

Gordon's musings. Fittingly, he wrote these words at around the same time he was trying to publish his pre-Gethsemani novel, thereby establishing a direct link between those two works:

A poet spends his life in repeated projects, over and over again attempting to build or to dream the world in which he lives. But more and more he realizes that this world is at once his and everybody's. It cannot be purely private, any more than it can be purely public. It cannot be fully communicated. It grows out of a common participation which is nevertheless recorded in authentically personal images. (*GL* 1)

Once you substitute "writer" for "poet," Gordon's question becomes superfluous. He did continue writing in that particular vein. *Lograire* is a mixture of genres: of poetry, prose and anti-poetry; it is a collage of quotations and borrowings from a variety of books Merton had been reading; a blending of the living, writing and reading persona whom the world knew – or so it believed – as Thomas Merton. An open-ended, incomplete "first draft of a longer work in progress" (*GL* 1), it reveals the writer Gordon has been tracking, a writer for whom living and writing were one.

Finally, the journals, "Merton's best writing" (87) – here Gordon pours out her heart and lavishes most of her praise, although she predictably tends to "lose sympathy when [Merton] interleaves his romantic gush with an old, discarded piety" (109) in the midst of his love affair of 1966. She quotes profusely from the sources, as if wanting the best of Merton to speak for itself, but there is little new insight concerning the writer. Finally, it seems Gordon has tired of the topic and of her emotional quarrels with the monk, for she offers no concluding chapter, leaving the reader to gather the conclusions for herself.

My overall impression is that this little book, which breaks no new ground and is strongly marked by the author's subjective agendas, will remain a testament to one writer's (mis)readings of another. It is a book I have started calling *Mary Gordon's Merton*. Were she really looking for Merton the writer, she should have overcome her reluctance to read him "past [her] early indifference" (2) not only about *The Seven Storey Mountain*.

Malgorzata Poks

MCCASLIN, Susan and J. S. Porter, *Superabundantly Alive: Thomas Merton's Dance with the Feminine*, Foreword by Lynn Szabo, Afterword by Jonathan Montaldo (Kelowna, British Columbia: Wood Lake Publishing, 2018), pp. 237. ISBN: 978-1-77343-035-5 (paper) \$24.95.

"His own poems and fables, dramas and songs were works of the spirit,

praise of the Lord, particularly of His mercy: sometimes directly, sometimes by inference; sometimes simply by the fact of their being. Ever creative, seldom didactic, they were always superabundantly alive.”¹ So wrote Robert Lax in tribute of Thomas Merton, his fellow conspirator in all manner of things clownish and poetic, contemplative and active, from the time of their first meeting at Columbia University in 1935. “Harpo’s Progress: Notes Toward an Understanding of Merton’s Ways” was written and delivered by Lax in September 1980 on the porch of Merton’s hermitage,² and first printed in Volume One of *The Merton Annual* (35-54). Lax’s lively portrait of his pen-pal “Harpo” warmly conveys Merton’s childlike inclusivity, an open-faced invitation to join him in “play,” “lightly and / seriously / at once” (Lax 40).

Some thirty years later, a new tribute to Merton has been written in the same convivial spirit that animates Lax’s. Indeed, the authors, Susan McCaslin and J. S. Porter, have drawn their title *Superabundantly Alive* from Lax’s lines quoted above. Porter refers to the relationship between Merton and Lax as “one of the great literary and spiritual friendships of the 20th century,” and it is clear that his collaboration with McCaslin is in sympathetic resonance (39). The book’s subtitle, “Thomas Merton’s Dance with the Feminine,” will be considered in due course, but it is worth pausing over the photograph of a grinning, twinkle-in-the-eye Merton, selected for the center of the cover. Also appearing un-cropped on the overleaf to the title page, the image by John Lyons captures Merton’s seriously playful stance to the world in the last decade of his life. The subscript appearing below the authors’ names on the cover like an “RSVP” references the much-cited closing chapter of Merton’s *New Seeds of Contemplation*,³ which epitomizes this stance: “Thomas Merton proclaims that we are invited to forget ourselves on purpose, cast our awful solemnity to the winds, and join in the general dance. How wonderful is that?”

Both picture and subscript situate the welcome to enter into the conversation with and about Merton through the writings of his last decade first. Much has been made of his “turn to the world” in the late 1950s, after his *fuga mundi* into the Abbey of Gethsemani in 1941 and the sometimes jaundiced view of what lay outside the monastery walls voiced by the ear-

1. Robert Lax, “Harpo’s Progress: Notes Toward an Understanding of Merton’s Ways,” *The Merton Annual* 1 (1988) 36; subsequent references will be cited as “Lax” parenthetically in the text.

2. See José Rafael Revenga, “Thomas Merton by Robert Lax,” *The Lion’s Den* (21 April 2012); available at: <https://lions360.blogspot.com/2012/04>.

3. Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1961) 297.

nest monk in his famous 1948 autobiography⁴ and other writings through the '40s. Indeed, in *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* Merton presents his 1958 epiphany at the corner of Fourth and Walnut, "The Vision in Louisville" – when he felt his connaturality with, rather than separation from, fellow humans, and especially women – as a sudden, pivotal insight that marked a new way of seeing.⁵ Yet surely his wide and deep reading, writing, and prayerful contemplation over the years had gestated and induced this "emergence of Sophia [Divine Wisdom] in Merton's life and theology as a Love and a Presence that 'breaks through into the world,'" as Christopher Pramuk puts it.⁶ Porter notes that this was no single, momentous change, but rather a turn in a continuous journey punctuated with many such "turnings" (58), perhaps better envisioned as "explosive" leaps in the dance of his connecting "body, soul, mind, heart, spirit" (35).

Be that as it may, the authors testify that discovering Merton was pivotal for them and that he continues to energize the turnings in their own quests. This is so, not through his writings only, but also in the possibilities incarnated in what McCaslin calls "imaginal conversations" with him. (183). Case in point, Merton's presence is immediately conjured into the present by two epigraphic poems in the first chapter, with McCaslin's eponymous "A Dream of Thomas Merton" (17) followed by Porter's "Thomas Merton in Las Vegas" (18). McCaslin proceeds to give an account of the way Merton has mattered to her and "why [he] matters now" (19), a topic on which Porter elaborates in the following chapter, "The Unbroken Alphabet of Thomas Merton" (29-94). Porter summarizes: "His collected writings fashion one of the longest and fullest accounts of what it is to be a human being – awake, aware, alive (artistically, politically and spiritually) – in the 20th century" (32). This theme subtends the project of *Superabundantly Alive* and its creatively expressive enticement to take up and read.

McCaslin and Porter – published poet-scholars, Canadian compatriots, and long-time friends – met years ago through their involvement with the Merton Society, and their collaboration extends to colloquy with the inclusion of two other well-known Merton scholars, Lynn Szabo in the Foreword (11-15) and Jonathan Montaldo in the Afterword (223-25). Szabo provides

4. Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1948).

5. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966) 140-42; see also the original journal version in which the focus on women is prominent: Thomas Merton, *A Search for Solitude: Pursuing the Monk's True Life. Journals, vol. 3: 1952-1960*, ed. Lawrence S. Cunningham (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996) 181-82.

6. Christopher Pramuk, *Sophia: The Hidden Christ of Thomas Merton* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2009) 131; subsequent references will be cited as "Pramuk" parenthetically in the text.

a warm introduction to the authors and an engaging overview of the project for which she served as manuscript editor. Montaldo astutely identifies the appeal of Merton's "voice and life": that which a reader finds to be "most deeply valuable" in its singularity is that which resonates with the reader's own voice and life, evoking a sense of "harmony" (225).

It is fitting, then, that the co-authors conduct a kind of duet in the chapter that forms the "axis" of the book, as Szabo observes. Entitled "The Divine and Embodied Feminine: A Dialogue" (95-109), it primarily concerns Merton's "experiences of the feminine" (98), archetypal and personal. Around this axis, the chapters composed of new and previously published pieces are arranged with careful intention. Bordered on one side by Porter's chapter, the duet is followed by a scholarly essay on Merton's prose poem *Hagia Sophia* and two new pieces by McCaslin: a sequence of concrete poems with a preamble on ordinary sainthood (Lax appears here, too) affirming the light of the divine Presence in all people, entitled "A Grotto of Sophia Ikons" (141-63), and a personal essay tenderly probing the significance of the brief love affair between monk and nurse in 1966. McCaslin considers the latter, "Love and Solitude: A Cache of Love Letters for Tom and Margie" (165-85), as a "cabling [of] somewhat impertinent, un-dialogic field letters" to the momentary lovers (166). She allows her imagination to play freely with themes rigorously researched in the preceding chapter, "Embodying Sophia" (111-39). This latter is a retitled reprint of her seminal essay, first published in *Merton & Hesychasm: The Prayer of the Heart*,⁷ that investigates the background and offers interpretation of Merton's prose poem *Hagia Sophia* [Holy Wisdom],⁸ which she names his masterwork, also reprinted here (111-19).

All of which brings us back around to the book's subtitle, "Thomas Merton's Dance with the Feminine." In their axial dialogue, McCaslin and Porter note that Merton had come to resist the constricting social constructions of gender in his time. The authors wisely avoid speculation regarding what might be his position on identity politics in our time. Instead, they dwell on the more profound matter of his conviction that integration of "the feminine" with "the masculine" is needful. One cannot help but note that the authors find these categories of gender necessary, and if socially constructed, also with biological basis (105). McCaslin's thoughts on integration presume the concept of polarity in union, as asserted by the

7. Bernadette Dieker and Jonathan Montaldo, eds., *Merton & Hesychasm: The Prayer of the Heart* (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2003) 235-54.

8. Thomas Merton, *Hagia Sophia* (Lexington, KY: Stamperia del Santuccio, 1962); Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1977) 363-71.

German-Canadian psychiatrist Karl Stern, whose ideas were influential on Merton's sophianic awakening (127-28). Stern affirmed ancient mythic and philosophical expressions of "an antithesis at the very heart of things [between masculine and feminine] . . . striving for synthesis unceasingly" through "a higher principle of oneness," a concept he found in Taoism, the Zohar, the Upanishads and the Christian tradition of an "androgynous" God.⁹ For the latter, he references the Eastern Orthodox Paul Evdokimov's *La Femme et le Salut du Monde* (1958), a source McCaslin identifies as key to Merton's *Hagia Sophia* (124-26).

So, in the (near) end of this review is the beginning, for the authors (in this reader's mind, at least) have picked up a subtle cue in Robert Lax's "Harpo's Progress." Wondering who Merton would have "gotten along with / in history" (44), Lax includes in his partial list the sixteenth-century Renaissance humanist monk and writer of satire, François Rabelais. A few lines later he asks, "how would he have felt / about the abbey of / theleme?" (Lax 45). The allusion is to Rabelais's *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, which features at one point in the narrative a description of the fictional Abbey of Thélème. Serving both satiric and utopian purpose, the abbey has been described as "the space in which *thelema*, the will of God, reigns," where men and women alike live in chaste community under only one rule, "Do as you will."¹⁰ There is an echo here of an Augustinian maxim with roots in Pauline teaching on Christian liberty of which Merton was fond: "Love, and do as you will."¹¹ This motto over the gateway of "the abbey of / theleme" is one likely prompt of the allusive question in Lax's poem, to which he responds in the satirical double negative of litotes: "he might not at all / have disliked it" (Lax 45). Surely levity cannot but help us handle with proper care the loaded topic of gender in our own time. The conversation of this book gives aid, as well.

The thrust of *Superabundantly Alive*, overall, is to sound the nature of Merton's faith in the "good / news, that / rings / with joy," as Lax expresses it (53). Porter describes the textual fruits of Merton's capacious contemplations of the good news with a phrase Merton once wrote of Shakespeare's corpus: it is "imaginative overflow, a brilliant excess" (37). Merton's superabundance reminds Porter of Kazantzakis' "fictional dynamo," Zorba the Greek, and McCaslin of Marge Piercy's "I Saw Her Dancing." Beneath

9. Karl Stern, *The Flight from Woman* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1965) 9-10.

10. Marian Rothstein, "Androgyne, Agape, and the Abbey of Thélème," *French Forum* 26.1 (2001) 2; available at: *JSTOR*, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40552233>.

11. Michael Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1986) 437.

and uniting all of the connections of this book's inquiries and insights is the "feminine principle in creation," the Divine Sophia of Proverbs 8 and the Russian sophiologists, who is "playing in the world," as Merton noted, "before the face of the Creator" (123).

Two essays by McCaslin bring *Superabundantly Alive* to a close with timely and pertinent meditations for the contemporary reader of Merton on the sophianic source of imaginative efforts for peace and an environmental ethics of care. This leads to a final commendation regarding the unique value of this project's invitation to dance with Merton and Sophia. Porter admires Merton for his capacity to resist "the temptation to harden [the scripture's] fluid complexities into rigid dogmas" (86). But just as there is for Merton no antagonistic dichotomy between masculine and feminine, so there is none between "dogmatic" and "non-dogmatic." For as Pramuk writes in his preface to *Sophia: The Hidden Christ of Thomas Merton*, the language of dogmatic theology is "a form of ecclesial memory, which comprises the positive seedbed of Christian spirituality" (Pramuk xvii-xviii). Merton's recovery of Sophia "holds significant promise for invigorating . . . christological and trinitarian discourse in response to these increasingly fractured, technological, industrialized, and militarized times"; further, the mystical wisdom tradition's roots are "[b]ound up closely with the biblical doctrine of creation" (Pramuk xviii-xix).

As Paul Ricoeur has written, "an original but always ongoing creation" is the religious symbol par excellence of "the economy of the gift," for it articulates "the sense of our radical dependence on a power that precedes us, envelops us, and supports us. . . . and confers [it with] both a meaning and a direction."¹² The creational "economy of the gift" is guided by "the logic of superabundance" in dialectical and productive tension with the "logic of equivalence" and justice, both mutually reinterpreting the other endlessly. This tension is echoed in that motto of Christian liberty: "Love, and do as you will." To add one more voice to the chorus, all of this resonates with ecofeminist theologian Sallie McFague's call in her *Life Abundant* for an environmental ethic based on "[t]he love of God and the love of the earth," an ethic summed up for her in Irenaeus's statement: "The glory of God is every creature fully alive."¹³ It is not hard to imagine Merton joined by a company of friends in a chorus of "Amen."

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12. Paul Ricoeur, *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative, and Imagination* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1995) 297.

13. Sallie McFague, *Life Abundant* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2001) 24.