

# Traveller of Culture: Michel de Certeau

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'I am a traveller', Michel de Certeau liked to say. This he was literally, ploughing Europe from one university to another, or America, from north to south, from campus to conference; and even more, figuratively, moving from one place of knowledge to another, using in turns different modes of writing, or mingling several disciplines in order to explore one and the same subject more deeply. Thus, he was disturbing. He was never where one sought to catch him. He appeared all the more a stranger to any classification inasmuch as he had the art, in every thing he approached, to make something strange emerge from the reassuringly familiar, where the very ones who call themselves 'researchers' willingly stop. He moved rapidly, sometimes a little feverishly, from one place to another, always departing and in transit, as if he guessed that his days were already numbered. He never travelled, literally or figuratively, out of mere curiosity, still less by incapacity to settle in one place, but to learn something new and, much more, to share other experiences, the experience of others, out of passion for the human and the other. And what he questioned relentlessly, in human experience at its deepest and most ordinary, was the passion for *believing*. In this passion he perceived the very place of otherness and of the search for the meaning of existence and of history. This questioning was his own quest for God.

Michel de Certeau was born in 1925, of an old Savoyard family. He entered the Society of Jesus in 1950, and followed the usual course of training until ordination as a priest in Lyons in 1956 and solemn profession in Paris in 1963. Together with his philosophical and theological studies he pursued a university career, begun before entering the novitiate and continued after his 'third year', in faculties or in seminaries, in the domain of letters, the human sciences, historiography, semiotics, and psychoanalysis. This long and rich apprenticeship in many disciplines accorded with his desire to explore the phenomenon of religion under all the aspects that link it to the culture of an age or of a society.

From 1963 he put this knowledge into practice in many directions. He was involved in editing several Jesuit reviews: *Christus*, in which he was writing since 1957 and of which he was for a time coeditor; *Études*, of

which he was an assiduous editor for more than ten years; *Revue d'ascétique et de mystique*, which became *Revue d'histoire de la spiritualité*, before disappearing, in which he published many learned articles; *Recherches de science religieuse*, to which he gave advice and articles until his death. He collaborated closely with *Traverses* (the review of the Centre Georges-Pompidou), with *Esprit*, and occasionally with many other reviews. In 1964 he joined the Ecole freudienne of Jacques Lacan and remained as long as it lasted. At the same time he took on teaching, in theology, at the Institut catholique in Paris. Throughout this time, he was editing and commenting on texts of spiritual writers in the Jesuit tradition: the *Memorial* of Blessed Pierre Favre (Desclée de Brouwer 1960), the *Guide spirituel pour la perfection*, then the correspondence of Jean-Joseph Surin (DDB 1963 and 1966), and also of contemporaries: *Lettres à Leontine Zaanta* by Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (DDB 1965).

From 1968 he became known for his analyses of the crisis of civil and religious society in France (*La prise de parole: Pour une nouvelle culture*, Desclée de Brouwer 1968; *L'étranger ou l'union dans la différence*, DDB 1969; *Le christianisme éclaté*, with J.M. Domenach, Seuil 1974). His growing notoriety opened the doors of two universities in Paris to teach cultural or religious anthropology. His publications in historiography and his analyses of the cultural phenomena of the day gave him an international audience (*La possession de Loudun*, Julliard 1970; *L'Absent de l'histoire*, Mame 1973; *La culture au pluriel*, UGE 1974; *L'écriture de l'histoire*, Gallimard 1975). He was invited to speak in many countries to a variety of learned audiences (notably at the centre of semiotic studies at Urbino), journeys which were for him sources of redoubled inspiration.

From 1978 to 1984 he taught on the staff of the University of California. However, he did not stop intervening on the intellectual scene in France or in Europe. Nor did he interrupt the flow of publications (second revised edition of *L'écriture de l'histoire* in 1978, third in 1984; *L'invention du quotidien*, volume 1, *Arts de faire*, UGE 1980; *La Fable mystique, XVIe-XVIIe siècle*, Gallimard 1982; *L'ordinaire de la communication*, a report edited with Luce Giard for the Minister of Culture, Dalloz 1983). His appointment in 1984 to the Ecole des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales in Paris was both an acknowledgement of his scholarship and the promise of a new career, but death came early in 1986, after a short implacable illness. He welcomed it with a smile, as he did all his other visitors; like the mystics he had frequented so much, he knew how to go.

He leaves behind an immense body of work. The bibliography in *Michel de Certeau. Le voyage mystique* (RSR/Cerf 1988) runs to no less

than 422 items, of which most are articles, contributions or communications of all kinds which accumulated one after another week by week, bearing witness to an indefatigable and prolific work of writing and of publication. It is an immense body of work but, what is more, it is a living one, in the sense, first of all, that, ten years after his death, it has not stopped being read, studied, republished, and translated into several countries and languages. This is without counting the texts which, before his death, Michel de Certeau envisaged publishing and which Mme Luce Giard, who established the bibliography, is carefully and devotedly preparing for publication (above all, volume 2 of *L'Invention du quotidien* and the sequel to *La Fable mystique*). It is also a living body of work in this other sense, that it never stopped growing like an organism, and in close connection with what was happening at the time. Attentive reading of the bibliography is instructive on this point. It shows, on the one hand, how Michel de Certeau worked, relentlessly taking up his earlier works, enriching them with new research, before reorganizing them into books. It shows, on the other hand, how, even when he was absorbedly going through archives on authors of past centuries, he was capable of being interested in an event that had just occurred, or in a recent publication — for he was an indefatigable reader, with a limitless curiosity, and a citizen engaged in the history of his time, even beyond the frontiers of his native land.

Despite its breadth and its diversity, the activity of Michel de Certeau can be classified in three principal categories. From his earliest training he was interested in spiritual experience, in theology, in all the forms of believing and of religion. He was a shrewd analyst of contemporary Christianity. With his scholarly work he is an acknowledged expert in the mystical literature of the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries. He has opened ways to a new 'writing of history'. With his knowledge of modern literature, his practice of new disciplines of analysis, and the experience of his life, he is a precious witness to the culture, the language and the intellectual adventure of our century. Such a diversity of interests, if not of specializations, is astonishing, but each of his writings bears within it the reason for such diversity.

Ceaselessly, he links past and present, tradition and the new, for he knows that attention to what is happening today helps to understand what was preparing itself in the past, just as knowledge of the past, if at least we allow ourselves to be surprised by its strangeness, allows us to see better where we are being led by the traces it has left in the present. Similarly, he links religion and culture, for he thinks that the act of believing has no proper site, being 'a practice of the other', and that culture is worked by what it lacks, by the excess of meaning that escapes it. The difficulty of

his writing, the inventiveness of his vocabulary, so often disconcerting, are the trace of this never satisfied pursuit of the strange and of the other under the banality of the everyday and under the deceitful clarity of the dominant forms of knowledge. They bear the mark of his industrious vigils, they are the ransom for his discoveries.

From the beginning of his career, Michel de Certeau's research was directed by powerful intuitions, illustrated by his labours in the different domains where they led his explorations. The appropriation of such intuitions is the benefit drawn from frequenting his work, for they are the right ones to guide the reflection of those who examine the links between history, the mind and the destiny of civilizations. I limit myself to noting some, particularly illuminating for those who are attentive, as he was, to the interchange of theology and culture, and preoccupied, as he was, with the future of Christianity.

First is the idea that history (that of a society, of a doctrine, of a movement ...) functions on the basis of an absence that it works to fill, for that is its role of 'burying the dead': an idea that Certeau could have learnt from Thucydides, but that he owes especially to his meditation on Christian origins. This idea ought to preserve theology from the temptation of mystifying and idolizing the images with which it conceals the divine. It follows that history is written in its margins and on its fracture lines, cleverly levelled and dissimulated by power games: history as it is read is always made up, and history that is written anew must first of all free itself from that which would fix in advance orthodoxies to follow and heterodoxies to sanction and to avoid. Equally, the idea of tradition needs to be reconsidered, for it does not have the smooth homogeneous continuity under the appearance of which it offers itself to be read; in reality, it is constructed by 'foundational ruptures', and is transmitted only on condition of renewing itself in a 'creative fidelity'. But, for the same reason, it does not cease inhabiting the present which deluded itself of having got rid of it and of having made itself completely new and on its own.

Under the ebb and flow of history, unfolding in folding back on itself and conquering its space by tearing itself apart, there is something permanent in ongoing evolution, the manifold passage of alterity, quest of the subject caught by his or her other, relation of the subject to the limit, work of the dead on the living. It is in this passage of the same to the other, in this burying of a beyond on this side of every limit, that belief loses itself, every time, in culture and rises again. This strict interpenetration puts faith on guard against the illusions and the metamorphoses of religion, but also incites it not to fear getting lost in the human. At this frontier of two worlds that make a single universe, the

destiny of faith allows itself to be questioned as the very destiny of humanity.

The whole *oeuvre* of Michel de Certeau is the story of the 'Abrahamic journey' that goes from the experience of God to that of the 'quotidian', this latter being the challenge thrown down to the former, but also its resource, when the experience of absence finds its being satisfied by the desire that maintains it. Thus the *oeuvre* tells the story of the life of its author, the astonishing fidelity to his first intuitions and to his first engagements, across so many wanderings and distant explorations that always relate, one to the other, the question of God and the question of humanity.

## What is Heterology?

Ian Buchanan

Heterology is Michel de Certeau's great unfinished project. Begun while still in the U.S., it was put on hold so he could complete his work on mysticism,—and regrettably—never resumed. This work holds such great promise that the thought of continuing his project, of somehow bringing it to fruition, has long been a fancy of mine.<sup>1</sup> But besides the obvious difficulty of creating what is practically a new epistemology, there is the more immediate difficulty of establishing just what heterology is meant to be. Since Certeau died before he could formulate either a specific thesis, or a particular method, we have no certain way of knowing what he actually meant by the term, or indeed intended it to mean. So until now the fancy has remained idle. However, it now occurs to me that it may be possible to construct a workable impression of what heterology is by determining what it decidedly is not.

While it is true that we do not really know what heterology is meant to stand for, there is one thing, at least, of which we can be certain and that is what Certeau did not want this book "we will never ready"<sup>2</sup> to be. It is quite clear from his existing work that he wanted to steer what at the time of his death was then emerging as cultural studies away from what might be called, to coin a phrase, 'interpretative semiotics'. He