Teresianum 76 (2025/1) 131-157
10.1484/J.TER.5.150500

Facing the Abyss: Ontological Distance in the Poetry of a Carthusian Monk

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1. Introduction and Research Material

The Carthusian Order traces its origins to the year 1084 when Bruno of Cologne and his six companions founded the first monastery in France. The Prologue of the Statutes of the Carthusian Order outlines their vocation to seek union with God in silence and solitude:

> To the praise of the glory of God, Christ, the Father's Word, has through the Holy Spirit, from the beginning chosen certain men, whom he willed to lead into solitude and unite to himself in intimate love. In obedience to such a call, Master Bruno and six companions entered the desert of Chartreuse in the year of our Lord 1084 and settled there; under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, they and their successors, learning from experience, gradually evolved a special form of hermit life[1].

Today, there are sixteen male and five female Carthusian monasteries worldwide[2]. The Carthusian contemplative strictly enclosed way of life combines the ideal of an eremitical life of solitude and silence with some elements of communal coenobitical monasticism. This is

[1] *The Statutes of the Carthusian Order*, Book I, Chapter 1:1. *https://carthusiansusa.org/texts/*. From here-on: *Statutes*.
[2] *The Carthusian Order* website *https://chartreux.org/en/*.

reflected in their daily recurring *horario* that alternates between communal and private prayers as well as dedicated periods of work and study in the cell with some time reserved for meals and sleep.

Within the Catholic monastic tradition, Carthusians are considered among the most austere, with statutes that remain relatively unchanged from their early medieval origins. The ancient monastic path of prayer in solitude and silence cultivated by the early desert fathers still marks the lived experiences of Carthusians of modern times.

The Carthusian way of life has remained relatively unknown through the centuries, which likely follows from their distinct separation from the world, as written in their Statutes: "Since our Order is totally dedicated to contemplation, it is our duty to maintain strictly our separation from the world"[3]. And further, "From ancient times it has been the mind of our Order that our absolute dedication to God be expressed and sustained by a great strictness of enclosure"[4]. The rigor of their enclosure is relaxed a little in order to receive the visit of parents and other relations each year for two days. But apart from this, Carthusians are to avoid visits from friends and conversations with seculars, unless some inescapable necessity is imposed on them by the love of Christ[5]. This Carthusian separation from the world is not only physical but applies to other aspects, as the Statutes instruct: "We should not allow our minds to wander through the world in search of news and gossip; on the contrary, our part is to remain hidden in the shelter of the Lord's presence"[6].

It is therefore understandable that Peter Nissen, in his 2014 article on Carthusians, speaks of an 'enforced outsider-hood' and an inaccessibility that seem to enhance our fascination with the Carthusian world[7]. He notes that historians, art historians, theologians, literary scholars and others who study the Carthusians remain no more than outside observers. Participant observation, one of the key research strategies in

[3] *Statutes*, cit., Book I, Chapter 3:9.
[4] *Ibid.*, Book I, Chapter 6:1.
[5] *Ibid.*, Book I, Chapter 6:9.
[6] *Ibid.*, Book I, Chapter 6:4.
[7] P. Nissen, "Carthusian Worlds, Carthusian Images: The Fascination of Silence and Inaccessibility", *Studies in Spirituality* 24 (2014), 143-154: 146.

cultural anthropology, is not feasible in the Carthusian world[8]. Nissen also provides a comprehensive survey of recent books written about the Carthusians, all of which are aimed at a general readership[9]. Among the recent works, he emphasises the importance of the international success of *Into Great Silence / Die große Stille* (2005) by Philip Gröning which was filmed at the Grande Chartreuse, the mother house of the Carthusian order in the French Alps. The story behind the permission process to shoot the film highlights the relative inaccessibility of the Carthusian Order. When Philip Gröning in 1984 asked for permission to shoot film scenes in the monastery, his request was turned down. Only in 1999, fifteen years later, did he receive a message from the prior of the Grande Chartreuse with the final permission[10]. The aptly titled *Into Great Silence* is long, evocatively beautiful and, for the most part, totally silent. The very few words in the film, spoken by an elderly monk, add weight to the Carthusian temporal message:

> The past, the present, these are human. In God, there is no past. Solely the present prevails. And when God sees us, He always sees our entire life. And because He is an infinitely good being, He eternally seeks our well-being[11].

To complement Nissen's survey on external publications on Carthusians in English, it is worth mentioning, for example, Tim Peeters' *When Silence Speaks* (2015), which offers a well-researched overview of the Carthusian spirituality[12]. In addition, a significant Carthusian component is found in two recent works: Cardinal Robert Sarah's *The Power of Silence (*2017)[13] and Nicholas Diats's *A Time To Die* (2019)[14].

[8] *Ibid*., 145.
[9] *Ibid*., 143-151.
[10] *Ibid*., 143-144.
[11] P. Gröning, *Into Great Silence,* 2005 *(*German original: *Die große Stille).*
[12] T. Peeters, *When Silence Speaks: The Spiritual Way of the Carthusian Order*, Darton, Longman and Todd, London 2015 (Dutch original: 2007).
[13] R. Sarah, *The Power of Silence: Against the Dictatorship of Noise,* Ignatius Press, San Francisco, CA 2017 (French original: 2016).
[14] N. Diat, *A Time to Die: Monks on the Threshold of Eternal Life*, Ignatius Press, San Francisco, CA 2019 (French original: 2018).

Another recommended recent book is *Report from Calabria* (2017) by a Catholic Priest (anonymous, in line with the Carthusian tradition), written during his season-long stay in the Carthusian Charterhouse in Calabria, Italy[15]. From this perspective, he comments on a misunderstanding regarding monastic life: "Some critics of the Catholic Church reject the cloistered monastic life as inhumane (although their appraisal might be different if they ever actually talked to a monk or a nun)"[16]. It is indeed possible that modern societies no longer have sufficient knowledge or understanding of the ancient monastic traditions. It is also true that very few can speak to cloistered monks and nuns, partly for the reasons mentioned above: the contemplative way is separated from the secular world.

Where does this all leave us if we still wish to gain a better understanding of the Carthusians? Literature seems the best avenue forward, and nine centuries of texts written by the Carthusians certainly provides a rich legacy; we need only mention here the classic medieval mystical work *The Cloud of Unknowing*, attributed to an anonymous Carthusian monk to provide evidence of such richness[17] Literature also provides a historical setting against which the Carthusian tradition can be explored today. Despite the challenge of relative inaccessibility, the ancient spiritual heritage justifies an interest in the contemplative way also as it is lived today.

Concerning this, it is notable that a unique corpus of poetry by a Carthusian monk, Brother A, has recently received permission to be researched. In line with the Carthusian tradition, the living authors of this Order typically remain anonymous, or sometimes publish under a pseudonym. Br A. is, therefore, given as an identification to distinguish this particular monk-poet from the other contemporary Carthusian authors who use the generic name 'A Carthusian'. Respecting the Carthusian tradition, biographical information about Br A. is limited to details that can be derived from his works.

[15] A Priest, *Report from Calabria: A Season with the Carthusian Monks*, Ignatius Press, San Francisco, CA 2017.

[16] *Ibid.*,100.

[17] *The Cloud of Unknowing and Other Works*, Penguin Books, London 2001.

Br A.'s first poems originate from 1964 which would coincide around the time of his entry into St Hugh's Charterhouse, likely in his twenties. He has lived in the same Carthusian community in England for six decades. Br A. writes in English, his mother tongue. Some of the Carthusian monk-poet's works have been published and translated externally; some are self-published by St Hugh's Press of the monastery[18]. Br A.'s poetry has not yet been widely researched, apart from a comparative study by Anna Maksjan, a researcher of English Literature, whose topic dealt with the mystical dimension of his poetry[19].

The Carthusian author's corpus of poetry covers six decades of poems written in the period of 1964-2024. It consists of thirty-two collections in booklet formats as well as some individual poems containing nearly two thousand (1,997) compositions. Br A. retains the copyright for his original texts but has granted permission for their use in scholarly research. The entire corpus of poems was systematically catalogued between February and October 2024 by the author of this paper using initial textual analysis for various categories, themes, influences, references, and keywords.

The textual analysis of the entire corpus of texts was conducted at three levels. Level 1 Textual Analysis constituted a systematic initial classification between temporal and non-temporal themes. Regarding temporality, the classification follows broadly the framework (liminality, relationship, eschatology) proposed in a previous study on Catholic contemplative enclosed monastic traditions[20]. The classification indicates that 40% of Br A.'s poems contain a temporal dimension, which is determined through a reference, direct or indirect, either to temporality (past, present, future) or eternity. The distributions of these categories and subcategories are shown in Table 1. A poem that has

[18] A Carthusian, *"O Bonitas!". Hushed to Silence*. Ed. R.B. Lockhart. Gracewing, Herefordshire 2001 and A. Carthusian, *The Silence of the Lotus: Collected Poems 1964-2008, Analecta Carthusiana* (257), Institut für Anglistik und Amerikanistik, Universität Salzburg, Salzburg 2009.

[19] A. Maksjan, *The Mystical Dimension of the Poetry of John Bradburne and the Carthusian,* Institut für Anglistik und Amerikanistik, Universität Salzburg, Salzburg 2007.

[20] R. Hujanen, *Monastic Perspectives on Temporality: Time is a Mirage*, Palgrave Macmillan, Cham 2023, 67-78.

been categorised under the main theme 'Temporality' can be included in one or more subcategories.

Table 1. Temporal themes by category and subcategory: number of poems and percentage of total

TEMPORALITY 800 poems (40% of total 1,997)					
Liminality	**280** (14%)	**Relationship**	**273** (14%)	**Eschatology**	**293** (15%)
Monastic life	95	Contemplation	94	Heaven, Eternity	77
Ontology	76	Relationality	74	Eschatological Hope	77
Pilgrimage	43	In Love with God	58	Memento Mori	68
Contribution	40	Participation	49	Longing	53
Threshold	30			Beginning and End	24

The other themes without a specific temporal perspective (60% of the total) cover a broad range of categories. The most frequent themes are: Salvific Plan (384 poems), Nature (260), Secularisation (245), Virgin Mary (233), Compassion (177), Reading and Writing (176), Prayer (163), Crucifixion (158), Friendship (154), and Humility (152). These categories are not exclusive. A poem may be classified under multiple themes, for example, when the text moves along a narrative path: nature => contemplation => eternity. In addition, Level 1 Textual Analysis includes the identification and recording of various keywords, literature references, as well as motivations for writing poetry.

Level 2 Textual Analysis consisted of a preliminary investigation of the thematic ideas based on their frequency as well as further organisation of texts by subcategories. The preliminary interpretation of poetic metaphors and allegories was initiated at this phase.

Level 3 Textual Analysis involved the selection of the main topics within the broader themes as well as further analysis of relevant texts. This level included the structured presentation of recurring themes and ideas. This involved, for example, contextualisation of Br A.'s po-

etry within Carthusian and Catholic monastic traditions, as well as Christian theology.

The current article explores the subject of 'ontology' drawing from a further textual analysis. This topic is catalogued under the main theme 'Temporality' within the category 'Liminality' of which 'Ontology' forms a subcategory. This subcategory consists of nearly eighty poems as part of the almost three hundred poems classified under 'Liminality'. This indicates that ontology has remained an enduring theme for Br A. through six decades.

The Carthusian author's poetry is analysed from the perspective of Catholic monastic spirituality. For this reason, it was sometimes necessary, for clarity, to break the poetic form of the original texts. Nevertheless, the selected texts should offer an opportunity to appreciate the monk-poet's exceptional talent for poetic composition.

2. The Existential Chasm

Br A. uses several metaphors in his poetry to express the vast ontological distance between the Creator and creatures. We begin the analysis with *The Infinitesimals* which provides a glimpse into the existential ontological chasm that the Carthusian author describes outright as 'the terror of God'. When created beings gaze upon the divine holiness of their Creator the 'sheer weight of God' makes them flee:

> The terror of God: my eyes are burnt-out, shot,
> Gazing upon your holiness, O God!
> My face disintegrates in Light…
> O Being, your infinitesimal flees in dread,
> Hungers to hold you stripped of faces, names:
> To each a star, to all the starlight: the sheer
> Weight of God! Sweet are the dead who gaze
> In adamantine hope![21]

[21] "The Infinitesimals", in: GN, 60.

The lyrical 'I', in this text, underlines further the solitary existentialist experience of each singular person. However, this is counterbalanced, it seems, by the line "To each a star, to all the starlight," which possibly points towards a shared destiny. Facing the weight of God, one simultaneously wants to gaze and flee; hope and fear. God's holiness evokes both dread and desire for him, which is felt as hunger.

In *Earth Your Footstool*, the ontological distance stretches, in Dantesque verticality, between heaven and hell. The Holy Trinity (Father, Saviour and Sanctifier) is heaven, "where all is well", contrasting with the lamentable existence of the monk-poet: "I am earth and I am hell".

Father, Saviour, Sanctifier,
I seem to burn in tongues of fire…
You are peace and joy and light;
I am war and turbulent night.
You are heaven where all is well;
I am earth and I am hell.

I your Cross, your bitter gall;
I your footstool, you my All…

Save me so foul deserving ire.
How far from love that casts out fear
I linger indulgently!...[22]

The extreme ontological distance between God and humans is expressed as contrasting qualifications presented in Table 2.

[22] "Earth Your Footstool", in: GN, 56.

Table 2. Contrasting Divine and Human Qualities in *Earth Your Footstool*

DIVINE	HUMAN
Peace, joy and light	War, turbulent night
Heaven	Earth, hell
All	Cross, bitter gall, footstool
Love	Foul, deserving ire, fear

The final lines of *Earth Your Footstool* revisit the ontological distance between heaven and earth/hell, but here the text turns into a prayer that reveals the Carthusian author's hope for salvation. For him, salvation is to dwell in the Holy Trinity, to share God's life and his perfect divine qualities of peace, joy, light, and love in heaven:

Father, Saviour, Sanctifier,
Save me so foul deserving ire…
O You are heaven where I would dwell,
Yet I am earth and I am hell...[23]

The chasm remains between the human and the divine, as does the abyss between heaven and hell. Yet, against all odds, hoping against hope, there is also longing and desire for God.

In *The Prayer of Poverty*, measured against God's holiness, the monk-poet is likened to a poor and needy beggar, a mortal on its way to a certain grave, and short-lived like a fragile snowflake:

A beggar I appear before you, poor
And needy, fragile as a snowflake swept
In the whirling wind due to dissolve at dawn.
This I bring before you, my truth and yet
My power. O God of mercy, how can you resist
The poor? (and all are poor before you). The flesh

[23] *Ibid*.

Is weak on march to a certain grave; the heart
Is weak unmanned so easily; the mind is poor
In wit and understanding; the will is weak,
Easy prey to easy living; pride
Our foe most subtle so hard to discern. In sum
What is man in earthly terms: dust
On the way to dust, sin on the way to wrath.
All this my truth I bring before you, this
My prayer of poverty, the peace of the poor[24].

The poem presents the plain truth about mortal human existence. Life is brief and fragile, like a snowflake that whirls in the wind only to dissolve at dawn. Human faculties (flesh, heart, mind, will) are so weak and poor that one can easily be led to pride through ignorance. The undeniable truth is that a mortal human is nothing but "dust on the way to dust", "on a march to a certain grave". Paradoxically, the confession of one's utter poverty seems to open the way to peace. The monk-poet trusts that God is merciful to the poor. The beggar has nothing to lose. This truth about his poverty, when humbly admitted, becomes his power.

We find a similar disposition in a letter that Bruno of Cologne (c. 1030-1101), the Carthusian founder, wrote to his friend Raoul from the Hermitage of The Tower in Calabria in Italy. In this letter Bruno first assures Raoul about his good physical health but continues: "I wish that I could say the same for my soul! The external situation is as satisfactory as could be desired; but I stand as a beggar before the mercy of God, praying that he will heal all the infirmities of my soul, and fulfil all my desires with his bounty"[25]. These two Carthusians, although separated by nine centuries, find themselves in a similar humble disposition before God.

Bruno of Cologne: "I stand a beggar before the mercy of God".

Br A.: "A beggar I appear before you… O God of mercy".

Poverty, in the monastic traditions, has both spiritual and material meanings. At the spiritual level, poverty is associated with the hu-

[24] "The Prayer of Poverty", in: RA, 303-304.

[25] Bruno of Cologne, *Two Letters and the Profession of Faith*, Charterhouse of the Transfiguration 2019, 4.

mility that puts all trust in God's mercy. In the light of the Beatitudes, for "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (Matt 5:3, KJV), it is possible to understand why Br A. calls his poverty "my truth and yet my power". The monastic experience that associates humility with reliance on God's grace is also expressed by Carthusian Innocent Le Masson (Prior of the Grand Chartreuse in 1675-1703) through the image of "two wings" – confidence and humility which must serve the contemplatives to keep them "balanced between heaven and earth"[26]. Similarly, the first desert dwellers recognised that happiness, beatitude, is found through humility, as Evagrius Ponticus (345-399) put it: "Happy is the man who thinks himself no better than dirt"[27]. Humble repentance, *penthos* in the Evagrian spiritual tradition, represents the secret of contemplation, or the ancient monastic path to union with God[28].

In *Two Turtle Doves*, the monk has only his 'abysmal emptiness' to give in exchange for God's unending bliss and holiness, for the divine richness in being, wisdom and love.[29] His feeling of worthlessness, however, is balanced with trust in God's love and mercy:

Abysmal emptiness I bring
Before God's Splendour and Fire. In trust
I wait knowing that he is Love;
All he made me all that I bring.

A loving word I cry, a glance
From the depths of non. I know he cares
For me and tenderly, brings peace
So undeserved by a single glance[30].

[26] R.B. Lockhart (ed.), *Listening to Silence: An Anthology of Carthusian Writings*, Darton, Longman and Todd, London 1997, 65.

[27] Evagrius Ponticus, *The Praktikos and Chapters on Prayer*, Cistercian Publications, Trappist, KY 1972, 75.

[28] I. Hausherr, *Penthos: The Doctrine of Compunction in the Christian East*, Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, Kalamazoo, MI 1982, (French original: 1944), 150.

[29] "Two Turtle Doves", in: VE, 100.

[30] *Ibid*.

This composition, like *The Prayer of Poverty*, speaks of the underlying trust and faith that God is merciful and that he cares. The "beggar's truth" of unworthiness prevails. Yet, against all odds, from his abysmal emptiness the monk-poet cries "a loving word" and glances from the depths of nothingness.

We could ask if the awareness of this distance is, indeed, an invitation to search beyond, to seek a communion with the Other. As Brazilian writer Marco Lucchesi suggests in his aphorism: "The distance presupposes the nobility of hospitality."[31] And hospitality, in turn, involves mutuality. The communion begins with an invitation, and in the spirit of mutual respect, the invitee accepts the hospitality with gratitude. The parable of the lord who invites all to his great supper 'so that his house shall be full' seems to indicate that it is the poor and humble folk who are more inclined to accept the invitation to the kingdom of God (Lk 14:7-24).

Br A. employs the metaphor of God as the Potter (who moulds us each moment) to describe the divine/human relationship that is founded on mutual love and respect. The human response to God's loving, eternal work must come from one's free will and gratitude. This relationship is viewed from God's perspective: "He moulds with love asking nothing… while yet desiring a response of gratitude and love"[32]. Elsewhere, the Carthusian author returns to the theme of the human response to God's love as he meditates on the human heart as an image of God (self-effacing, asking no recognition, never intruding, unseen). From this it follows that the human heart is capable of giving its free response of love: "Love is the freest, most personal act that man can make; it vanishes if it is forced; hence God although all-powerful must wait in hiding for man's response"[33]. These texts portray God as a gentle lover who respectfully waits for an acceptance to his invitation. He desires a response to his love without forcing it. Interestingly, the Carthusian monk-poet posits that the divine Love is a beggar, too:

[31] M. Lucchesi, "Aforismas – 'Teologias da distância'", *Teopoética: mística e poesia*, M.C. Bingemer, A. Villas Boas (eds.), Editora PUC-Rio, Rio de Janeiro 2020, 17. 'A distância pressupõe a fidalguia da hospitalidade'. Translation mine.

[32] *"Without Love"*, in: AoF, 76.

[33] "Within A Lifetime", in: AoF, 83.

> Love's a beggar and so remains if no one freely gives himself. Love although omnipotent's a beggar in things of the heart. Jesus is Love that knocks and waits. "And many left him and walked with him no more." "Will you also go?" The mystery of life lies here: a simple question; and our response of friendship and love resolves the mystery. "We walk in love as he loved us." If our response is "No!" friendless we head for a barren grave[34].

If Love is a beggar, is Love also humble? We find the answer in the Incarnation, in the *kenosis* of the Son of God. Again, there is a certain mutuality and symmetry, although it is clear that God always acts first, opening a way for his children to follow. As another anonymous contemporary Carthusian monk put it, "We know the way because Christ has shown it to us. The way of the beatitudes, of emptying of self to let God be and live and love in us. The Father has sent us his Word in order to lead us into his eternal beatitude"[35].

Furthermore, Jane Foulcher, an Australian theologian, notes that the monastic tradition speaks of cultivating humility as a Christian way of imitating the humble Christ while it also protects the graced nature of this quality, which can never be found by human effort but is the by-product of a life oriented toward God[36]. Foulcher argues that the Christian monastic expressions she has researched all understand human life as oriented towards an end (*telos*), variously expressed as the vision of God, the kingdom of heaven, eternal life, purity of heart, and love. From this perspective, Foulcher writes: "Human life is lived not only toward this end but also in front of this end – with judgment in view"[37]. Accordingly, the desire for God is met by a sense of the distance between the Divine and the human, an "eschatological humility". Human beings are limited, broken creatures with a divine vocation,

[34] "Warzone", in: BM, 28-29.

[35] A. Carthusian, *The Spirit of Place: Carthusian Reflections*, Darton, Longman and Todd, London 1998, 59.

[36] J. Foulcher, *Reclaiming Humility: Four Studies in the Monastic Tradition,* Liturgical Press, Collegeville, MN 2015), 309.

[37] *Ibid.*, 310.

but paradoxically, in facing and acknowledging these limits, we are able to transcend them[38].

John Climacus (c. 579-649) in *The Ladder of Divine Ascent* tells a story about an ascetic who was struggling to achieve humility when tempted to pride by demons. God inspired the monk to use a "holy trick" as an aid in combat. The monk wrote on the wall of his cell in sequence the names of the major virtues:

perfect love
angelic humility
pure prayer
unassailable chastity
(and others of similar kind)

The result was that whenever vainglorious thoughts began to puff the monk up, he would say: "Come! Let us go to be judged." Going to the wall he would read the names there and would cry out to himself: "When you have every one of these virtues within you, then you will have an accurate sense of how far from God you still are"[39]. The story demonstrates well the extremity of the ontological distance and the deep meaning of humility.

3. Finding Joy in the Extremes

Br A. employs a broad canvas of metaphors in his poetry to express the ontological distance between the Creator and creatures. He uses expressions of extreme distances – abyss, void and chasm – as well as contrasting opposites: heaven/hell, peace/war, light/night, love/fear, greatness/nothingness, Absolute Being/abysmal emptiness, I-AM/I-am-not. The anguished expressions of existential void and fragility are, however, balanced by more joyful and gentle texts that reflect the relationship between the Creator and his creatures, taking, for example,

[38] *Ibid*.

[39] J. Climacus, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, Paulist Press, Mahwah, NJ 1982, 222-223.

metaphors from nature. Such a composition is *Nest of Nothingness*, where Br A., watching a little wren joyfully building a nest near the monastery, realises that he, too, is working on a metaphorical nest:

> And I have a nest to build. It is not great;
> In fact it is so small it's hardly seen.
> It is my nothingness and all my joy.
> Here I am at peace and gaze on high,
> Gaze at the vastest blue, the Infinitude
> Of God. I cannot wait till all is done.
>
> This double truth: his so very great
> And mine so insignificant are both
> My joy. Both are truth and "truth will set
> You free." Free of what? Free of lies,
> Deceptive hopes that Adam fell for. And God
> Loves the humble who love all he has done[40].

God's greatness and human's nothingness are here the double truths that set the monk free. The monk's nest is insignificantly small while God's is infinitely great. There is dynamism; the works are still in progress, but the happy outcomes are already evident, and this truth is the source of the monk's peace and joy. Similarly, Br A. writes about the truths of two abysmal distances in *"Standing In The Sun"*: "I stand in the abyss of innate nothingness blissful in truth: The Abyss of Light circling the abyss of dust"[41]. This vivid image allows us to visualise a wave of light, dancing around particles of dust that swirl in mystical Light. Incomprehensibly, the divine abyss of Light has taken an active interest in the human nothingness, the abyss of dust. The recognition of this paradoxical truth becomes a source of joy: "Here is the Truth our minds rejoice in. Here is the Love uncircumscribed the heart desires. Here is the nourishment of Light our eyes crave: Beauty circling the abyss of dust"[42]. The capitalised absolute divine qualities (Truth,

[40] "Nest of Nothingness", in: ED, 47.
[41] "Standing In The Sun", in: BoL, 36.
[42] *Ibid.*

Light, Love and Beauty) in this composition are contrasted with the nothingness of dust. That the divine abyss of Light would indeed embrace abysmal human nothingness is simultaneously both a truth and a mystery. The acceptance of this paradox is the ultimate source of bliss and awe.

Silence of the Lotus is another distinctly contemplative, nature-related composition that plays with the images of a lotus flower (human) and the Sun (God). The lotus flower is receptive to light and beauty in silence; it is open and attentive to the Sun. The Sun desires its beauty. The heart of the lotus flower gazes from her void with trust, in love's abandonment. Her void reflects the Sun's face and the Sun pours love in the open petals. The metaphor of the outstretching passion of the Sun turns into an outpouring of love that gaps the void between God and the human: "I-AM is faint with love for I-am-not…"[43] *Silence of the Lotus* presents God's grace as a silent mystery where the Absolute Being is deeply in love with a mortal creature, who in silence gazes at his Creator in trust, abandonment and love.

The *Art Restorer*, similarly, finds hope and joy in the acceptance of God's work in the abyss of one's soul. The hidden work of divine grace transforms the human being that was created in the image of God into a likeness of Christ:

> My ways fall short of your demands; I place no hope in virtue though strive for it I must. I place my hope in the hidden work of grace: your work in the soul's abyss transforming my nothingness to truth and justice, a likeness to the soul of Christ. In that abyss all is the work of God, a work I cannot see nor brag about, nor rob God of his glory… Your work is all my hope, my joy beneath the shame[44].

While the monk-poet strives for virtue, he abandons himself in the hands of God in trust and hope. His humility allows divine grace to perform the work for the greater glory of God. Ultimately, God is the true 'art restorer' of the soul that is transformed from the image of God

[43] "The Silence of the Lotus", in: SoL, 275.
[44] "The Art Restorer": in: ND, 74.

to the likeness of Christ. The concepts of the 'image of God' and 'likeness of Christ' are discussed also by Eastern Orthodox theologian Olivier Clément who points to the Incarnation as a secret re-recreation by which human nature was assumed and restored to its original state. Referring to Irenaeus of Lyons (c. 130-c. 208) Clément writes, "Christ reveals to us, and we see in Christ, that perfect 'image of God' after which we are fashioned, and which attracts us like a magnet. It is now up to us to transform 'image' into 'likeness'"[45]. The Incarnation seems to provide a key for grasping how, despite the abyss of ontological distance, humans (created in the image of God) are *capax Dei* (through transformation into likeness of Christ). This involves poverty, humility, and trust, which can re-create the original state of friendship between God and his creatures.

The human ontological limitation is recognised by Gregory of Nyssa (c. 335-c. 394), as he claims in *The Life of Moses* that it is impossible for those who pursue the life of virtue to attain perfection. He explains this by saying that God himself is the absolute virtue, and whoever pursues true virtue participates in nothing other than God. But since this good has no limit, the participant's desire has no stopping place; it stretches out with the limitless. It is therefore impossible to attain perfection because the one limit of virtue is the *absence* of limit[46]. This resonates in *The Art Restorer*'s lines of "My ways fall short of your demands; I place no hope in virtue though strive for it I must"[47]. Equally, Gregory of Nyssa reasons that, even if what is sought for is unattainable, one should not disregard the commandment to be perfect, just as the heavenly Father is perfect. He therefore concludes: "For the perfection of human nature consists perhaps in its very growth in goodness". As a result, 'the men of understanding', by attaining even a part, could yet attain a great deal even if it is not possible to attain to everything[48].

[45] O. Clément, *The Roots of Christian Mysticism: Texts from the Patristic Ear with Commentary*, New City, London 2017 (French original: 2007), 41.

[46] Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of Moses*, HarperCollins, New York, NY 2006 (Original English translation: 1978, 5.

[47] "The Art Restorer", in: ND, 74.

[48] Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of Moses*, cit., 6.

Br A. wonders, in a poem that is dedicated to a fellow Carthusian, "How strange a mixture is man?"[49]. He finds that humans are limited in many ways when facing the universe, time and knowledge:

> Before the stars we sink to an Infinitesimal.
> Before time's immensities we hardly exist a split second.
> Before knowledge of all there is we stand tongue tied[50].

Humans are a strange mixture of contrasts. Yet, the Carthusian monk-poet takes comfort in that God's love remains without limits despite all the human limitations:

> And yet in the midst of it all a hope burns in our breast: from all eternity we know that God has loved us, "God so loved the world he sent his Son to save us".
>
> All that is negative in man's condition can be borne with grace.
>
> All that will pass away while we will rest in the Father's bosom, our unique heritage, with Son and Spirit while slowly burn the stars…[51]

The "strange mixture" that is called man, therefore, ultimately finds his eternal coherence, meaning and bliss in the Holy Trinity. The temporal difference, and its eventual convergence, echoes some ideas about time and eternity presented by the Greek early Christian theologian Pseudo-Dionysius (5th – 6th century). In *The Divine Names*, he defines 'time' as having to do with the process of change manifested, for instance by birth, death and variety; but he continues: "Hence, theology tells us that we who are bound in by time are destined to have a share of eternity when at last we attain the incorruptible, unchanging Eternity"[52]. Pseudo-Dionysius further distinguishes between eternity

[49] "Man's Strange Mixture", in: PM, 18.
[50] *Ibid*.
[51] *Ibid*.
[52] Pseudo-Dionysius, "The Divine Names", in: *The Complete Works*, Paulist Press, Mahwah, NY 1987, 120-121.

(the home of being) and time (the home of things that come to be) and argues that we should look upon those things which share partly in eternity and partly in time as somehow midway between things which are and which are coming-to-be. It appears therefore that this 'strange mixture' is associated with the human condition while God is "the cause of all time and eternity"[53]. Yet, for Pseudo-Dionysius, God precedes both time and eternity: God is before time and beyond time and he is also there before eternity and above eternity[54].

Br A. argues that faith, the conviction that God exists, is a belief, not a fact open to demonstration[55]. This conviction is linked to the question of human nature and our relationship with God. According to the Carthusian monk-poet God is the unfading truth that wheels the ancient stars in space but "finds delight in the human soul", made (unlike stars) in the image of God. The human goal is to find in Jesus the Paradise of love that we had lost and walk once more hand in hand with God the Father, sins forgiven, the curse annulled. Only in God can love of 'rock certitude' be found[56]. Regarding this, Br A. reflects on the secularisation of the modern society. His conclusion: "Oddly our greatest loss in recent decades lies in sense of sin. It was eroded bit by bit as God's existence became a doubt for some and hard denial for few"[57]. He argues that too much love of the here-and-now results in denial of God's existence. And what follows: "no God, no awe, no fitting sense of shame and sinfulness, the trembling that grips the creature before the holiness of God […] Our epoch prefers sweet-sounding lies"[58]. In contrast, Br A. claims, those who revere God are simultaneously wise and religious. They attain a constant joy in living. They grow in love and awe, and a hidden humble path of constant desire for God emerges[59].

The ontological distance, instead of leading to existential despair, can thus become a source of joy and freedom. This insight comes from the realisation that God loves the humble, those who are nothing. It is

[53] *Ibid.*, 121.
[54] *Ibid.*
[55] "Outrageous Fortune", in: DoD, 56.
[56] "At First Faith Was Easy", in: DoD, 59.
[57] "Oddly", in: DoD, 57.
[58] *Ibid.*
[59] *Ibid.*

gained through self-knowledge and by contemplation of God's Love and Being. Palladius of Galatia (c. 363-420) noted in *The Lausiac History* that "ignorance is the mother of arrogance"[60]. Accordingly, we might posit that "Knowledge is the father of humility". This profound humility is that of a beggar who has nothing and even deeply *knows* that he/she is nothing. Another Carthusian author, Dom André Poisson (1923-2005) likewise suggests that our joyful acceptance of human nothingness, "our weakness beyond comprehension", can lift us to a communion with the Holy Trinity:

> Once we really begin to believe in the infinite tenderness of the Father, we are, as it were, obliged to descend ever more fully and joyfully into a realm in which we neither possess nor understand nor control anything.
>
> Thus, almost without being aware of it, we enter into communion with the divine life. The relation between Father and Son in the Spirit is, at a level completely beyond our comprehension, a perfect embodiment of weakness transformed into communion[61].

In conclusion, the Carthusian's poetry on the ontological difference reflects a monastic, contemplative, theological approach that explores "the living depths of truth", which Eugène de l'Enfant Jésus, ocd (quoted by Jean Leclercq) distinguishes from a purely rational, deductive, theological reasoning. He adds that both approaches serve the same cause but while the theologian's reasoning excels in organising already established points of doctrine, the contemplative's love (possessing greater penetration) makes him a "bold, avant-garde scout"[62]. According to Le-

[60] Palladius of Galatia, *The Lausiac History*, Aeterna Press, Great Britain 2014, 20.

[61] A. Poisson, *The Prayer of the Heart*, Charterhouse of the Transfiguration 2018, 22. Dom André Poisson was Prior of La Grande Chartreuse and Superior General ("Reverend Father") of the Carthusian Order from 1967 to 1997.

[62] J. Leclercq, *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God: A Study of Monastic Culture*, Fordham University Press, New York, NY 1982 (first English translation 1961; French original 1957), 216. The author of this article wishes to thank the anonymous reviewer for recommending this classic work on monastic theology.

clercq, within monastic spiritual theology, everything can be reduced to two correlative aspects of the same religious knowledge: knowledge of self and knowledge of God. One is the necessary complement of the other[63]. Leclercq argues further that the monastic writers' principal purpose is not to reveal the mysteries of God, to explicate them or derive from them any speculative conclusions, but to impregnate their whole lives with them and to order their existence to contemplation[64]. This is also what Br A. seems to convey when he, through his lived experience, explores the depth of the ontological abyss as well as the intimate desire and love for God. The ontological distance calls for humility and trust in Providence, even when God's ways seem inscrutable. The Carthusian texts therefore encourage us to go 'beyond' and seek communion with the Divine in silent contemplation of the Trinitarian mystery.

4. Ontological Distance in Speed

The first part of this paper focused on the individual perspective, viewed through the lyrical 'I' of the monk-poet who, in effect, stands as a representative of all fellow humans facing the ontological chasm that separates them from their Maker. The final part of this article presents a brief analysis of a single poem that moves fluidly between the human and divine temporalities. This ability to move between divine and human perspectives is indeed a characteristic contemplative quality in the Carthusian author's poetry. As the title *Speed* indicates, temporality and motion are the central concepts in this Carthusian composition. The text is quoted here in full but divided into three segments for analysis.

5. Speed

Speed opens with a temporal paradox: God's time is simultaneously ultimate speed and ultimate stillness. This complex meaning is ex-

[63] *Ibid.*, 220.
[64] *Ibid.*, 223.

pressed, for example, in the claim that God "devours his life in sempiternal peace". What is the implication of this temporal paradox? It leads the monk-poet to remind himself:

> Slow down! I always tend to speed. Seek
> Speed in God, his eternity. And that?
> It's ultimate slowness, stillness. It's ultimate speed
> So intensely his whole life is lived; no wheels
> Could spin more powerfully, no falcon stoop
> More swiftly, no forest could blaze more vehemently.
> He devours his life in sempiternal peace[65].

Speed proceeds next to observe the spatiotemporal qualities of the human temporal 'this-worldly' existence and the divine eternal life in heaven. This distance is expressed as a 'measureless chasm'. The chasm is bridged by God alone. He willed the existence of each human, and he preserves their earthly temporal life and will bring them home. Finally, God's faithful love will keep his own eternally in Trinitarian splendour gazing on the face of God. It appears that Br A. raises here an ontological-epistemological aspect as well. For God, to know is to love, while for humans this is not necessarily the same. His knowledge and love are perfect, ours imperfect.

> "The Lord knew his own." To know is to love
> In God. To love is to will: his love willed
> That we exist, his love preserves our life,
> His love so faithful will see us home. Once home
> Across the measureless chasm his love will keep
> His own in splendour, the Spirit's fire, the Son's
> Wisdom. Our eyes will gaze intensely on the face
> Of God, our hearts aflame with burning grace…[66]

[65] "Speed", in: ND, 28.
[66] *Ibid.*

Speed moves then on to consider the immensity of God's salvific plan and to explore how humans could seek to understand it. Again, contemplative silence and slowing down are required to discern God's will in interiority. But once the way of God's will has become clear, the road opens to allow one to progress with greater speed.

Slow down! Your speed is a worldly haste. Seek
Interior speed, the zeal to discern God's will,
That promptness to comply: "Mary made haste
To the mountains." The way once clarified then speed
Devours the open road, the ideal move
On the vast chessboard of time. The goal of the game
God fixed in a single creative act, an act
Of infinitive love unfolding at Wisdom's speed.
In faith's interior vision the soul's as still
As eternity to relish the stillness of God,
The intense fullness of life, the white hot blaze
Of Divinity. Contradictions are met
In him or rather the slender mind of man
Discerning piecemeal in time dimly perceives.
The passionate heart takes over, in trusting cleaves…[67]

The final section of *Speed* likens God's salvific plan to a game of chess where God already has secured the final and ultimate victory with one ideal creative move. This involved Mary's prompt response. The poem also distinguishes between 'worldly haste' and haste that is associated with the zeal to discern God's will.

The game appears to unfold slowly and piecemeal for those who observe it externally. However, those who have been given the grace of vision (faith) can contemplate the victorious endgame in their minds. This will enable them to enjoy the eternal stillness and bliss, at least dimly, already here and now. In God, in trust, the monk-poet's heart meditates on the mystery of the ultimate and victorious reconciliation of temporalities. The spatiotemporal distance and contradictions dis-

[67] *Ibid*.

solve as the soul enters stillness where it can taste God's life and timelessness. The Eastern *hesychastic* tradition of prayer teaches us that such peace can be found already here in communion with the Divine. For example, John Cassian (360-c. 435), referring to Abbot Isaac's teaching of the prayer formula "O God, make speed to save me: O Lord, make haste to help me", writes that the end of all perfection is that "the mind purged from all carnal desires may daily be lifted towards spiritual things, until the whole life and all thoughts of the heart become one continuous prayer"[68]. John of Damascus (c. 680-c. 750) likewise suggests that when we shut down the senses and enter into union with ourselves and God, and – freed from the steady revolution of the external world – come to live inside ourselves, then we shall clearly see the Kingdom of God in ourselves. This is because Jesus, who is God, declared that "the Kingdom of heaven," which is the Kingdom of God, is "within you"[69]. And Elizabeth of the Trinity, ocd, similarly, tells us in her profound insight: "Indeed I have found heaven on earth because heaven is God and God is in my soul. The day I understood this everything became clear to me"[70].

Conclusions

'Facing the Abyss' as a fundamental ontological existential question has been addressed by various philosophical and religious approaches. The ancient monastic way offers a perspective of hope to all regardless of their failings and limitations. Indeed, in *The Astonishing Call*, Br A. writes that our human condition, our fall from Paradise and rapid growth in evil, so dominate the scene that we assume that we are doomed, unworthy to gaze on high. However, he claims that we

[68] J. Cassian, *Conferences*, First Rate Publishers, Brookfield, WI 2016, Conf. 9, Ch. VII.

[69] John of Damascus, "Oration on the Transfiguration of Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ", *Light of the Mountain: Greek Patristic and Byzantine Homilies on the Transfiguration of the Lord*, St Vladimir's Seminary Press, Yonkers, NY 2013), 205-231: 218.

[70] E. Obbard, *To Live is to Pray: An Introduction to Carmelite Spirituality*, Canterbury Press, Norwich 1997, 94.

must continually fight this sceptical view because faith affirms what Christ asserted: "You shall see my glory, the glory of the only begotten Son". Despite our inclination to evil, we have been released from guilt in Christ. This is indeed the paradoxical and "astonishing call": finite humans are called to infinite joy[71].

The Carthusian monk-poet introduces in his compositions a broad range of ontological ideas that take us from the abyss of nothingness to eternal bliss in the kingdom of God. One way to summarise the theme is to consider the "double truths" that set us free, as Br A. suggested in *Nest of Nothingness:* God's holiness and human sinfulness.

Facing the ontological abyss then means the honest and humble recognition of, firstly, the truth about God and our relationship with him; and secondly, the truth about oneself and other human beings. In relation to God, the Carthusian clings to hoping against hope, trusting against all odds. This means that instead of us staring into the abyss in despair, God's grace invites us to shift our gaze from an excessive focus on this transient world and oneself to look 'beyond' to the Divine.

In relation to oneself, humility and gratefulness are the correct responses. While Br A. tends to write in singular form, using the lyrical 'I' in his poems, it is evident that he speaks of our shared human condition. This, in turn, puts everyone in the same ontological and existential state as flawed and imperfect mortal human beings. This involves compassion and mercy towards fellow pilgrims on earth, as all are loved by God and invited to return to his everlasting friendship. These themes echo the spirituality of the desert fathers and mothers, who also wrestled with the ontological questions of 'what is a man' and 'who is God'. Their self-knowledge and non-judgemental attitude is reflected in the dialogue between two desert fathers:

> Joseph: Tell me how to become a monk?
>
> Poemen: If you want to find rest in this life and the next, say at every moment, "Who am I?" and judge no one[72].

[71] The Astonishing Call in IJ, 204.

[72] *The Desert Fathers: Sayings of the Early Christian Monks*, Penguin Books, London 2003, 85.

John Chryssavgis, an Eastern Orthodox theologian, writes about the compassion that the early ascetics learned in the 'school of the desert' amidst their own struggles through darkness. They could be joyful because they knew that they are human and that failure comes with the territory of being human. The desert elders understood one simple but profound truth, that 'they are not God' and knew that 'only through God that all things are possible'[73]. Therefore, Chryssavgis writes, "In the struggle – in the very place where we meet God and are loved by God – we too discover how to love others… We understand that we are like others not primarily in our virtues and strengths, but especially in our faults and our flaws"[74]. Chryssavgis underlines the compassionate attitude of the early desert dwellers claiming that their suggestion is not so much: "I'm OK and you're OK." On a much deeper level, it is their awareness and admission that "I'm not OK; and you are not OK." Yet, this recognition is also their reassurance; for they know that: "That's OK!" And he concludes that whenever the reality of imperfection or limitation is denied, it is God and the possibility of transcending these limitations that are being rejected[75].

The early desert dwellers recognized their sinfulness before God and the weak human nature that they shared with their brethren. They knew they were not equal to God; neither were they above any of their fellow human beings. It could be argued that his monastic, humble disposition strikes a liberating, counter-cultural contrast with the secular tendencies toward hypocritical self-justification and indiscriminate judging of others. As another anonymous Carthusian writer puts it: "When God is the centre of our universe and not our little egotistical self, then will there be liberty and peace within us, then will there be real interior silence, that purity of heart to which it is promised to see God"[76].

[73] J. Chryssavgis, *In the Heart of the Desert: The Spirituality of the Desert Fathers and Mothers*, World Wisdom, Bloomington, IN 2008, 105.

[74] *Ibid.*, 106.

[75] *Ibid.*

[76] A Carthusian, *The Spirit of Place*, cit., 59.

Teresianum 76 (2025/1) 131-157
10.1484/J.TER.5.150500

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Facing the Abyss: Ontological Distance in the Poetry of a Carthusian Monk

ABSTRACT: 'Facing the Abyss' refers to the liminal and temporal theme of 'Ontological Distance' in the poetry of an anonymous Carthusian monk in the period 1964-2024. This article approaches the topic mainly from the perspectives of Catholic monastic spirituality and the Carthusian tradition. The thematic analysis of the selected texts explores the metaphors and expressions employed by the monk-poet to describe the extremity of the ontological distance between the Creator and creatures. The acknowledgment of the extreme ontological distance, rather than leading to existential despair, can become a source of joy and gratitude when viewed through faith. The paper identifies some influences of early Eastern monastic spiritual traditions that echoed in the contemporary Carthusian author's writings.

KEYWORDS: monasticism; ontology; liminality; temporality; Carthusian.