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PETER NISSEN

CARTHUSIAN WORLDS, CARTHUSIAN IMAGES

The Fascination of Silence and Inaccessibility

SUMMARY – The silent, hidden world of the Carthusians has become known to a broad public thanks to the 2005 film, *Die grosse Stille / Into Great Silence* from the German producer Philip Gröning. That world appears to fascinate people, as evidenced by earlier films and books about Carthusian life as well. But the onlooker remains an outsider. Films and books afford a fleeting glimpse of an inside world marked by inaccessibility. The inaccessibility in fact accounts for the outsider's fascination. Usually it results in a biased picture: the Carthusian world is seen as paradisiac. Yet a number of recent autobiographic works by former Carthusians demolish the idyll of the 'white paradise'. They show that the silent, enclosed world of the Carthusians is marred by acute psychological tensions. These are mainly about boundaries: where does the Carthusian world begin and end, where is the boundary between the inside and the outside world, between the individual monk and the community? The author proposes studying the realities of Carthusian life from the angle of three dialectical relationships: that of the Carthusian and the outside world, of the anchorite and the coenobite (hence the individual monk and the community), and of practical and inner life (the monk's own inner and outside worlds).

1. INTO GREAT SILENCE – A VISITOR TO A WORLD WITHIN A WORLD

Since the autumn of 2005 a lot of people, many of whom had probably never heard of the existence of Carthusians before, have gained access to the Carthusian world. This is a result of the great success of the film *Die grosse Stille / Into Great Silence* by the German film producer Philip Gröning (born in Düsseldorf in 1959).¹ The film shows us the life of the monks of the Grande Chartreuse, the mother house of the Carthusian order, situated in a remote spot in the beautiful French Alps in the neighbourhood of Grenoble. As far back as 1984,

¹ Information about Philip Gröning's film, which is also available on DVD, can be found on the website www.diegrossestille.de.

when the Carthusian order celebrated its eight centenary, Philip Gröning asked permission to shoot film scenes in the monastery, but at that time his request was turned down: the presence of the movie maker would encroach too much on the quiet, privacy and silence of the Carthusian community. But in 1999, fifteen years later, Philip Gröning received a message from the new prior – since 1997 – of the Grande Chartreuse, the fourth Dutchman in the history of the Carthusian order, Dom Marcellin Theeuwes: ‘The time is ripe now, you may come’.² Over several seasons in 2002 and 2003, all on his own, Gröning followed the day-to-day life of the monks in the charterhouse with a small camera – mostly a 24P HD, partly a Super 8. And so out of 120 hours of recordings a 158-minute documentary film was made, in which there are hardly any spoken words. There are no interviews, nor a commentator’s voice. Only a few biblical verses flash on the screen every now and again, like a kind of refrain. We hear the human voice only when the monks gather in church to sing the divine office, when they meet in the chapter to welcome two novices in their midst, and – but by then the film is already far beyond halfway – during the monks’ weekly common recreation. Right at the end of the film a Carthusian monk speaks about the meaning of his life with God and the absence of fear of dying. But is he speaking to us? As viewers we know that he cannot see us, not only because he is not really standing in front of us but is talking from a projection screen, but also because he is blind. Even when this scene was shot he could not have seen Philip Gröning but was only able to experience Gröning’s presence via his other senses. The aged monk seems to be speaking primarily to himself. For the rest the film consists of silence: two and three quarters of an hour of utter silence. Almost a silent film, so to speak.

Starting in November 2005, *Into Great Silence* (under its German title *Die grosse Stille*) made a successful circuit of German film houses – in December 2005 a German journal proclaimed it film of the month – and since the summer of 2006 it made its way to many other countries. It received rave reviews and earned accolades and prizes at film festivals in Leipzig, Rotterdam, Toronto and Venice. The German journal *Die Welt* called it ‘die ungewöhnlichste Film des Jahres’ (‘the most unusual film of the year’). In the Netherlands, according to sociologists one of the most secularised countries in the world, the film continued to attract full houses for many months, to everyone’s astonishment. In some film houses *Into Great Silence* was on the weekly programme for more than six months. Here and there it was combined with an introduction or

² His Dutch predecessors were Jan van Roosendaal from Nijmegen (1463-1472), Willem Bibaut (1521-1535), previously prior of Geertruidentberg, and Pieter Marnef from Leiden (1540-1546), monk of the Charterhouse of Delft. P. Nissen, ‘Nederlander Dom Marcellin Theeuwes prior-generaal van kartuizers’, in: *Een Twee Een* 25 (1997), 297.

followed by a discussion.³ Never before have the Carthusians been on everybody’s lips the way they have been the three or four years after 2005.

Philip Gröning’s film shows us a lifestyle of which silence is the dominant characteristic. Carthusians, male and female, lead lives of organised, regulated silence. Nevertheless silence is not the objective of their way of life: it is a means, an instrument to serve and foster receptivity to the mystery of God. Carthusians search for God. And through their silence they want to create a situation in which they can concentrate on this search. They don’t look for silence to escape the world, and certainly not to run away from themselves, because whatever they leave behind when they enter the charterhouse, they always take themselves within. The very silence of the Carthusian world confronts these men and women with themselves: they are thrown back on themselves. They cannot walk away from themselves, nor from the world.

The silence of the charterhouse can best be compared to what is called ‘the eye of the storm’ in meteorology,⁴ referring to the epicentre or heart of a tropical cyclone or a tornado. This centre is part of the storm and yet it is uniquely silent. Someone in the eye of the storm would watch the fury raging around him from that tranquil vantage point. The Charterhouse is much the same: it is part of the world and yet a quiet point from which to observe the world in prayer and meditation. The Carthusian world is, as it were, a still, stable centre in the midst of the turmoil of the world. That is expressed by the logo and the motto of the Carthusian order. The logo shows the globe with the cross superimposed on it and above the cross seven stars, representing the first seven monks who settled in the valley of Chartreuse in 1084. The motto is *Stat crux dum volvitur orbis*, Latin for ‘The cross is steady while the world revolves’.

At the same time this silent centre, this eye of the storm that is part of the tempest, is also a world on its own, a world within the world: the Carthusian world. Philip Gröning’s film admits viewers to this world for a brief moment, but it remains a virtual visit. Above all, the viewers always remain visitors, no more. They can observe the Carthusian world, as the film maker did, and as scholarly researchers do. 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 cultural anthropology, is not feasible in the Carthusian world. They don’t have a guest house like

³ See for instance H.J.A. Hofland (Ed.), *De grote stilte: Overdenkingen in filosofie, kunst en spiritualiteit*, Budel-Nijmegen 2007.

⁴ ‘The eye of the storm’ is also a favourite metaphor of the well known Dutch writer Cees Nooteboom, an admirer of the Carthusians: P. Nissen, ‘In een klooster zonder muren: Kloosters in de grenzeloze wereld van Cees Nooteboom’, in: K. Blom et al., *De grenzeloze wereld van Cees Nooteboom*, Nijmegen 2006, 91-101; and L. Földényi et al., *In het oog van de storm: De wereld van Cees Nooteboom. Essays over zijn oeuvre*, Amsterdam-Antwerp 2006.

the Benedictines, Cistercians, Premonstratensians and other monastic and canonical orders, where researchers can spend some days or weeks sharing the life of the Carthusians, following their daily schedule and participating in their liturgy. Neither do the Carthusians have oblates, like the Benedictines: men and women who affiliate individually with a monastic community in order to follow its rule in their private lives at home and at work as closely as their individual circumstances and prior commitments permit. These oblates do not physically live in the monastic world, but to some extent they do live in it mentally. They share it partially, they participate in it, so they are more than just observers. But it is impossible to participate in the Carthusian world in such an institutionalised manner. Whether we are just chance viewers of Philip Gröning's film or scholars who have devoted our whole life to Carthusian studies, when it comes to the Carthusian world we always remain outsiders.

2. CARTHUSIAN ARCADIA – THE VIEWER AS AN OUTSIDER

It is this phenomenon of enforced outsider-hood that seems to enhance the fascination with the Carthusian world. It is a different world, mysterious, exotic. This is confirmed by two earlier films on the Carthusians. The first is a German documentary entitled *Leben um zu Beten* ('Live to Pray'). It was made in 1984, more than a quarter of a century ago by now, on the occasion of the ninth centenary of the Carthusian order, and was broadcast by the German 'Südwestfunk'. It shows the life in the only inhabited charterhouse left in Germany, that of Marienau. Partly it consists of an interview with the prior, partly it shows recordings of the life and liturgy in Marienau Charterhouse. These recordings were made by a priest from the neighbourhood using a simple amateur camera.

The second film is of Dutch origin. I am referring to an episode on the Carthusians in a popular series on monasteries in the television programme *Kruispunt* ('Crossing Point'), broadcast on Dutch television for the first time on 8 August 2004, repeated in October 2007 (together with Philip Gröning's film) and also available on DVD. The maker of this documentary is Leo Fijen, who became friendly with the former prior general of the Grande Chartreuse, the Dutchman Dom Marcellin Theeuwes, and made him the central character in a book on the 'journey from your head to your heart', based on the television series and published in 2004.⁵ But notwithstanding Leo Fijen's good relation-

⁵ L. Fijen, *De reis van je hoofd naar je hart: Leefregels voor het bestaan van alledag*, Kampen 2004, 122-151. Dom Marcellin is also an important spokesman in a more journalistic book written by his nephew J. Reijnders, *Een reis in stilte: Leven als kartuizers*, Kampen 2006.

ship with the prior general, he did not really penetrate the Carthusian world. He, a film maker, and we, the viewers of his documentary, remain outsiders. True, Leo Fijen was allowed to spend one night in a monk's cell in the Grande Chartreuse and in the documentary he comments on the oppressive silence of that night: 'If this is not the meaning of your life, you wouldn't last even one day' ('Als dit niet de zin van je leven is, hou je het nog niet één dag uit'). But his camera crew had to stay outside. They recorded Leo Fijen's conversation with the prior during a walk through the magnificent surroundings of the Grande Chartreuse, outside the cloister. The scenes of life within the Grande Chartreuse in the Dutch documentary were taken from Philip Gröning's film, at that time still in the making.

Hence Carthusian worlds are fascinating because of their inaccessibility. Film scenes afford brief insight, but we remain outsiders and for that very reason they preserve a kind of pristine, immaculate, paradisiac state, like the mediated world of the Amish.⁶ 'That which makes the Amish an icon of the American pastoral precludes the possibility of filming them. The Amish Arcadia is always already inaccessible', as Crystal Downing puts it.⁷ In both cases, that of the Amish and that of the Carthusians, this inaccessibility is strongly encouraged by the religious institutions' own information strategy, which is directed to establishing information boundaries. Both communities communicate only what they consider relevant.⁸

3. HEAVENLY IMAGES

This paradisiac state of the Carthusian world is also depicted in a few books written to introduce that world to the general public.⁹ I cite just two examples. The first is a book from 1929 entitled *Het Witte Paradijs* ('The White Paradise') by the Dutch writer and later Benedictine monk Pieter van der Meer de Walcheren (1880-1970). In 1926 Pieter and a friend spent the week of Christmas

⁶ D. Zimmerman Umble & D.L. Weaver-Zercher (Eds), *The Amish and the media*, Baltimore 2008.

⁷ C. Downing, 'Witnessing the Amish: Plain people on fancy film', in: Zimmerman Umble & Weaver-Zercher, *Amish and the media*, 25-41, quotation 40.

⁸ D.A. Stout, *Media and religion: Foundations of an emerging field*, New York-London 2012, 79.

⁹ For this more or less 'mythical' image of the Carthusians in literary tradition, see: B. Rieder, 'Der Mythos der Kartäuser: Beobachtungen zum Bild der Kartäuser in der öffentlichen und literarischen Vorstellung', in: J. Ganz & M. Früh (Eds), *Das Erbe der Kartäuser*. Internationaler Kongress für Kartäuserforschung 1.-5. Dezember 1999 Kartause Itringen, Salzburg 2000 (Analecta Cartusiana 160), 185-195.

in the charterhouse of La Valsainte in the Swiss Alps. He was so impressed by the world of the Carthusians that he decided to write a lyrical booklet about it. *Het Witte Paradijs* was printed five times in Dutch between 1929 and 1965 and has been translated into English (1952), French (1931, 1939 and 1953), German (1930), Spanish (1943, four editions up to 1961), Portuguese (?) and Italian (1969, 1975), sometimes in more than one edition and several of them with an introduction by the famous French philosopher Jacques Maritain.¹⁰ So you could say that it was a kind of cult book in its time. The longest chapter in the book is entitled 'A Carthusian Speaks' ('Een Karthuizer Spreekt'). The speaker is the Dutch Carthusian Dom Gerard Ramakers (1896-1984), born in the village of Echt and raised in the city of Weert, who was La Valsainte's novice master from 1923 to 1931. He is as it were a voice from within the Carthusian world speaking to us. But for the rest Pieter van der Meer's booklet is the account of an outside observer. Its very title reveals the observer's paradisiac image of the Carthusian world: *The White Paradise*.¹¹

A second book that introduces a general readership to the Carthusian world is by the British journalist Robin Bruce Lockhart, a Catholic convert and author of *Ace of Spies*, a successful book on Sidney Reilly, the greatest spy in British history and subject of a major TV series in 1983. Just as Lockhart was interested in the mysterious world of spies – his father Sir Robin Hamilton Bruce Lockhart (1887-1970) was a famous diplomat and a secret agent in Moscow – so he was interested in the mysterious world of the Carthusians. He was a friend of the last inhabited charterhouse left in England, St Hugh's in Parkminster, Sussex, and lived for some time in a village in the neighbourhood. In his book *Halfway to Heaven: The Hidden Life of the Sublime Carthusians* (published in 1985, reprinted in 2005 and translated into French and German) he describes the history and way of life of the Carthusian, with a preamble of a few chapters on the desert fathers and early monasticism. At the end of his book he also summarises some lines of Carthusian spirituality. Lockhart has an extremely exalted image of the Carthusians. He calls them 'sublime' and the title of his book speaks volumes: according to him they are already halfway to heaven. 'Were all mankind, by some divine miracle, able to detach itself from the world in the Carthusian way, it would surely be paradise regained', Lockhart writes.¹²

¹⁰ P. Nissen, 'Nederlandstalige kartuizerauteurs uit de 19^{de} en 20^{ste} eeuw', in: F. Hendrickx (Ed.), *De kartuizers en hun klooster te Zelem*, Diest 1984, 146-156, esp. 146-147.

¹¹ The 1952 English edition was published by McKay, New York. According to A. Gruys, *Cartusiana: Un instrument heuristique*, Paris 1976, I, 6 there must have been an (earlier?) English edition, published in London.

¹² R.B. Lockhart, *Halfway to heaven: The hidden life of the sublime Carthusians*, London 1985, 117. Reprinted by Cistercian Publications, Kalamazoo, Michigan, in 2005 (Cistercian Studies Series 186).

In the German translation, published two years later (in 1987), the title of the book is significantly more modest: *Botschaft des Schweigens: Das verborgene Leben der Kartäuser* (Message of silence: The hidden life of the Carthusians). The Carthusians are no longer 'sublime', neither are they 'halfway to heaven'. This modesty is undoubtedly due to the translators, who were Carthusians themselves: the book was translated by a few monks at the German charterhouse of Marienau. Nevertheless they left the passage I have just quoted on 'paradise regained' unchanged.¹³

Books like the ones by Pieter van der Meer de Walcheren and Robin Bruce Lockhart portray a paradisiac, heavenly image of the Carthusian world. In so doing they contributed greatly to the emergence of a kind of Carthusian romanticism. But reality is not always that paradisiac. That is made clear by some other books that introduce a broader readership to the Carthusian world in a different way, namely through the biographic or autobiographic stories of men who were Carthusians for some time but left the order. These books do not portray the Carthusian world from the perspective of an infatuated admirer from the outside, but from that of a (former) inhabitant of the world itself. And we know from experience that such a perspective usually yields a much more realistic picture of the inside of the Carthusian world.

Still relatively subtle and disguised, this happens in the book by the German theologian Willibald Bösen, now professor emeritus of biblical theology at the University of Bielefeld. In 1987 he published a thrice reprinted book on the Carthusians entitled *Auf einsamer Strasse zu Gott* ('On the Lonely Road to God').¹⁴ The second part of this book offers some rather matter-of-fact information on the history, way of life, architecture and daily schedule of the Carthusians. But the larger first part of the book affords a more personal glimpse into the Carthusian world by means of interviews with several Carthusian monks and correspondence with a Carthusian. Bösen also inserted excerpts from the diary of a theology student, over twenty years old, who spent nine months and seven days as a novice in the Swiss charterhouse of La Valsainte. Its fifty pages make it the longest chapter in Bösen's book and it might very well be that this novice, who had to leave the charterhouse for reasons of health, was himself the author of the book, hence the later professor Bösen. At all events, the diary gives the reader a modest insight into the conflict that can take place

¹³ R.B. Lockhart, *Botschaft des Schweigens: Das verborgene Leben der Kartäuser*, Würzburg 1987, 163: 'Würde die ganze Menschheit durch ein göttliches Wunder dazu befähigt, sich wie die Kartäuser von der Welt zu lösen, wäre zweifellos das Paradies wieder da'. The title of the French translation is also more modest: *La vie cachée des Chartreux*, Paris 1985.

¹⁴ W. Bösen, *Auf einsamer Straße zu Gott: Das Geheimnis der Kartäuser*, Freiburg 1987; second edition 1990; third edition 1991; 'Sonderausgabe' Buxheim, 1995.

in the Carthusian world, although the friction apparently had little to do with the young monk himself: he was more concerned about the health of his mother and sister. Indeed, letters reached him from an aunt, from the family doctor and even from the mayor of his village, calling him to leave the charterhouse: 'Come back home, because your mother and your sister need you'.¹⁵ In the diary's presentation of the facts the cause of the tensions experienced by the young Carthusian monk lies not within the Carthusian world but outside it. The outside world caused unrest and destabilised the inner world of the charterhouse.

4. CONFLICTING CHARACTERS IN THE CARTHUSIAN PARADISE

Two other recent biographical stories of Carthusians depict a different situation. The first is autobiographical: *Sounds of Silence: A Monk's Journey* (2005) by Father Benedict Kossmann. Behind this writer's name – a pseudonym, 'out of continuing respect for Carthusian anonymity' – lurks an American who was a Carthusian monk for twenty years, first in the Spanish charterhouse of Jerez and later in the first foundation of the Carthusian order outside of Europe, the Charterhouse of the Transfiguration in Arlington in the state of Vermont, USA, under construction since 1951 and completed in 1970. The book tells the story of the happy life of a monk, feeling at ease in the charterhouse and taking on more and more responsibilities, such as the offices of novice master and chanter. This last position eventually brought him into conflict with the community. It started with a simple choir incident on a Sunday morning during the blessing of holy water, but according to the prior this incident exposed deeper emotional tensions within the community. The prior 'was ever obsessed with identifying and eliminating emotional problems in his community',¹⁶ and so it was now: the monk was sent to New York city for a series of psychological tests and never returned to the charterhouse. He was released from his monastic vows and the priesthood and lives with his wife in Florida. Father Benedict's story shows us another side of the Carthusian world. Instead of a paradise half-way to heaven inhabited by angels, it is a world of ordinary people with emotional problems, conflicting characters and the concomitant tensions.

This is even more evident in a book that reduces the idyll of the white paradise to a story of human ideals and failures, of struggles and tensions. I am referring to *An Infinity of Hours* (2006) by Nancy Klein Maguire, now also

¹⁵ Bösen, *Auf einsamer Strasse*, 78.

¹⁶ B. Kossmann, *Sounds of silence: A monk's journey*, Bloomington, IN 2005, 250.

translated into German (2007) and Spanish (2008).¹⁷ Nancy Klein Maguire is a scholar-in-residence at the Folger Shakespeare Library in Washington, DC, who publishes on politics and the theatre in the seventeenth century. After a long article on the Duchess of Portsmouth, the favourite mistress of king Charles II, she decided to take a break and write a short story about her husband, an ex-Carthusian monk. After seven years of research based on many letters, interviews, e-mails, diaries and phone calls she published a book in which she follows the development of five young men, including her present husband, who entered the English charterhouse of Parkminster between July 1960 and March 1961 to start their noviciates. By October 1965 four of these five men had left the charterhouse. Only one of them, Dom Leo, professed his solemn vows in 1965 and has remained a Carthusian until today. For eleven years, from 1990 to 2001, he was the prior of Parkminster. Nancy Klein Maguire's book has been praised by many, also from within the Carthusian order, for the accuracy and honesty with which she describes the reality of the Carthusian world between 1960 and 1965. Her description reveals that it was a world of high ideals but at the same time not without inner tensions, and certainly not paradise.

These inner tensions become evident in conflicts that arise, particularly on questions concerning the definition of domains in and around the Carthusian world. Thus they are cultural and mental border conflicts. Following recent developments in cultural history, I would argue that we take these border conflicts as heuristic points of departure in our attempts as historians of spirituality to understand the Carthusian world.¹⁸ I see mainly three types of border conflicts: those between the charterhouse and the outside world, those within the Carthusian community and those concerning the definition of the individual Carthusian monk or nun. Always the primary question is: where does the Carthusian world begin and where does it end? What belongs to it and what doesn't? In everyday life, also that of Carthusians, limits have constantly to be exceeded and borders have to be crossed, those between the 'us' and the 'them' of the Carthusians and the outside world and those between the 'me' and the 'them' of the individual monk and his fellow Carthusians. In this crossing of borders confrontations occur with the alterity of the others, and these shed new light on the relationship between the outside and the inside world of Carthusians.

¹⁷ For all kinds of information on the book and the author, see www.nancykleinmaguire.com.

¹⁸ P. Burke, *What is cultural history?*, Cambridge 2004.

5. CONCLUSION – THREE DIALECTICAL RELATIONSHIPS IN CARTHUSIAN REALITY

I think we can trace these border conflicts by examining three dialectical relationships that play an important role in the history of the Carthusians. I advocate using these dialectical relationships as points of departure in our research into the Carthusian world. In this dynamic the dialectical tension between the two opposites or poles imparts new meaning to our understanding of Carthusians' past and present.

The first relationship is that between the Carthusian world and the outside world. Every charterhouse has to maintain certain relationships with its environment. Even in the process of founding a charterhouse the Carthusians have to form a number of relations with stakeholders in the local society. These are especially visible in the economic structures that are necessary for the subsistence of the Carthusian world. Together with the Cistercian sisters of the Munster abbey, the Carthusians of Roermond, for instance, were the main monastic proprietors in the Dutch city of Roermond.¹⁹ They owned a number of farms and the right to collect tithes in several villages in the neighbourhood, especially in the upper quarters of the Duchy of Guelders, as well as several water mills and fishing rights in the Roer river. This made the charterhouse an important player in the local economy. But its economic power was also a source of conflict with the guilds of Roermond, the city administration and other religious communities, especially the Cistercian nuns.

The works of art in charterhouses shed an interesting light on the dialectical relationship between the inside and the outside world. After all, with only a few exceptions these artworks came from outside. At most the Carthusians were the sponsors of the work of art, but mostly even that role was played by a benefactor from outside the charterhouse. Gradually the works of art nevertheless became part of the inside world. They would be integrated with the Carthusian world, for instance because they played a role in devotional practice (e.g. a painting that became an object of meditation) or in their ritual practice (e.g. a baroque altar like that of Roermond Charterhouse, now in the abbey church of Thorn, that came to function in the austere liturgy of the Carthusians). Through their devotional and liturgical communication with these objects of art the Carthusians as it were appropriated them and made them part of their own world.

The second dialectical relationship in the Carthusian world is that between anchorite and coenobite, in other words, between the Carthusian community

¹⁹ P. Nissen, 'De geschiedenis van de Kartuis van Onze Lieve Vrouw van Bethlehem te Roermond', in: K. Pansters (Ed.), *Het geheim van de stilte: De besloten wereld van de Roermondse kartuizers*, Zwolle 2009, 62-77, esp. 68-70.

and the individual Carthusian. In a sense this relationship is a logical consequence of the true nature of Carthusian life, namely that of hermits living in a communal monastery. Tensions between an individual and a group that are present in every human society get more intense in a Carthusian community, because they affect the very identity of the members. In topological terms one could say this tension concerns the difference between the Carthusian cell and the Carthusian monastery. Tensions of this kind played an important role in the failure of attempts between 1946 and 1961 to establish a Dutch speaking community in the Charterhouse of Calci near Pisa (Italy) in order to prepare for the return of the Carthusian order to the Netherlands. Among other reasons these attempts were wrecked by the ordinary human phenomenon of incompatible personalities.²⁰ The biography of the Dutch monk Dom Benoit Lambres, one of the most prolific writers of the Carthusian order in the twentieth century, is filled with tensions of this kind between him and his community. The artistically gifted Dom Benoit wanted to exploit his literary talents, but the Carthusian community that he was part of did not like it, not even when he made use of pseudonyms (like Dom Benoît du Moustier, 'Prins' Jesus Minstrel, or P.I.M.) or when his literary work familiarised his readers with Carthusian life.²¹

The third dialectical relationship in the Carthusian world is that between practical and interior life: the outside and inside world of the Carthusian monk himself. Perhaps we can translate this relationship into a conflict between ideal and reality, although it does not necessarily coincide with that between the monk's inside and outside world. We should ask whether the spiritual writings of the Carthusian heritage truly reflect the lived spirituality of real-life Carthusians. They might reflect a more programmatic ideal, an image of how the Carthusian world should be. What, then, do studies of Carthusian spirituality inform us about – the real Carthusian world or virtual Carthusian worlds?

The tensions arising in the aforementioned three dialectical relationships can cause men and women to leave the Carthusian world. Summarising the aforementioned three biographical books and thus simplifying the complexity of the life histories, one could say that the anonymous Carthusian writer of the diary in Willibald Bösen's book dropped out because of tension between the Carthusian world and the outside world, and the monk hiding behind the pseudonym of Father Benedict Kossmann gave up because of tension between

²⁰ T. van Schaik, *Het kroost van broeder Joost: Waarom de kartuizers niet terugkwamen naar Nederland*, s.l. s.a. [2007], 135.

²¹ P. Nissen, 'Monnik en muze: Dom Benoît Lambres en het zielsavontuur van Desmond Bowdry', in: T. Gaens & F. Timmermans (Eds.), *Liber amicorum Jan De Grauwe: Essays over de geschiedenis en het spirituele leven van de kartuizers*, Salzburg 2004, 309-316.

the individual and his community. Both these tensions also featured in the departure from Parkminster of four of the five novices described in Nancy Klein Maguire's book. For instance, tensions between individual monks and their community, like those in Parkminster, also surfaced in Father Benedict Kossmann's irritation with the performance and quality of singing during the celebration of the liturgy. But in Nancy Klein Maguire's book the major tensions have to do with the third dialectical relationship, that between the practical and the interior life. These two aspects, in a manner of speaking the ideal of Carthusian sainthood versus the reality of everyday life, do not always keep in step with one another. And that can be exasperating for a Carthusian as well.

If we study the history of Carthusian communities and their heritage from the perspective of these three dialectical relationships, we may be better able to trace the historical tensions that constitute the true nature of these silent Carthusian worlds, too easily seen by outside observers as a paradise halfway to heaven.

WOLFGANG CHRISTIAN SCHNEIDER

THE SPARKLING STONES IN THE GHENT ALTARPIECE
AND THE FOUNTAIN OF LIFE OF JAN VAN EYCK, REFLECTING
CUSANUS AND JAN VAN RUUSBROEC

For Lothar Graf zu Dohna, on the occasion
of his ninetieth birthday, May 4th, 2014

SUMMARY – The rich use of precious stones in the panels of the Ghent Altarpiece is due to the presence of stones in the Rivers of Paradise (Gn 2:10-14: onyx and bedolah, i.e. sardonyx or carnelian and jet) and in the goshen of the High Priest in Exodus (28.15 to 21), which inspired the description of the heavenly Jerusalem in the Apocalypse (21.9 to 21). Whereas within the Fountain of Life in the Prado, which since new investigations is to be ascribed to Jan van Eyck, on the side of the Synagogue all stones are concentrated in the Goshen, on the side of the Ecclesia the precious stones are spread over the spiritual and secular leaders. This later moment is maintained in the Ghent Altarpiece, in which Jan van Eyck in addition to the biblical sources picks up statements of Jan van Ruusbroec. Citing the Apocalypse the Flemish mystic spoke of a sparkling stone, which is given to the one, who transcends all things, and in it he gains light and truth and life. Exactly that was painted by Jan van Eyck.

Mysticism is widely seen as a matter of the word: the figurative seems to be at best an illustration of what is said about the mystical appearances. In fact, however, in the visualization of spiritual perception and artistic forming, there is a communication and exchange between the pictorial and the linguistic. To illustrate their thoughts mystics draw on the figurative world of objects, while texts enter in the visual design and the forming of thinking and meditating painters. Of special importance in this regard is the interrelationship between the pictorial works of the painter Jan van Eyck and the texts of the Bible and the theological writings of Jan van Ruusbroec and Nicholas of Cusa: All of them deal with precious sparkling stones in a spiritual way.