

**Michel de Certeau:
The Redeployment of Knowledge**

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Michel de Certeau (1925-1986), whose works became classics in the humanities and social sciences due to his relentless effort to decompartmentalize knowledge, produced a unique oeuvre, in which his Christian faith inspired without limiting his historical and anthropological insights into contemporary culture.

Though he was often associated with other thinkers of his generation, such as Michel Foucault, Pierre Bourdieu, and Louis Marin, Michel de Certeau (1925-1986) holds a position in the landscape of contemporary French culture that is remarkable in two respects. Systematically refusing to be identified with the many disciplines that he passed through in the humanities and social sciences (including history, philosophy, theology, semiology, psychoanalysis, and anthropology), this Jesuit intellectual, who managed to gain recognition in both religious and non-religious academic circles (he taught at the Paris Catholic Institute, but also in the Parisian universities of Jussieu and Vincennes, as well as at San Diego in California, where, before being appointed professor in 1978, he ran a seminar on cultural anthropology for seven years; in 1984, he joined the *École des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales* as a professor) was noteworthy for his ability to navigate between various domains and disciplines. This distance is indicative of his relationship with institutional contexts, the operating bases from which he disseminated knowledge. These particularities left their mark on his work, which aspired to be as fragmentary and dispersed as the spaces of knowledge he traversed.

Certeau, who was not content merely to bring religious studies out of its ecclesiastical confines, helped to renew the humanities and social sciences with his article on “popular culture,”¹ written with Dominique Julia and Jacques Revel, which became the starting point for an anthropologically based cultural history, and an essay addressing the themes of the historian as a social actor, historical practice as a scientific operation, and the relationship between history and psychoanalysis.² The anthropology of everyday life, which has since become a major field, is deeply indebted to him.

From the Academy to Autonomy

Born in Chambéry in 1925 and raised in a family of small provincial aristocrats who were strict Catholics, Michel de Certeau completed his primary and

¹ Michel de Certeau, Dominique Julia, and Jacques Revel, “La beauté du mort: le concept de ‘culture populaire,’” *Politique aujourd’hui*, December 1970, p. 3-23; reprinted in Certeau, *La Culture au pluriel*, Paris, Christian Bourgeois, 1974 and Paris, Seuil, 1993, p. 45-72. The article was translated into English as “The Beauty of the Dead: Nisard,” in Certeau, *Heterologies: Discourse on the Other*, trans. Brian Massumi, Minneapolis and London, University of Minnesota Press, 1986.

² Certeau, *Histoire et psychanalyse entre science et fiction*, Paris, Gallimard, 1987.

secondary education as a boarder at two religious schools. Between 1943 and 1950, he obtained two undergraduate degrees at the Faculty of Letters of the University of Grenoble: one in classical letters (Certeau showed a preference for Greek), the other in philosophy. He also attended Jean Baruzi's seminar on the history of religion at the Collège de France. These lectures would influence his research on seventeenth-century mysticism. While simultaneously following this secular curriculum, Certeau, in 1943, began to train for the priesthood at the Grand Seminary of Chambéry and with the Society of Priests of Saint Sulpice at Issy-les-Moulineaux. After a vocational crisis in 1945 and 1946, and a clear decision that he would not pursue a career in the church, he earned a degree in scholastic philosophy. At Issy, Certeau discovered the "new theology" at the University Seminar of Lyon Fourvière, the primary figure of which was the Jesuit Henri de Lubac, who later participated in the Second Vatican Council. In 1950, Certeau joined the Society of Jesus. Even at this time, his trajectory testified to a desire to connect history to experience and tradition to modernity.

Thus at the root of Certeau's work lies a form of Christianity that aspires to be historical as well as anthropological. From the moment he joined the Society of Jesus, Certeau presented himself as the historian and chronicler of a new Christian spirituality. Yet this first doubling of his identity did not result in the creation of two distinct voices, but of an assemblage in which past and present were blended and juxtaposed. His goal was to promote the recovery of historical Christianity through "lived experience." This dual approach would guide Certeau's scholarly research, reading, writing, textual production, and efforts to invent a new reader.

This dual approach took a new direction when Certeau joined the Ignatian journal *Christus*—the first forum in which he would write professionally—and become permanent when, in 1963, he was named the journal's assistant editor at the peak of the Second Vatican Council. At this time, Certeau was interested in the origins of Jesuit spirituality in France, as seen in the examples of Pierre Favre, one of Ignatius of Loyola's first companions, and Jean-Joseph Surin, who was known for his role as exorcist in the possessions that shook Loudun in the seventeenth century. These figures were tied to reformist movements that promoted a sharp break with tradition by modifying the institutional dynamics of devout practice within particular religious communities. Thus his critical edition of Favre's *Mémorial* (1960), the first major scholarly edition that Certeau published,³ which began as his doctoral thesis in Religious Science, allowed him to fine-tune his historical practice. The edition of Jean-Joseph Surin's *Guide Spirituel* and *Correspondence* was, for its part, an unprecedented scholarly experiment, transcending the confines of religious historiography and, in particular, of the history of spiritual, in that Surin was, for Certeau, both an object of historical research and a spiritual subject who in many ways seemed still living.

By this time, the first signs of Certeau's institutional detachment began to appear. Without exactly neglecting the Society, Certeau became increasingly autonomous. Whether at the Catholic Institute or the Pars Freudian School, he forged bonds of sociability while preserving his uniqueness. He also crossed disciplinary boundaries imposed by the nomenclature of the social sciences. This gesture which,

³ Pierre Favre, *Mémorial*, translated with commentaries by Michel de Certeau, SJ, Paris, Desclée de Brouwer, 1960.

over the years, became inseparable from each of his historiographical works, already implied a critique of scholarly knowledge from within each discipline. Certeau ultimately found that by diversifying his efforts, he could make his desire to decompartmentalize knowledge concrete.

While Certeau now belonged to the learned circles of spiritual historians, he continued to help disseminate contemporary spirituality, independently of any scholarly enterprise. While these two endeavors were closely intertwined in his personal trajectory, they required different approaches, in terms of writing styles, reading contexts, and circulation in print. Even if, with Surin's *Correspondance*, he had produced a work of immense erudition (which resembled the *Correspondence de Fénelon* edited by his teacher, Jean Orcibal), Certeau had yet to publish any monumental work, as if he refused to write full books or long, comprehensive monographs. Only in the late 1960s did he consider writing an historical and anthropological work that would reach an audience that was wider than that of specialists of spiritual literature and make it possible to disseminate more broadly the aspirations of an historical spirituality engaged with the world.

A Dual Intellectual

La Prise de parole (translated as *The Capture of Speech*), Certeau's first book, in which he analyzed the recent events of 1968, would be widely discussed thanks to a memorable phrase: "on a pris la parole comme on a pris la Bastille en 1789" ("speech was taken the way, in 1789, the Bastille was taken"⁴). This essay, which might be seen as the turning point of his entire intellectual trajectory, reflects one of the primary goals of his thought. Whether it be "received," "read," "given," "taken," or "practiced," *speech* became the keyword he used to describe relationships with others. It extended to every realm of Certeau's oeuvre, producing a distinctive economy not only of mystical reading, but of reading in general, in which he explored the act of enunciation as such.

The distinctive character of Certeau's early work can be gauged by what remained of it in later years. The "Complete Bibliography" drawn up by Luce Girard shows that his publications covered a vast range. There are, in the first place, texts on historical and contemporary Christianity, written within the context of visible institutions such as the Society of Jesus, or at least in philo-Jesuit settings, appearing in publications that could be deemed "central" (like *Christus*, *Études*, or *La Revue d'ascétique et de mystique*) or "peripheral" (such as *Échanges* and *Concilium*) depending on the closeness of their ties to particular institutions and the frequency with which Certeau published with them. The nature of these texts also varies: they include articles, book reviews, transcriptions of oral presentations that were later revised, interviews, distinctive forms of commentary (*textes de liaison*), and more traditional commentaries on ancient and modern texts. At this time, Certeau was either associated or occasionally published with thirty-three French-language and five foreign periodicals, including journals, magazines, and newspapers. Of this vast ensemble, only five lacked a religious affiliation or a direct editorial relationship with a religious institution: *Le Nouvel Observateur*, *Sur*, *Politique aujourd'hui*, *Annales ESC* and *Lettres de l'École*. Certeau was thus, at his career's outset, *un homme de*

⁴ Michel de Certeau, *La Prise de parole*, Paris, Desclée de Brouwer, 1968, p. 27. Translated into English as *The Capture of Speech and Other Political Writings*, trans. Tom Conley, Minneapolis and London, University of Minnesota Press, 1997.

revue—a journal man.⁵ Not only did he hold every possible position (founding member, editor, member of the editorial committee, and regular or occasional contributor), but he conceived of his involvement as a form of activism and a way of bringing people together and effectuating change.

Between 1954 and 1970, Certeau also published seven books: four critical editions (Favre's *Mémorial*, Surin's *Guide spirituel* and *Correspondance*, and, in a completely different vein, Teilhard de Chardin's *Lettres à Léontine Zanta*); a volume co-edited with François Roustang (*La Solitude*); two books written entirely on his own (*The Capture of Speech* and *L'Étranger*) and a volume of annotated seventeenth-century historical sources (*La Possession de Loudun* [*The Possession at Loudun*]) in which, after ten years of research, Certeau reconstructed the historical figure of Surin. Like most periodical publications, these works related, either explicitly or implicitly (as in the case of *The Capture of Speech*) to contemporary history and circumstances, notably the state of Christian culture. They were also, with the exception of *The Possession of Loudun*⁶ (another late work), released by a publishing house that was deeply invested in religious matters, Desclée de Brouwer. Moreover, most of these publications placed Certeau's name alongside the initials "SJ" (i.e., *Societatis Iesu*, or Society of Jesus).

Yet it would be hazardous to see these works as simply proposing a religious outlook that was limited in practice to sacred affairs. In each of these texts, Certeau elaborated and fine-tuned a system of thought, the continuity and coherence of which stands in radical contrast to the wide range of publications in which his writing appeared and, in particular, to its poetical character. The publishing contexts changed, but the religious themes mostly remained, even if they were transfigured. Whether through spiritual themes that served as reference points or themes that were interpreted from a social scientific standpoint (reconfigured to the point that readers could not discern their religious origins), Christianity as a lived experience and a model of epistemological intelligibility remained present in his thinking as Certeau undertook his examination of the logic of contemporary culture. Thus beginning with a Christian matrix, Certeau learned to craft a practice of reading—and, consequently, writing—that was constantly displaced and fragmented. The need to provide a different kind of discourse for the readership of each publication became one of the first ways in which he materialized the presence of the "other."

The theme of the "other" lies at the heart of the topics he addressed during the 1970s. Henceforth, otherness, resistance, margins, and the recovery of voices eclipsed by historiography (such as mystics, witches, the possessed, the common people, and allegedly minor authors) became the focus of Certeau's thought. His writings attest to a slow but striking reorientation: it is as if Certeau's conception of Christianity—his approach to texts and his understanding of it in epistemological terms—led to an explosion of the religious practices of his time. Where the early Certeau used Ignatian spirituality and Christian concerns to address social and cultural phenomena, this

⁵ See Olivier Mongin, "Une figure singulière de la pensée," in Christian Delacroix, François Dosse, Patrick Garcia, and Michel Trebitch, eds., *Michel de Certeau. Les chemins de l'histoire*, Paris, Complexe, series "Histoire du temps présent," 2002, p. 28.

⁶ *La Possession de Loudun* is an eloquent example: this book was published in Editions Julliard's "Archives" series in 1970. It was published in English as *The Possession of Loudun*, trans. Michael B. Smith, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1996.

relationship was reversed in the 1970s. The use of religious figures and themes gradually became, in his writings, a form of genuine otherness, a consequence of his determined migration to the terrain of the social sciences. In the continuity of its forms and the serene modification of its approach to publication, this method would appear to constitute a genuine shift. Around this time, the Society of Jesus gradually ceased to be Certeau's principal outlet and, in particular, was no longer the focus of his research. But rather than breaking with the Society, Certeau reinvented the ins and outs of this personal connection, making it difficult to tell where it began and ended. The freedom with which he poached from multiple disciples and institutions can even be partially explained by Certeau's institutional attachment to the Jesuit order. Indeed, the Society was always there to protect, accept, or limit the contributions of a member who was nonetheless careful not to rely on his religion affiliation.

Towards Consecration

The year 1970 is crucial to understanding Certeau's emergence as a thinker who was recognized, legitimated, and referred to as the representative of a new way of thinking about history and culture. He did not abandon his old missionary ideals, nor the "spiritual struggle" initiated with *Christus* and partially pursued with *Études*. But he stopped writing critical editions, expanded his study of mystics to Spain, Germany, and England, and produced theoretical texts on psychoanalysis and epistemological issues in history. The work he published in 1970s consists of an extraordinary concentration of topics that are directly related to his early output, even as they foreshadowed the themes to which he would soon turn: the relationship between Freudian psychoanalysis and history, the significance of spiritual experience, the possibilities of a language of "unity," the practice of reviewing historical books, educational issues at universities, attempts to theorize the idea of the "conference" (one of the intellectual venues that he most frequented), an updating of his studies on mysticism aimed at wider readership, two works on historical epistemology, a study of Surin as reader of Saint John of the Cross, a lengthy review essay on Jansenism, a conference paper on "the urban imaginary" (a foretaste of the *The Practice of Everyday Life*⁷) and popular culture.

Beginning in 1970, Certeau published his major historiographical works. *The Possession of Loudun* (1970), *L'Absent de l'histoire* (1973), both editions of *L'Écriture de l'histoire* (*The Writing of History*, 1975 and 1978), and *Une politique de la langue*, co-authored with Dominique Julia and Jacques Revel (1975) brought to a close a rich period of collaborative research, which began in 1970 with his article on "La beauté du mort" ("The Beauty of the Dead: Nisard"). At this time, when history was undergoing an epistemological crisis, Certeau introduced the idea of an "historiographical operation." This system consisted of three logics defining the historical practice (a social space embodied by the historical institution, a historiographical school, an academic field) as a technique based on analytical processes in which scientific knowledge overlapped with fiction, but with neither being superior to the other.

⁷ The two volumes of *L'Invention du quotidien* were published in 1980 in the "10-18" series of the Union Générale d'Éditions. The first volume, written by Michel de Certeau, was entitled *Arts de faire*, and the second, written by Luce Giard and Pierre Mayol, *Habiter, cuisinier*. Both have been translated into English: *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall, University of California Press, 1984 and *The Practice of Everyday Life*, vol. 2, *Living and Cooking*, trans. Timothy J. Tomasik, Minneapolis and London University of Minnesota Press. 1998.

The anthropological dimension of his oeuvre both builds on and departs from his earlier work. In *Le Christianisme éclaté* (an oral interview with Jean-Marie Domenach, published in 1974), Certeau shows the way in which Christianity has become a veritable network of metaphors and images in contemporary society—an ideological tool of sorts, or a social folklore. The same year, in *La Culture au pluriel* (*Culture in the Plural*), he explored the place of culture in society by way of various disciplines (anthropology, politics, philosophy, and education sciences) to show the contradictions of “popular culture” and the aporia of mass culture in universities.

Culture in the Plural paved the way for the *L’Invention du quotidien* (*The Practice of Everyday Life*, 1980), a book that came out of a collective study of everyday life and which constitutes an important moment in anthropology’s history. Certeau proposes to redefine the way that individuals develop tactics and combine rituals so as to build an identity and a distinct representation of the world. In contrast to Michel Foucault’s idea of “vigilance” and Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of “strategies,” Certeau argues for the existence of a “man without qualities” (an expression borrowed from Robert Musil’s novel) who is not a passive subject bowing to the system’s demands, but an active consumer who employs “tactics” to forge silent bonds of solidarity and resistance with his community vis-à-vis institutional controls. Yet the logic of this “anti-discipline” is not that of deliberate rebellion, but a singular type of contingent “invention,” which is often ignored by many consumers themselves. Everyday practices elaborate, in this way, a symbolic theatricality and an almost accidental creativity in overthrowing the mechanisms of surveillance, thus becoming, at the same time, “poetic” surprises and dissimulations lacking any fixed territorial basis. In this respect, when Certeau speaks of “invention,” he seems to evoke the *inventio*, that is, that rhetorical trope which consists in making commonplace arguments that relate to the writer’s attitude towards his topic: this idea is applicable not only to the practices of the ordinary individual, but also the conditions under which *The Practice of Everyday Life* was produced.

In 1982, Certeau published the first volume of *La Fable mystique* (*The Mystic Fable*)⁸—his most important work, the second volume of which would be published by Luce Giard thirty years later. Even while acknowledging the book’s significance, three factors must be emphasized that risk undermining its distinctive character, notably by reducing it solely to the intellectual context of the 1980s, steeped in psychoanalysis, semiology, and the thought of Deleuze and Foucault. Even if Certeau, in his increasingly diverse research on mysticism, began to recognize the need to integrate multiple disciplines, spiritual history had always been the primary matrix of his work. This does not, of course, mean that his trajectory consists in a process of intellectual secularization or laicization, a substitution of categories (religious by literary or philosophical ones), or an aesthetic or linguistic transformation of the mystical experience. In reality, *The Mystic Fable* is a collection of pluralistic and

⁸ The first volume of *La Fable mystique* was published by Gallimard in 1982. In September 2013, Luce Giard, after extensive editorial work, published the second volume, in keep with the instructions Certeau left before his death in January 1986. Both volumes were published by Gallimard’s “Bibliothèque des Histoires.” The two volumes have been translated into English: *The Mystic Fable, Volume One: The Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, trans. Michael B. Smith, University of Chicago Press, 1995; *The Mystic Fable, Volume Two: The Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, trans. Michael B. Smith, University of Chicago Press, 2015.

dispersed readings in which Certeau returns to his initial investigations of such topics as the spirituality of fourth-century Byzantine monks, Hieronymus Bosch's *Garden of Earthly Delights*, the way that Saint John of the Cross prayed, Surin's "experimental science" (i.e., the theory and practice of mysticism), and the history of the Society of Jesus in the seventeenth century, in order to recover, explain and insert his own scholarly history into a present that is necessarily "other." This process had begun as soon as he joined *Christus*. But if the work is an attempt at reconstruction, it also represents the impossibility of re-appropriating such a past intact.

In this spirit, *The Mystic Fable* must be seen as a masterwork in the form of an anti-work, an open text that refuses to become a monument. In this respect, it is Certeau's most engaged book, the one that best condenses his trajectory as a scholar, confers meaning on the rest of his writings, and brushes up against the question of origins, but which must be reinvented and witnessed first-hand as a new lived experience. Evoking the ideas of the ruin, the fragment, or reconstruction—all of which are essential to the historian—*The Mystic Fable* is the material pinnacle of a particularly scattered form of redeployment. Let us recall its astonishing opening: "This book does not lay claim to any special jurisdiction over its domain. It stands exiled from its subject matter." Here as elsewhere, Certeau does not retrace an absent work; he recovers voices without uniting them—even, at times, his own. This redeployment allowed him to extend and reconquer the book even as it pulled away from him—and which renders his oeuvre a classic.

Further reading (and watching):

"L'ecclésiologie paradoxale: Michel de Certeau," a series of filmed talks (CéSor-EHESS), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YOaM_nqpoYo

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