DIOGENES

Diogenes 50(3): 115–129

Comment

The Emancipation of Thought: On the Work of Michel de Certeau

Maria Letizia Cravetto

Today it seems to be an urgent and necessary task to return to the texts by Michel de Certeau (1925–86). Not because Michel Foucault said of him that he was 'the best, the brightest of [his] generation',[1] but for reasons to do with our present thinking.

Indeed, when we consider the social and political disarray of the moment, we are forced to recognize how hard it is, in periods of crisis, to clarify the changes taking place. That implies the emancipation of thought, a process that consists of an inventive interrogation of knowledge and a rigorous elaboration of understanding. This process is one that would not be subject to the dominant ideological models. In addition, thinking of the way clarification and emancipation are intertwined in the most successful intellectual constructions, some of us remember Certeau's work, whose central aim is to clarify the fundamental but stealthy transformations that abruptly emerge into the light of day and undermine the most tenacious assumptions. M. de Certeau wrote, at the beginning of *La Possession de Loudun*:

> Normally, strange things circulate discreetly below our streets. But a crisis will suffice for them to rise up, as if swollen by flood waters, pushing aside manhole covers, invading the cellars, then spreading through the towns. It always comes as a surprise when the nocturnal erupts into broad daylight. What it reveals is an underground existence, an inner resistance that has never been broken. This lurking force infiltrates the lines of tension within the society it threatens. Suddenly it magnifies them; using the means, the circuitry already in place, but reemploying them in the service of an anxiety that comes from afar, unanticipated. It breaks through barriers, flooding the social channels and opening new pathways that, once the flow of its passage has subsided, will leave behind a different landscape and a different order.[2]

SAGE: London, Thousand Oaks, CA and New Delhi, www.sagepublications.com
0392-1921 [200308]50:3;115–129;038514

This dazzling, unclassifiable text, which appeared in 1970, throws light on the meaning of the Ursulines' possession, revealing the link that connects belief, both individual and social, to action that is also individual and social. Indeed, how would it be possible to understand and 'restore the lived reality, the emotion and the immediate, . . . by inscribing an event in the fluctuations of the long timescale'[3] without untangling the link between singular experiences and the mentalities of different milieus?

It is this link that today haunts our thinking, and our consideration of the present.

Moreover, reflecting on Certeau's legacy, it seems possible to approach it in a different way in order to reveal an aspect that is often neglected. Indeed, if we consider the links between Michel de Certeau's texts, the prejudices surrounding them and the different receptions they receive in French-speaking countries and the USA, the dialectic that relates the production of the work to its dissemination by way of various networks – academic, international, etc. – forces us to cross the uncertain frontier separating the researcher from the faceless crowd and to clarify the way in which the two-way relationship (author–public) becomes triangular.

In other words, the dialectic between production and reception makes us understand what opens up beyond the mirror by making the Third Person[4] appear: the spur by way of which one recognizes language and understanding as Other, as something of the Other that is continually coming into being.

*

So to begin with I must show how, in Certeau's work, the twofold requirement to throw light on social changes and 'surprise the invention of society'[5] takes the form of a 'constant work of reconnaissance'.[6]

Destined for a career as a scholar in the history of spirituality and mysticism, Michel de Certeau broke with that early fame by writing an impromptu series of articles for *Etudes*[7] around May 1968 that he subsequently published in *La Prise de parole*:

> The reflections that follow are born of the conviction that the 'revolutionary' speech of May 1968, a symbolic action, puts language on trial and calls for a global revision of our cultural system. The question posed by my experience as a historian, a traveler, and a Christian, I recognise, and I also discover, in the movement that stirred the inner workings of the country. I needed to clarify it. Not in the first instance for others. Rather, because of a need for veracity.[8]

A demand for personal veracity committed him to that stance; but, from the first pages, the work reveals 'his desire to go beyond the narrative of a personal experience in order to extend the field of investigation to the social dimensions of the present',[9] since for Michel de Certeau 'the event cannot be dissociated from the options to which it *gave place*; it is that space constituted by often surprising choices that have modified customary divisions, groups, parties and communities, following an unforeseen division'.[10]

Thus, by drawing on heterogeneous disciplines,[11] *La Prise de parole* and *La Possession de Loudun*, these two analyses of situations that are so different, began an

inventive process at once critical of, and surpassing, more traditional methods of historical analysis. Indeed they succeed in making perceptible certain moments of historical transformation, not by fitting crises into contemporary cognitive schema, which are recognized and widely experienced, but by articulating the present with places, communication[12] indices,[13] anxieties without answers and practices *in fieri*, which are not yet objectivized.

These texts show what Michel de Certeau's method would subsequently be, since they express his need to work on what he would call '*ruptures instauratrices* [initiating breaks]'.[14]

> For an expression to be possible a space for speech must be opened up and for that a cut in the social body must be made. . . . Christian specificity can now identify itself only by cutting into operational rationalities or social formations: madness is reasons cut into and regions traversed.[15]

This transgressive move – and this notion of madness – led Michel de Certeau to live the invention of his daily life[16] and his faith,[17] attending to both mysticism and political commitments in order to unearth – as we shall see – the most diverse forms of oppression and resistance. In other words: it led him to take an interest in the way the word, whether oral or written, circulates through the social body.

However, moving from the most disparate texts to reflection and action, following the same single thread, he came to think that no detail could be of secondary value since nothing is foreign to a work – without preconceptions – of elucidation and intelligence.[18] This attitude, and his 'constant work of reconnaissance',[19] provoked incomprehension and irritation around him, so much so that he was seen as a researcher who was lacking coherence, 'dispersed – torn even – among many scientific fields and directions'.[20]

'How is it possible' – wrote E. Maigret, attempting to summarize some of the prejudices around M. de Certeau – 'to be interested at one and the same time in Ignatius Loyola, the theoretical basis of historiography and the female readership of *Nous Deux*? The extraordinary diversity of Michel de Certeau's theoretical and empirical involvements still continues to be a cause for dismay.'[21] According to E. Maigret this heterogeneity explains the slow and difficult reception of Certeau's work.

*

It is true that reading some of his texts does indeed cause a surprise effect. But this surprise is akin to the surprise we feel when we come out of an exhibition of a collection of pictures that are radical and diverse. On reflection the coherence of the group emerges, and it is that reflection that is intended to alert the visitor to the possibility of a new epistemology.

Similarly, when we finish reading Certeau's *oeuvre*, the need for the *constant work of reconnaissance* seems to be an (internal) need to articulate a different relationship with others and the world.

*

The meaning of that need can be grasped if we situate ourselves in a psychoanalytical perspective. Here we see how far the subject – when he unconsciously senses the risk of losing his identity – experiences the need for an intellectual exodus, obsessed by the need to flee into an elsewhere where he can dig out spaces and temporalities that can receive mourning and hope. These emotions, which force him to sublimate, elucidate the meaning of the present and the past, cannot be expressed without the invention of an unprecedented relationship to language, because the wounds of primary narcissism fundamentally condition its use.

> A semantic passion is revealed here: the conjunction of a passion (which desires and suffers the other) with a meaning (which is offered or refused). The secret introduces an erotic element into the field of knowledge. It impassions the discourse of knowledge.[22]

Listening to Michel de Certeau – at his seminar at 15 rue Monsieur in 1970[23] – it became clear that during the 16th and 17th centuries mysticism had brought about a kind of revolution in the history of rationality and progress in the West. At that period men and women from different classes and cultures had experienced the collapse of the reference system of preceding generations – and even the crumbling of socio-ecclesiastic traditions and socio-economic recession. But they had found in prayer and writing the possibility of subverting their misfortune, which was both generational and individual, and they did so by discovering that 'speaking about loss is another kind of beginning'.[24]

The articulation of loss had led to types of representation in which internal privation and dispossession had turned into the possibility of living a spiritual and public life with a freedom born of an alliance between powerlessness and invention. Starting from this experience of exile, the mystics had managed to communicate the sense of a transition: their (new) way of acting, suffering and loving.

It seemed obvious, listening to Michel de Certeau, that the recognition of that transformation had required more than a knowledge of history. That recognition had demanded an *attention* that implied distancing from the experience of misfortune, of thirst for happiness, and a culture in solidarity with human misery. Thus one was led to understand the extent to which the object of research depended on its author's questions and method; then to wonder whether that subversive reading of mysticism – whose intelligence was close to genius – had not been triggered by mourning.

What leads to a fruitful relationship with alterity is always connected to what subverts the safety and comfort of various assumptions. Among these changes bereavement – of whatever kind – forces the subject to give up a tradition's guarantees and the taxonomies of prior knowledge. This allows us to understand that even the overwhelming encounter with suffering and evil can become an occasion to advance in human existence, for in the final analysis the unforeseen is only another encounter with life.

Within Certeau's work the unforeseen is characterized by the breaking of the connection 'between discourse (writing) and the "real" (presence)'. So the author has to resign himself to not having 'totality and reality'.[25]

Thus Certeau's writing continually articulates the acceptance of loss, and allows us to see developing a process of mourning which, because of its lack of its own

place, ends up seeming to the reader like the unfolding of a psychic operation, hidden in the author's archaic bodily spaces.[26] This occurs to the extent that even the obligation to travel through the most heterogeneous fields of research eventually appears to be the echo of an ancient need to try continually to find a word that can communicate the desire to be with the Other.

By grasping the *unforeseen–rupture–mourning* connection it becomes possible to get the measure of the *formal obsession* that runs through the representation of life in Michel de Certeau's work.

Formal obsession – that phrase was used by M. Le Bott, in his 1975 lectures on Balthus, to stress the fact that space is divided up in recurring ways in the work of the artists who stand out and innovate in painting. But this is also found with some great writers and intellectuals, since *formal obsession* expresses the particular way the subject apprehends the outside-the-self. Indeed, whenever the working of the mind suddenly and completely uncontrollably produces an image – a representation of the subject or the world – it is structured in accordance with modalities that precede the formulation of thought and the articulation of style.

Formal obsession is the reflection of the archaic bodily space, the trace of an initial–initiating wound, at the same time as the erasure of that same wound. So *formal obsession* allows one to approach the 'generating flash'[27] of the activity of creation.

In Certeau's texts the *unforeseen–rupture–mourning* connection leads the author to the need to clarify what has been experienced – 'the altering alteration', said Michel de Certeau, who was forced to go back continually over his statements to allow his reader to perceive their 'clarity'.

> That brightness . . . may be the very radiance of a desire that has come from 'elsewhere'. But it gives itself up neither to work nor to age. It is testamentary: a kiss of death.[28]

We glimpse the brilliance of that desire and that kiss where Certeau asks 'ancient and widely dispersed witnesses'[29] what ruse and what seduction they employed in order to live – in the anonymity of the crowd without ever referring to the *kenosis* of Christ – the challenge of the Incarnation. So, to discover what helped them cast off from the real and exist as idiots and objects, M. de Certeau states that

> In this account as elsewhere . . . the idiot is a body made for blows . . . . His weakness is the strength of an absence, because already he 'makes waste'. He no more obeys than resists the law of conflict. Fallen into the public domain like a piece of common property, he is delivered from that ownership upon which violence is founded. He neither speaks nor strikes out. He laughs.[30]

But when we force the idiot to turn his laughter into speech, when we unmask the simulation of his madness, we condemn him to death.

In 1980, in 'Folies déliées: séductions de l'Autre', Certeau stated: 'the idiot can do nothing more but die'; in 1982, in *La Fable mystique*, he wrote of Mark, who was labelled an idiot by the crowd:

> Having been declared a saint and called 'father' [*abbas*] . . . in the presence of the pope, who thereupon puts him up in his palace, Mark will escape. The day after having been identi-

> fied, he is found dead in his room in the morning. . . . He could not stand the positivity and legitimacy of a patriarchal location. *There* he is but a corpse. . . . Honor to the dead: they make the palace, the monastery, and any other organization of meaning safe from that *otherness* they had introduced into them while still alive. Unless we have to contemplate something still worse: that their disappearance, covered up by edifying discourse, definitively separates the institution from what it lacks.[31]

This last clarification does not surprise the reader since, in order to get to it, Certeau gradually revealed the place that is the starting-point from which he articulates his thinking and writing. This place is an in-between where he 'disguises'[32] the strategy of appearances (seeming wise or seeming mad), letting us perceive that this act is the consequence of 'the alteration [of a] necessary delirium'.[33]

> The essential is not . . . the transgression of an order (which is always there where positions are to be distinguished), but rather the *loss* of distinction in a non-place where there is a play of identities shifting to and fro, like semblances. The crowd, that chasm in which differences disappear, is the eclipsing of sex (male or female) and of *logos* (wise or foolish).[34]

This *alteration* reveals the gradual emergence of the impulse to death within the writing, and forces the reader to understand that this impulse manifests itself as an 'urge to wipe out everything that is already known, already achieved, in order to give the living upsurge of the new its chance'.[35]

The *living upsurge of the new*, the path along which Michel de Certeau continued to advance in the last years of his life, making his way between a fervent and growing love of mystics, outcasts, the oppressed, and mourning for the parental laws, uncritical obedience, handing oneself over to the institution; in short, mourning for the 'privilege of being a son'.[36]

> . . . the devil of yesterday is replaced by so many other successive nurturing laws, 'diabolical' assurances drawn from a knowledge, a clientele, a confinement, and from every other way of being exempted from producing history, thanks to the 'privilege of being a son'.

And so a feeling and a logic 'of not belonging'[37] make Certeau's work resound with the effort to transform dispossession into assumption. This demands that the experience of suffering should not be avoided, but turned upside down, transformed, in a critical transcendence, an inventive distancing,[38] because language itself must be challenged and interrogated.

Can it yet turn 'into a network of present expressions and alliances'?[39]

Paradoxically this question shows that 'dispossession'[40] and 'not belonging' derive from a genealogical debt contracted with the disappointments and *misfortune* of previous generations. So much so that Michel de Certeau's work eventually seems like the shaping of a passion for veracity 'that is self-justifying and does not depend on any outside support'.[41]

In this connection we should re-read the beginning of *La Fable mystique*.

> This book does not lay claim to any special jurisdiction over its domain. It stands exiled from its subject matter. It is devoted to mystic discourse of (or about) presence (of God),

> but its own discourse does not share that status. It emerges from a mourning, an unaccepted mourning that has become the malady of bereavement, perhaps akin to the ailment *melancholia*, which was already a hidden force in sixteenth century thought. One who is missing moves it to be written.[42]

This *mourning that has become unaccepted* brings into being new representations in which known appearances are defeated by a desire that gives sight of a familiarity with excess, pain and death.

> He or she is a mystic who cannot stop walking and, with the certainty of what is lacking, knows of every place and object that it is *not that* one cannot stay *there* nor be content with *that*. Desire creates an excess. Places are exceeded, passed, lost behind it. It makes one go further, elsewhere. . . . It is, as Nelly Sachs says in a poem, *forthehen ohne Rückschau*, 'leaving without looking back'. . . . Unmoored from the origin of which Hadewijch spoke, the traveler no longer has foundation or goal.[43]

This organizing failure, this strange shaping, obeys its sole need, determining which rules to follow and organizing the spaces it has to explore. So much so that Certeau's strategy – both intellectual and poetic[44] – seems particularly 'lacking in coherence' as it comes into conflict with the (normative) bodies for academic programmes.

*

None better than H. Martin described the surprise, attraction and irritation that M. de Certeau managed to provoke during his lifetime with his 'words that came from somewhere else' and were immediately 'domesticated, tamed, reduced to the condition of fragments capable of multiple reinvestment'. And not only because 'the University, like every institutionalized Church, is afraid of passing figures who are constantly searching',[45] but because familiarity with pain and death is unacceptable.

It is first of all unacceptable to the subject himself.

Indeed reading Certeau's writings shows how the practice of history continually reminds its author of a 'lost origin' and a 'solidarity destroyed'[46] that writing attempts to conceal. But an unspoken pain – at the limit between the inner and outer ego – leads Certeau to passion, which operates as a secret spring and reveals itself as the sign of a 'relation of non-relation'.[47]

Furthermore, familiarity with pain and death is also unacceptable to readers because of the lack of distinction[48] that inhabits the writing of Certeau's texts and creates its rhythm, blurring the differences between poetry and prose, essay and novel. Reading it, we receive, as it were, the slow, confused perception of a distant sound that seems to haunt it: the perception of an excess that, having pre-existed subjective individuality, continues to unsettle the frontiers – of meaning and naming – letting ambiguities, tears appear where the word gets bogged down and then re-emerges, alive and transformed.

Normally, in order to be accepted, this lack of distinction and familiarity with pain and death require a jump of a generation, that is to say, a hiatus that gives the time needed for the unassumable to tip over in criticism and intellectual acceptance. Paradoxically the time needed is only the cruelty of life: the scandal that, as T. S.

Eliot[49] demonstrates, imposes on nature – whether vegetable, animal or human – through the mediation of a physical rebirth, the obligation to continue in existence and genealogical heritage.

In other words, in order for writing haunted by the impulse to death – of whatever kind – to be able to circulate and be understood, it needs 'to be addressed by a mediator (or mediators); targeted, reflected, "re-earthed" by interpreters'.[50]

*

Then why have Michel de Certeau's writings not found this sort of interpreter in French-speaking countries?[51]

After his death in 1986 there were some brilliant celebrations of his work, of variable quality, whose theme did not always avoid 'the edifying'.[52] But the rhetoric of the tribute[53] in fact precludes methodological exchange, debates and epistemological adjustments. Similarly later studies[54] in French-speaking countries on the characteristics of Certeau's work did not provide an overall view of it nor did they suggest that Michel de Certeau's particular manner of interrogating the present and thinking history had marked a fundamental change in western thinking.

So why is Michel de Certeau's work affected by a kind of forgetting or wrapped in commentaries that make us realize how far the 'preservation of the name' takes place at the cost of the extinction of the author's presence and the meaning of his writings?

The 'upholding of the proper name', wrote Michel de Certeau, 'allows only the ellipsis of a death and brings with it the lure of identity.'[55]

Repressing the experience of lack, the phenomena of ellipsis and delusion carry a fictive representation, a non-understanding of the author's thought, which render his radical words[56] pointless and transform his life's project into that of a 'dear departed one'.[57]

All of Certeau's work – on history, day-to-day experience, mysticism, torture, institutions, politics, etc. – continually demonstrated that articulation and the 'speaking body' – the desiring body of the subject – end up in a position of reciprocity. All Certeau's studies have revealed that disavowal (of the intimacy between us and ourselves) and the distance between articulation and the articulated – and even the pretence of being objective and scientific – distort the question addressed to the object of the research. Only the assumption by the researcher of his lived experience and his history allows him to free himself from the constraints typical of knowledge techniques and technical knowledge.

And so we come to ask ourselves whether the authors who have forgotten, accused, denigrated[58] Michel de Certeau did not do so because they were unable to give up, first, the normativity that causes one to write as if there were an *indefinite* subject of the enunciation, then the desire for *non-modification*,[59] which institutions need to support their aims. Or might it be worse?

Might the debt to Certeau's thought have been denied to allow a whole generation to ignore its inability to accept, within the articulation of knowledge, the unique emotion, the need of the 'speaking body' that wants to be satisfied?

Has this inability transformed the author–reader relationship into a screen-like

one? Might M. de Certeau's works have become the screen capable of reflecting back a generation's fears and inabilities?

And furthermore, after Michel de Certeau's death, dissemination of his work in French-speaking countries was not assisted by institutional channels.[60] With the new paperback editions of the texts dealing with the interface between history, culture and politics, dissemination used circuits on the margins of academe.

Becoming aware of this phenomenon of generation gap – the spread of Certeau's thought among students – we have to consider that among young people from disadvantaged backgrounds we find the desire to break with the rules of the academic system in order to give new meaning to the link between experience and theory.

And so, if we recall the old adage – *'le semblable n'est connu que par le semblable'* ('it takes one to know one')[61] – we can anticipate the future and predict that young researchers will eventually reverse the situation I have set out and bring about a widespread recognition of Michel de Certeau's work. And this will be because they will have found in Certeau's texts something that takes them to the conflict nodes from which the demands of their work sprang.

*

For all these reasons, in 1998–9, when we were putting together the 25th issue of *Rue Descartes – Beginning from Michel de Certeau: On the New Frontiers*[62] – it seemed to me crucial to overstate the opposition between the reception Certeau's work had found in the USA and the indifference it faced in France. Instead of developing J. Ahearne's work, which explained the reasons for the variable reception of Certeau's texts,[63] I preferred to stress experience in order to show why and how a two-way relationship tips over into a triangular one.

I began by confessing that there had been something unbearable in realizing how in France forgetfulness of the debt ran alongside demands for new paperback editions; that there was something unbearable in the thought that even the cruelty of life could be rendered pointless by the game that allies market forces with the evocation of the 'dear departed one'.

Then I told this story:

In late June 1997 a young American woman passed through Paris on her way to Cameroon to study the Pygmy people in the field with a view to taking a doctorate in anthropology at Berkeley. When we met she was casually holding *The Practice of Everyday Life* by Michel de Certeau.[64] From her attitude and the carefree curious look in her eyes, I understood that for her the doctorate was simply a pretext.

She had to find 'instruments' in order to discover herself. Born into a multi-racial background and raised in its complexities, she was embarked on a life-changing and necessary quest and not an academic programme.

She reminded me of the young people at Berkeley[65] who hang around on the cross-disciplinary interfaces in search of suggestions that might show them a route – an inner one – towards a re-appropriation of their identity; a route that might transform into an issue of meaning and life the precarious painful juxtapositions of attitude, customs and languages all around them.

Instead of a map of Paris the young woman was in fact holding *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Nothing could be of less concern to her than the mechanisms for denying the value of Certeau's work.

How could I not remember what Michel de Certeau used to say? 'Thus, what goes on in the kitchen is quite different from what happens in the parlor.'[66] In the kitchen, recognition of the work does not require any generational leap.

Since the act of naming – giving a name to the de-appropriation of identity and the desegregation of language, giving a name to the alterity that upsets and strikes at assumptions – this act, which nothing authorizes, circulates in the kitchen in the same way as a poem. Whereas in the living-room 'the institution tends to control, rework, and alter the poem, allowing only interpreted or corrupt versions to circulate'.[67]

In the kitchen, the two-way relationship tipped over into a triangular one because young Americans of mixed race wished to proclaim their gratitude and their debt to a body of work that suggested reasons why so many sufferings, revolts and crimes remained excluded from history, outside of symbolization and discourse. Indeed M. de Certeau wrote:

> Accounts by torture victims indicate the stage of breakdown at which their resistance intervenes. They 'held up', they say, by maintaining (perhaps we should even say 'enduring') the memory of comrades who, for their own part, were not 'rotten'; by keeping in mind the struggle in which they were engaged, a struggle which survived their own 'degradation' intact, and did not unburden them of it any more than it depended on it; by discerning still, through the din of their tortures, the silence of human anger and the genealogy of suffering that lay behind their birth, and from which they could no longer defend themselves nor expect anything; or by praying, in other words by assuming an otherness, God, from which neither aid nor justification was forthcoming, and to which they were of no use and could not offer their services—exactly what an old rabbi means when he says that praying is 'talking to the wall'. This resistance eludes the torturers because it is something ungraspable. It originates precisely in what eludes the victim himself, in what exists without him and allows him to elude the institution that takes him as its adopted son only through reducing him to *that* [*ça*], putrescence. Resistance such as this rests on *nothing* that could belong to him. It is a *no* preserved in him by what he does not have. Born of a recognized defection, it is the memory of a *real* that is no longer guaranteed by a Father.[68]

In this text, in which the de-appropriation of the self and the refusal to be enslaved become the condition for resistance, the logic of the *work of value*[69] – which promotes the debate between specialists and allows them to advance in academic programmes – is not at all effective. Since the way of writing, which turns familiarity with misfortune and death into empathy, has the power to introduce every subject who hungers after truth – and especially every person of mixed-race who hungers after signposts and solidarity – into a space of surprise and reflection. Confronted with their most intimate needs, readers forget their mistrust of political, theoretical, intellectual, etc., elaborations. At that moment the proper name – Michel de Certeau – becomes a sign of truth: he lets his readers grasp – with the deepest part of themselves – that in writing about 'the tortured', this man – Michel de Certeau – experienced a loss of frontier between history, ideals and disappointments. And that, at

this point, renunciations and defections are connected, in an irreducible demand for justice, to the desire to give and the desire to lose oneself.[70]

*

However, it is impossible to neglect the other reasons why Michel de Certeau found a readership in the USA who were grateful for what they owed to his work. We should remember the welcome he received when he arrived in San Diego, the style of his words and work; how people perceived the density and (poetic) breath within him and animating his writing, which made translation of his books into English so difficult.

Indeed Michel de Certeau's translators found themselves in a very different encounter from that created by the interaction of thought. Because, like history, translation is constructed by excluding.

In solidarity with the text, a translation is built upon constant renunciation because it carries concepts, metaphors and not the phonetic collocations and stylistic constructions that reveal the signifiers structuring the writer's ego. By betraying the profound connections between sound and sense, translation embodies the absence of subject, its effacement, its lack.

The result is that translators – who are paradoxically made to realize how all that is left of the author is 'a name without a place'[71] – are forced to ask themselves what (authentic) relationship could be established between someone who is absent and the communities for whom the work is intended. In formulating that question some of them were forced into reflecting on the strange relationship of similarity that paradoxically seems to insert the dissemination of M. de Certeau's texts into the trace of the spread of Christ's words.

> There is no longer anything except the trace of a passing, made possible by him, the connection between an arrival (birth) and a departure (death), then between a return and a disappearance, indefinitely. Nothing but a name without a place. The writings initially answering develop by themselves like a series 'listen–follow–become other' already modulated in a hundred different ways, but they do not place a stable term before them. The Name that starts this series off denotes both (and solely) what it allows *other after* it and what sends it towards *its other*.[72]

This connection – 'related to an Unnameable calling[73] – is to be seen in Michel de Certeau's work as the consequence of a desire that, 'released from every objective tie, turns back on the subject and seizes him with its power. In this movement there are combined free desire, suicidal self-affirmation and self-sacrifice'.[74]

Consequently, Certeau's search appears to be fundamentally associated with a *modus vivendi* that is revealed in the assumption of alterity: disappointments, desertion of the body, acceptance of death. It is this *modus vivendi* that determines the *modus loquendi.* Certeau wrote:

> There is nothing so 'other' as my death, the index of all alterity. But there is also nothing that makes clearer the place from which I can say my desire for the other; nothing that

https://doi.org/10.1177/03921921030503009 Published online by Cambridge University Press

> makes clearer my gratitude for being received—without having any guarantee or goods to offer—into the powerless language of my expectation of the other; nothing therefore defines more exactly than my death what *speaking* is.[75]

This connection between consent and speech inscribes itself in writing as the violence of a 'rage for loving'.[76] So Certeau's radicalism has the strength to re-position certain subjects within their personal trajectory.

Thus today – at the moment when the emancipation of thought is the most urgent requirement, as has been emphasized – we need to ask ourselves how it is possible to acquire and transmit M. de Certeau's legacy, which, like the legacy of a work of art, is conquered by an intimate understanding of what the sublimation of a primal wound means.

If we compare this thought with the conclusions of 'La brèche entre le passé et le futur'[77] – in which H. Arendt shows that every legacy is passed on through strictly personal interrogation – we understand that we have to assume first the genealogical misfortune, and even the bond that unites the past with the renewal of generations; then we see that the issue of filiation is neither in the flesh nor in society but in the power of speech and writing. Thus no researcher, touched by Certeau's thinking, will be able to participate in the edification of the social body without having previously interrogated the motives for his involvement, and without having questioned what the transmission of culture means today, when we are all prisoners of phenomena of language cross-fertilization.

Maria Letizia Cravetto
EHESS, Paris
Translated from the French by Jean Burrell

Notes

1. As recounted by Francine de Martinoir.
2. M. de Certeau, *The Possession at Loudun*, translated by Michael B. Smith, Chicago, University of Chicago Press 2000, p. 1.
3. N. Wachtel, *La Foi du souvenir*, Paris, Seuil 2001, p. 33. See J. Revel, 'Présentation', in A. L., *Jeux d'échelles. La micro-analyse à l'expérience*, ed. J. Revel, Paris, Gallimard-Seuil, 1996, p. 10.
4. Lacan's 'Tiers' has been translated as 'Third Person'.
5. J. Revel, 'Michel de Certeau historien: L'institution et son contraire', in L. Giard, H. Martin and J. Revel, *Histoire, mystique et politique de Michel de Certeau*, Grenoble, Jérôme Million 1991, pp. 126–7.
6. *Ibid*., p. 126.
7. From 1967 to 1972 M. de Certeau was the editor of *Etudes*, the Jesuit journal.
8. M. de Certeau, *The Capture of Speech and Other Political Writings*, translated by Tom Conley, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 1997, p. 10.
9. L. Giard, 'How Tomorrow Is Being Born', introduction to *The Capture of Speech, op.cit*., p. viii.
10. M. de Certeau, *La Prise de parole, op. cit*., p. 29; *The Capture of Speech, op. cit*., p. 3.
11. In *La Possession de Loudun* Certeau mixed theology, anthropology, social history, history of medicine and witchcraft, and psychoanalysis, with which he was acquainted not only in theory, since he was a member of the Ecole Freudienne throughout its existence (1964–80).
12. See J. Revel, 'Ressources narratives et connaissance historique', in *Enquête*, Paris, Parenthèses, EHESS 1995, p. 44.

13. See R. Terdiman, 'La marginalité de Michel de Certeau', in *Rue Descartes*, 25, 1999, pp. 141–58; now in 'The Marginality of Michel de Certeau', *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 100(2), Spring 2001, pp. 399–421.
14. Michel de Certeau, *La Faiblesse de croire*, Paris, Seuil 1987, pp. 183–226. Not yet translated into English
15. *Ibid*., p. 279.
16. Among the most remarkable of M. de Certeau's texts we should recall *L'Invention du quotidien*: I. *Art de faire*; II. *Cuisiner et habiter* (Paris), first published under the 10/18 imprint in 1980. M. de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, translated by St Rendall, Berkeley/Los Angeles/London, University of California Press, 1984. In the 1990 reissue the publisher explained its originality: 'He replaced consumers' supposed passivity with the (argued) conviction that ordinary people have a creativity. A creativity hidden in the intermingling of silent, subtle and effective ruses by which we all invent for ourselves our "own way" of making a route through the forest of products imposed on us' (see note 64 of the 1990 version).
17. M. de Certeau, who never denied his membership of the Jesuits, was extremely reticent on his position as a believer, which is shown in his texts to be the right to go on being born from the spirit by performing the mourning over privileges (see below) that that implies. So that this faith, silent and secret, may be understood as the *inability* from which he tried to articulate his research.
18. L. Giard, 'Cherchant Dieu', in M. de Certeau, *La Faiblesse*, *op. cit*., p. IX.
19. In M. de Certeau's work the 'hermeneutics of the present' can be understood as 'a politics far removed from the normal definitions given, and from the institutional space that is ordinarily assigned to it . . .' – indeed as 'the invention of a relationship with others and the world' where 'the project of . . . surprising the invention of society begins and takes shape'; J. Revel, *Michel de Certeau historien*, *op. cit*., pp. 126–7.
20. E. Maigret, 'Michel de Certeau. Lectures et receptions d'une oeuvre', *Annales*, n. 3. LV (2000), p. 511.
21. *Ibid*., p. 512.
22. M. de Certeau, *The Mystic Fable,* translated by Michael B. Smith, Chicago, University of Chicago Press 1992, p. 98.
23. M. de Certeau taught at Paris VIII till 1971, Paris VII till 1978, the University of California (San Diego) from 1978 to 1984, then at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales until his death.
24. This I think was the phrase used by M. de Certeau, who kept coming back to the significance of the phenomenon.
25. M. de Certeau, 'L'histoire, science et fiction', in *Le Genre humain*, nos. 7–8 (1983), p. 160. It is also important to consider the analysis, suggested by S. G. Nichols, of rupture at work in M. de Certeau's historiography, 'History: Science and Fiction', in *Heterologies, Discourse on the Other*, translated by Brian Masumi, Minneapolis, University of Minneapolis Press 1986, pp. 199–221.
26. See P. Aulagnier, *La Violence de l'interprétation. Du pictogramme à l'énoncé*, Paris, PUF 1975, pp. 129–213.
27. S. Le Poulichet, *L'Art du danger*, Paris, Anthropos 1996, p. 17, characterizes the generating flash by referring to the definition of the signifier given by J. Lacan; this definition states that the flash is constituted by the trace of a primal wound, by the erasure of the trace and the trace of the erasure.
28. M. de Certeau, *The Mystic Fable*, *op. cit*., p. 3.
29. 'Of these ancient and widely dispersed witnesses from whom would come the groups of "madmen of Christ" [*yourodivyj*] who circulated on the public squares of Moscow in the 14th to 16th centuries, I ask: What change in direction did they bring about?', M. de Certeau, *The Mystic Fable*, *op. cit*., p. 32.
30. *Ibid*., p. 42
31. *Ibid*., p. 44.
32. M. de Certeau: 'All disguised, men or women, wise men or fools, masks and mockeries of identity, *disappear* into a public, common intermediary zone', *The Mystic Fable*, *op. cit*., p. 44.
33. M. de Certeau, 'L'institution de la pourriture: luder' in *Psychanalyse* (Brussels), no. 2, Dec. 1984, p. 102; republished in *Histoire et psychanalyse; entre science et fiction*, Paris, Gallimard 1987, p. 167. For convenience I refer to this edition ('The Institution of Rot', in *Heterologies, Discourse on the Other*, *op. cit*., p. 46).

34. M. de Certeau, *The Mystic Fable*, *op. cit*., p. 44. See note 32 (above).
35. A. Didier-Weill, *Invocations. Dionysos, Moïse, Saint Paul et Freud*, Paris, Calmann-Lévy 1998, p. 63.
36. M. de Certeau, *The Writing of History*, translated by Tom Conley, New York, Columbia University Press 1988, p. 305.
37. J. Revel, *Michel de Certeau historien*, *op. cit*., p. 126. It is surprising to note how far the reading of Certeau's strategy by J. Revel – beyond any psychoanalytical consideration – appears accurate and pertinent even within that perspective.
38. I use this word with a meaning that differs from the process at work in B. Brecht's writing, which might be summarized by referring to what the author wrote on 3 August 1938 about the 'conventional form' of the song. 'I started from that in order subsequently to destroy it', B. Brecht, *Journal de travail, 1938–1955*, Paris, L'Arche 1973, p. 17.
39. M. de Certeau, 'L'énonciation mystique' in *Recherches de sciences religieuses*, 64(2) April–June (1976), p. 199. ('Mystic Speech' in *Heterologies*, *op. cit*., pp. 80–100.)
40. M. de Certeau, *The Writing of History*, *op. cit*., p. 318.
41. M. de Certeau, 'Mystic Speech', *op. cit*.
42. M. de Certeau, *The Mystic Fable*, *op. cit*., p. 1.
43. *Ibid*., p. 299 (original emphasis).
44. See M. Heidegger, *Approche de Hölderlin*, Paris, Gallimard 1973.
45. H. Martin, 'Michel de Certeau et l'institution historique', in L. Giard, H. Martin and J. Revel, *Histoire mystique*, *op. cit*., pp. 57 and 96.
46. M. de Certeau. 'La folie de la vision', *Esprit*, no. 66, June (1982), pp. 92–3.
47. While being indebted to A. Green's work, *Le Travail du Négatif*, Paris, Editions de Minuit 1993, p. 87, I have nevertheless altered the sense of some phrases.
48. See M. L. Cravetto, *Fidélité à l'Après. A propos du suicide de Primo Levi et de l'intériorité du Mal*, Paris, Kimé 2001, p. 71, where I tried to characterize the gulf of suffering that opens up in writing when the impulse to death manages to prevail.
49. 'April is the cruellest month, breeding/Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing/Memory and desire, stirring/Dull roots with spring rain.', T. S. Eliot, *The Waste Land*.
50. See M. Deguy, 'Paul Celan 1900', in *Les Temps modernes* (1990), no. 529/530, p. 3.
51. I would like to thank J.-G. Bidima for drawing to my attention the fact that African philosophers have taken up M. de Certeau's work. See J.-G. Bidima, *Théorie critique et modernité africaine*, Paris, Publications de la Sorbonne 1994; F. Eboussi-Boulaga, *La Crise de Muntu, Authenticité africaine et philosophie*, Paris, Présence Africaine 1977; V. Mudimbe, *L'Odeur du Père, Essai sur les limites de la science et de la vie en Afrique noire*, Paris, Présence Africaine 1992.
52. For a full list of these tributes see A. L., 'Feux persistants. Entretien sur Michel de Certeau', *Esprit*, no. 3 March (1996), p. 133.
53. See M. L. Cravetto, 'Les functions du Je dans le langage hagiographique', *Littérature*, no. 29 (1978), pp. 63–74; M. L. Cravetto, *Fidélité à l'Après*, *op. cit*., *passim*, where I explained at length my thinking on the social function of hagiography.
54. E. Maigret, *Michel de Certeau*, *op. cit*., pp. 511–49, which gives an account of the many commentaries and emphasizes how belated was the first research to mention Certeau.
55. See M. de Certeau, *The Writing of History*, *op. cit*., p. 318.
56. See M. de Certeau, 'Lacan: An Ethics of Speech', translated by Marie-Rose Logan in *Heterologies*, *op. cit*., note 22, p. 241.
57. 'These "dear departed" had been tamed in our window displays and our thoughts, placed under glass, isolated, prettied up, and offered like this for edification or intended as exemplars'; M. de Certeau, *L'Absent de l'histoire*, Paris, Mame 1973, p. 15.
58. See especially E. Le Roy Ladurie, 'Le diable archiviste', *Le Monde*, 12 November 1971; E. Maigret, *Michel de Certeau*, *op. cit*., p. 515.
59. See P. Aulagnier, *La Violence de l'interprétation*, *op. cit*., p. 152.
60. See A. L., *Feux persistants*, *op. cit*., p. 137. See also H. Martin, *Michel de Certeau et l'institution historique*, *op. cit*., pp. 91–2, who, recounting Certeau's influence in various areas, writes: 'Michel Morineau's

J'accuse, published in all honesty by *Annales ESC*, remains in everyone's memory: I denounce the monstrous blindness of a coopted intelligentsia.'

61. S. Breton, 'Le pélerin, le voyageur et marcheur', in *Le Voyage mystique, Michel de Certeau*, Paris, Recherches de Science Religieuse, 1988, p. 22.
62. M. L. Cravetto, 'Permanences: la frontière. En guise d'introduction', in *A partir de Michel de Certeau: des nouvelles frontières*, in *Rue Descartes*, Collège International de Philosophie, no. 25 September (1999), pp. 9–19.
63. J. Ahearne, *Michel de Certeau: Interpretation and Its Other*, Cambridge, Polity Press 1995, and *Feux persistants*, *op. cit*., pp. 137–9.
64. M. de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, *op. cit*.
65. I was able to analyse that group during my stay in Berkeley in January 1998; then through a number of exchanges with researchers, among them Stefania Pandolfo in particular, who holds a chair in anthropology at Berkeley.
66. M. de Certeau, *Heterologies: Discourse of the Other*, *op. cit*., p. 46.
67. *Ibid*., p. 46.
68. *Ibid*., p. 43.
69. See M. de Certeau, *L'Absent*, *op. cit*., *passim*.
70. In 'Folies déliées', *op. cit*., p. 37, M. de Certeau used a quotation from M. Duras – ' She asks for directions in order to get lost./ No one knows' – that he later removed in the first chapter of *The Mystic Fable*, *op. cit*.
71. M. de Certeau and J.-M. Domenach, *Le Christianisme éclaté*, Paris, Seuil 1974, p. 88.
72. *Ibid*. M. de Certeau refers in a note to the Greek text from John 1, I *'le Verbe est* à *lui et* vers *lui'* (the Word is his and towards him).
73. *Ibid*.
74. P. Guyomard, *La Jouissance du tragique*, Paris, Flammarion 1998, p. 52.
75. M. de Certeau, *L'Invention du quotidien*, *op. cit*., p. 281 [*The Practice of Everyday Life*, *op. cit*., pp. 193–4].
76. M. de Certeau and J.-M. Domenach, *Le Christianisme*, *op. cit*., p. 92.
77. H. Arendt, 'La brèche entre le passé et le futur', in *La Crise de la culture*, Paris, Gallimard 1972.