



Superabundantly Alive:
Thomas Merton's Dance With The Feminine

Wood Lake Publishing, 2018
Susan McCaslin & J.S. Porter

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 read of Merton and the historic Christian Sophianic tradition and ethos. The recent publication of *Superabundantly Alive: Thomas Merton's Dance with the Feminine* (2018) answers the music of Pramuk's wise insights handsomely. The American (Pramuk) and Canadian (McCaslin/Porter) Merton family have come together to offer yet a fuller read of Merton's engagement with both the feminine and Divine feminine.

The dance of sorts between Susan McCaslin and J.S. Porter in *Superabundantly Alive* is well worth the watching as each, at times, do their own dance steps, footing it well, then they come together to answer the musical theme of Merton and the feminine handsomely.

Susan's six essays cover a wide range of approaches to Merton and the feminine (some published previously and others new to this book): 1) A Dream of Thomas Merton, 2) Embodying Sophia, 3) A Grotto of Sophia Ikons, 4) Love and Solitude: A Cache of Love Letters for Tom and Margie, 5) Pivoting Toward Peace: The Transformative Poetry of Thomas Merton and Denise Levertov and 6) Sophia Awakening Merton, the Trees and Me. The titles of each essay highlight the breadth and depth that Susan 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 much longer than most of Susan's articles. "The Unbroken Alphabet of Thomas Merton" is 66 pages in length and is worth many a meditative read, the metaphor of alphabet a most compelling way to understand the invitational welcome of Merton to a fuller life. The single article that Susan and John wrote together, "The Divine and Embodied Feminine: A Dialogue", enhances and offers the reader a mature way of dancing out the intricate and nuanced steps of Merton and the feminine.

I found myself agreeing with Lynn Szabo in her "Introduction" that "the axis of this volume" is the timely and in some ways timeless essay by Susan/John, "The Divine and Embodied Feminine". 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—such are the Celtic "thin places".

If Pramuk's *Sophia* was a research-laden and scholarly approach to Merton and the wisdom tradition, Susan and John bring together a thoughtful, poetic, creative and more personal engagement with Merton and Sophia. Many are the dance steps done between Susan and John in their literary dance and their round dance of sorts with Merton. Each article moves ever closer to the centre of the issue, then 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 that greet the reader make it abundantly clear that this is a delight of a read not to miss. The “Foreword” by Lynn Szabo is a fine portal into both the larger issue of the feminine and her obvious respect for the creative dance steps of Susan and John as they engage Merton and the feminine. The “Afterword” by Jonathan Montaldo makes for a thoughtful bookend to the endorsements and “Foreword”. The Bibliography is an enticing pointer to a variety of significant and substantive books on the topic (both explicitly by/about Merton and a host of other writers) that massage the issue in a further and reflective manner.

I found myself somewhat unsure about the title of the book (a sense of superheroes nagging my hesitations), but I was relieved and informed by both Robert Lax’ and Jonathan Montaldo’s comments. Lynn mentioned in her “Introduction” that in Lax’ article on Merton, “Harpo’s Progress: Notes Toward and Understanding of Merton’s Ways”, Lax called Merton “superabundantly alive”. Jonathan approached the site from another pathway, quoting from Merton in *Seeds of Contemplation*, in which Merton suggests contemplatives are “fully alive and awake”. Then, there is, of course, Irenaeus’ oft-quoted “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 Susan and John have literary bents and see through poetic lens (as did Merton) means that they have a unique and uncanny way of approaching Merton’s dance with the feminine. There are various ways and means of living into and thinking from Merton, and John and Susan, in *Superabundantly Alive*, have footed such an approach in a most evocative manner--it is our task and calling as readers, to answer the music of their genre most handsomely. This is surely a must-read collection of essays for those who are keen to trek yet further down the meandering trail of Merton and join him on his eternal dance with the feminine.

Ron Dart