unsure about the title of the book (a connotation of superheroes nagging my hesitations), but I was relieved and informed to learn in the Foreword that the phrase was taken from Robert Lax’s article on his friend, “Harpo’s Progress: Notes Toward and Understanding of Merton’s Ways,” in which he called Merton “superabundantly alive” (14-15). Montaldo provided another appropriate connection, quoting Merton’s description in *New Seeds of Contemplation* of contemplatives as “fully alive and awake” (224). Then, there is, of course, Irenaeus’ oft-quoted statement that “the glory of God is a human being fully alive.” I rest my case! The title was perfectly chosen – Merton, McCaslin and Porter surely understand the role of the poet, essayist, contemplative (and, dare I say, dancer), who handsomely answers those who, wisely, foot it well – they are, indeed, abundantly alive.

The fact that the authors view the theme through a distinctively poetic lens (as did Merton himself) means that they have a special, uncanny way of approaching Merton’s dance with the feminine. There are various ways and means of living into and drawing thoughtfully from Merton, and *Superabundantly Alive* has evocatively “footed” a particularly attractive approach. It is our task and calling as readers to respond to the music of their chosen genre in a similar spirit. This is a must-read collection of essays for those who are keen to step forth to join Merton in his eternal dance with the feminine.