

Part I

Other Times: Historiography

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Introduction: Michel de Certeau on Historiography

Luce Giard

When he was asked to declare a professional identity, his interlocutors being embarrassed by the variety of his works and the range of his expertise, Michel de Certeau used to answer that he was a historian, with religious history in early modern Europe as his main field. When his long-awaited book on mystics (*La Fable mystique*) was very favorably received, some friends suggested that he come back from the University of California at San Diego, where he was a full-time professor, and apply for a position at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales. He successfully did it with a teaching programme on “the historical anthropology of beliefs (sixteenth to eighteenth centuries)” and was elected to a chair under this title. His self-understanding of his disciplinary locus and focus was neatly situated inside history, even if he inspired and directed innovative cross-disciplinary research projects, to which he owes some of his international influence.

Thus he was a historian, but of what kind? There are so many “houses” on the historian’s territory and the word itself has so many different meanings and connotations, from entertaining popular books to strictly defined scholarly case studies, notwithstanding the major differences between national traditions and schools of thought. To appraise a pianist’s art, one has to listen to him or her playing a sonata or some other piece. To appraise a historian’s talent, to grasp the main features of his style of thought, one has to read a selection of his works. In

that sense, a direct reading acquaintance with the author surpasses all commentaries and introductions. This text is no exception: it is intended to lead to Certeau's own works through some characteristics of his historical *oeuvre*.

Most musicians satisfy themselves with the practice and teaching of their instrument. They give performances, they take part in recording sessions of the best of their repertoire. They never think of writing a long treatise about their art's requirements. They leave this task to other kinds of professionals linked to the world of music. A similar divide can be encountered among historians. Most of them never find any spare time or strong motive for discussing methodology and historiography substantially at the theoretical level. Many historians would discard these problems as void of any interest to them, foreign to the very historical work, relevant only to philosophers of history. Nevertheless, the following selection from Certeau's texts shows that he professed the opposite opinion and could argue in favor of historiography convincingly and consistently.

Certeau belonged to this minority of historians who are not afraid of calling for a thorough rethinking of the prerequisites and presuppositions which rule the profession as a social body and guide its intellectual commitment. For followers of this line, historiography stands as an elucidatory activity which is inherent in any writing of history. They believe that the historiographical debate opens to historians a royal path toward clarification and validation of their craft. They also believe that this debate is to be renewed by every generation, in order for the discipline to stay alive, through the emergence of new research areas, new paradigms, new explanatory schemes, and the necessary criticism of previous methods, paradigms, and assumptions. Certeau's conception of the historian's task was far from the naive picture popularized by historical novels (and movies), which presents it as a retrospective criminal investigation, the result of which will be to tell what actually occurred, who murdered the victim or misled the credulous crowd.

Certeau's analysis of the famous Loudun Possession (in France, near Poitiers, 1632–5) is eloquent on this matter. It began with a bold statement: "History is never sure." It ended with another startling remark: "The possession has no 'true' explanation, since it is never possible to know who is *possessed* and by whom."¹ In other words, the historian does not exert police powers on past events. His mission is more humble; more subtle, too. With a light touch of irony, Certeau remarks that the historian is not in charge of "speaking the truth," but in charge of "diagnosing the false."² Surveying the varied treatments given to the possessed nuns in Loudun, in which priests, physicians, and judges intervened (and competed against one another), Certeau notices that the historian "too has received from society an exorcist's task. He is asked to eliminate the danger of the *other*."³ Here is seen Certeau's broader under-

standing of past and present societies. At different historical moments, in diverse social and cultural settings, “the poison of the other” presents itself under varied forms and guises. It is the responsibility of the historian to identify “the new social figures of the other,” so that his or her contemporaries can understand that no society is totally homogeneous and unified, that there will be new irruptions of a troubling otherness. Studying the past, the historian allows the future to come and bears a political responsibility of his own; that is the reason why he needs historiographical awareness, ethical inspiration and critical epistemology. Certeau placed history among these “sciences of the other,” which were dear to him and which he called “heterologies.”⁴ Here he singled out ethnography and psychoanalysis with history itself. Nowadays, we are less familiar with demons’ uncanny visitations than the Loudun crowds, judges, and nuns, but we do have our horrible paroxysms of otherness, operating on unprecedented scales, with relentless brutality, through mass murder, genocide, totalitarianism, political violence. Who could forget it? Who could ignore it?

Two of Certeau’s books specifically concern historiography, one under the sign of “the absent”, the other focused on the problem of “writing.”⁵ Both books will disappoint readers in search of a general handbook for would-be historians. They do not belong to the familiar literary genre of those loosely arranged booklets, where an old scholar indulges in a miscellany of reminiscences, anecdotes, commonplaces, and inoffensive advice amid the universal benevolence which may grace one’s old age. Certeau died too early to face the temptation of avuncular historiography. Besides, he never accepted the parallel illusions linked to the mastery of knowledge and the convenience of didactic simplification. He respected his readers’ intellectual autonomy, had a very high opinion of their needs and demands, and would never give them a simplified version of his reflections and scholarly hesitations. As a result, he did not compose user-friendly texts; his books ask for close reading and sustained attention. But his readers are rewarded in a deeper way, by the force and breadth of the thought, by the poetical beauty of the style, and by the intellectual generosity which flows through his texts.

With regular new reprints in French, and five or six translations into other languages, *The Writing of History* has gained the status of a classic. It attests to the range and richness of Certeau’s reflections on historiography. The first part addresses the ambiguous social role of the historian. He chronicles the deeds of the Prince, the State, the Nation. He stands too close to authorities, leaders, institutions, too far from individuals, subjects, minorities. He thinks about power, he does not exert it. He “does work in history,” he “does not make history.”⁶ Certeau goes further in his critical sociology of the profession: he details the implicit and explicit rules a historian follows in order to be

legitimized and accredited to the milieu. Certeau does not call for an institutional revolution, he pleads for some epistemological self-awareness and ethical commitment from historians. "The historiographical operation" is presented "as the relation between a *place* (a recruitment, a milieu, a profession, etc.), analytical *procedures* (a discipline), and the construction of a *text* (a literature)."⁷ Each operation must be well determined: its results are to be put to the test, first by the author, then by readers. This means that the final narrative accounts for all steps of the operation, explains the decisions made, discusses the interpretative hypotheses preferred. Readers must be allowed the means to disagree, even if the author's scholarship and intellectual integrity are faultless. Any interpretation carries more falseness than truth.

The second part concerns religious history, in which the historian accounts for beliefs and commitments he does not share or even finds meaningless. He has to keep himself respectful, fair, generous toward believers, dissenters, prophets, reformers whose logic sounds illogical to him. In a brilliant chapter, "The formality of [religious] practices", Certeau shows how in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century France the Christian faith, its religious system, its complacent authorities, were skilfully used by the political power to control its subjects. Everything was done formally "in the name of God," but really in the service of the King. Certeau here develops an original hypothesis backed by a complex argumentation in which he deftly intertwines elements from theology, political history, anthropology, cultural history.

Then the book focuses on the other and its sciences. First comes a comparison between "written" and "oral" narratives. Jean de Léry's *récit de voyage* to Brazil (first edition 1578) gives Certeau the opportunity of visiting America and trying on early modern Europe his conception of "scriptural economies": when God stops to speak directly, financial and political scriptures of many kinds take the lead. A shorter essay returns to the possessed nuns of Loudun and follows their efforts to resist the questioning of judges who tried hard to make demons accept their mental categories. The judiciary proceedings started in an oral form, and were then recorded by clerks in written legal documents. Finally, the "diabolical phenomena," which passed the judges' understanding, were narrated in legal language, but the records convey some traces of the "double [linguistic] play" maintained by nuns and demons.⁸ In the fourth part of his book, Certeau presents an original reading of two historical studies written by Freud, the first one on a demonological neurosis in seventeenth-century Austria, the second one about the biblical Moses, founding father of the Jewish people and in whom Freud thought he saw an Egyptian. Certeau was extremely interested in Freud's works, which he read in German, and in psychoanalytical interpretation. In it, he expected to find an instrument for the study of otherness and of its mobile repertoire of corporal, intellectual and

social expressions. His relation with Freud and with Lacan's Ecole freudienne was more anthropological and historically interpretative than therapeutic. Moreover, he did not think much of the type of retrospective psychoanalysis produced by some historians to explain the individual achievements and shortcomings of political leaders, religious reformers, serial killers, etc.⁹

Michel de Certeau believed in the Christian God. From 1950 to his death, he was a member of the Society of Jesus, a religious Catholic Order. His first historical studies concerned early Jesuits Pierre Favre (a contemporary of Ignatius of Loyola) and Jean-Joseph Surin (the exorcist who saved Jeanne des Anges in Loudun, but was afterwards mentally ill for many years). His religious commitment and affiliation did not limit his intellectual quest, and did not lead him to ready-made answers. On the contrary, his theological studies and religious milieu acted on his mind as strong incentives. Past and present both required from him more thinking and inquiring, more knowing and believing. The core of his historical work concerned mystics and mystical literature. He did not look for a universal theory of "mystical experience," he did not trust ahistorical generalizations. He did not wish to prove the preeminence of Christian mystics over other religious traditions. He followed the common historical path with a few case studies, documented and contextualized in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. *The Mystic Fable* was his life labour and a labour of love. In the "disenchanted world" of early modern Europe, God turned silent for the majority of people. Some believers in a few social circles tried to restore a communication with God, they let their hearts and minds tell their desire of Him in strange narratives which report the secret events of their inner lives. Certeau read hundreds of those texts, and regarded them as precious documents and valuable literary sources. He analyzed them with sophisticated linguistic procedures, paid them all due respect, made their original content and poetic power visible. He was careful to begin his book with an insistent denial. The author studies mysticism, but he has no "special jurisdiction over its domain," "no insider's knowledge" of it, his book is written in the name of an Absent, "it stands exiled from its subject-matter."¹⁰ On this point, readers can make their own judgement, after reading and comparing a few other texts from Certeau.¹¹ Let us say with Shakespeare that "the rest is silence."

Notes

- 1 *La Possession de Loudun*, translation by Michael B. Smith published by the University of Chicago Press in late 1999. Quotations come from the introductory and concluding chapters of this translation.

- 2 *Heterologies: Discourse on the Other*, p. 200.
- 3 *La Possession de Loudun*, concluding chapter.
- 4 *Heterologies*.
- 5 *L'Absent de l'histoire* and *The Writing of History*.
- 6 *The Writing of History*, chapter 1; *Heterologies*, p. 213. The French text is more effective: "il fait de l'histoire," "il ne fait pas l'histoire."
- 7 *The Writing of History*, p. 57.
- 8 *Ibid.*, pp. 263–4.
- 9 The limits of space made it impossible to include any of Certeau's Freudian studies in this volume, although they constitute an essential part of his innovative historical work.
- 10 *The Mystic Fable*, pp. 1–2.
- 11 See *La Faiblesse de croire*. Its last piece, "White Ecstasy," translated by Frederick C. Bauerschmidt and Catriona Hanley, is included in Graham Ward (ed.), *The Postmodern God* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), pp. 155–8.