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**MICHEL DE CERTEAU**

Interpretation and its Other



Michel de Certeau

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# Michel de Certeau

*Interpretation and its Other*

JEREMY AHEARNE

Polity Press

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# Abbreviations

I shall refer to Certeau's major texts using the following abbreviations.

AH	<i>L'Absent de l'histoire</i>
CP	<i>La culture au pluriel</i>
E	<i>L'Étranger ou l'union dans la différence</i>
FC	<i>La faiblesse de croire</i>
H	<i>Heterologies: Discourse on the Other</i>
HP	<i>Histoire et psychanalyse entre science et fiction</i>
MF	<i>The Mystic Fable</i> , vol. 1 (French: <i>La fable mystique</i> , vol. 1)
PE	<i>The Practice of Everyday Life</i> (French: <i>L'Invention du quotidien</i> , vol. 1: <i>Arts de faire</i> )
PL	<i>La possession de Loudun</i>
PP	<i>La prise de parole et autres écrits politiques</i>
UPdL	<i>Une politique de la langue. La Révolution française et les patois</i>
WH	<i>The Writing of History</i> (French: <i>L'Écriture de l'histoire</i> )

Publication details for these editions are given in the bibliography. Wherever possible, I have given references to English translations. In abbreviated references I cite first the abbreviated title, then a page reference to the English translation, then a page reference to the French edition. Thus (MF 295/407) refers to a passage which can be found on page 295 of *The Mystic Fable*, and on page 407 of *La fable mystique*. Where a passage or article can be found in translation in the collection *Heterologies* (which does not correspond

directly to a French volume), then the reference takes the form (*H* 119/*CP* 45). Where only one page reference is given (i.e. *UPdL* 15), this means unless otherwise indicated that no translation is yet available.

I have used the excellent published translations where they exist, though I occasionally modify them in order to emphasize particular nuances or connotations contained in the French. Otherwise I have produced my own translations.



# Introduction

To each their strangers  
*Julia Kristeva*

Michel de Certeau died on the 9 January 1986, leaving behind him the memory of an 'intelligence without bounds' (Roger Chartier), but also 'without fear, without fatigue and without arrogance' (Marc Augé), of 'one of the boldest, the most secret and the most sensitive minds of our time' (Julia Kristeva), and of a 'spoken word bathed today in shadow and light' whose writings 'continue to call to us in our most intimate recesses' (Edmond Jabès).<sup>1</sup> Since 1984, with the translation of *The Practice of Everyday Life*, his writings have begun to circulate increasingly across a plurality of disciplines throughout the English-speaking world.<sup>2</sup> The present book represents the first full-length study of Certeau's thought, and is designed as a guide to draw out the exceptional range but also the overall coherence of a challenging and incisive body of work. My book presupposes no prior knowledge of Certeau's thought, but should also be of particular interest for those readers who are already acquainted with at least one facet of his prismatic work and who wish to explore how their understanding of this may be reconfigured by a reading of the oeuvre as a whole.

Certeau was born in Chambéry in 1925. He obtained degrees in classics and philosophy at the universities of Grenoble, Lyon and Paris and, rather later, a doctorate in religious science at the Sorbonne in 1960. He joined the Jesuits in 1950 (with the hope of

working in China), and was ordained in 1956. Asked to undertake research into the origins of the Jesuit order, he had become by the mid-1960s a leading specialist in early modern religious history (working notably on Pierre Favre, a companion of Ignatius, and then on Jean-Joseph Surin, a strange seventeenth-century mystic). At this time he was editing and contributing regularly to a number of broadly Catholic reviews (in particular *Christus* and *Études*, Jesuit journals devoted respectively to spirituality and to culture). In 1968, he published a seminal analysis of the symbolic 'revolution' of that year, entitled *La prise de parole. Pour une nouvelle culture* [Starting to speak: Towards a new culture]. In retrospect, this can be seen to have heralded a watershed in his intellectual itinerary, confirmed by the publication in 1970 of the historical study *La possession de Loudun* [The possession of Loudun]. While many of the fundamental questions informing his thought would remain, their expression no longer bore the marks of an orthodox religious affiliation. Likewise his writings henceforth became disseminated across heterogeneous social, political and intellectual sites (*Annales ESC*, *Politique Aujourd'hui*, *Recherches de Science Religieuse*, *Esprit*, *Traverses*, *Le Débat*, *Le Bloc-Notes de la Psychanalyse*, to list only some of the journals in which his later work appeared). His writings were now clearly situated in relation to a range of contemporary problematics, and cut across issues in psychoanalysis (Certeau was a member of Jacques Lacan's *École Freudienne* from its inception in 1964), historiography, epistemology, semiotics and the social sciences. At the same time, in the wake of *La prise de parole*, Certeau had been drawn into a number of official and unofficial interlocutory networks addressing questions relating to contemporary cultural practices and policies.<sup>3</sup> Some of these investigations emerged in book form as *La culture au pluriel* [Culture in the plural] (1974) and *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1980). The course of his work also took him across Europe, the United States and South America (he occupied a full-time post in California from 1978 to 1984). The extraordinary intelligence at work in his thought from the late 1960s onwards is the product of this untiring textual, cultural and interlocutory 'travel', coupled with a form of interior distancing or 'quiet' born of a life-long immersion in the demanding texts of the Christian mystics. This singular combination of engagement and detachment reverberates through his more properly erudite and historiographical production of the period: *L'Absent de l'histoire* [The absent of history] (1973), *The Writing of History* (1975), *Une politique de la langue. La Révolution française et les patois* [A politics

of language: The French Revolution and patois] (1975), and the first volume of *The Mystic Fable* (1982).

Certeau has left us, in the words of Jean Louis Schefer, with 'the image of an open work'.<sup>4</sup> He was not interested in producing a systematic doctrinal edifice, nor did he set himself up as the guardian of an erudite preserve. Indeed, I shall argue that his intellectual strategy consisted precisely in an endeavour to discern and to make ethical and aesthetic space for particular forms of interruption. His work was conceived as an ongoing response to a series of appeals and solicitations addressed to him directly or indirectly by others. In the light of this, I shall not myself extract an interpretative system from Certeau's work. In the mode perhaps of a 'travelogue', I have sought rather to map out and to correlate a set of intellectual itineraries which took Certeau through an intriguing combination of intellectual fields. I show how these itineraries are organized by a recurrent set of questions, and I explore how the different treatments which these questions receive can be used to shed unexpected light on each other.

The reading contained in this study is by no means the only way of moving across and analysing Certeau's work. It could have taken a very different form. It could, for example, have followed the route mapped out by Wlad Godzich in his introduction to *Heterologies*, a collection of Certeau's articles translated into English and published in 1986. Godzich inscribes Certeau's work in a philosophical 'countertradition' which 'in shorthand, could be described as being deeply suspicious of the Parmenidean principle of the identity of thought and being' (*H* vii). He invokes the writings of Friedrich Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger, Georges Bataille, Maurice Blanchot and Jacques Derrida, as well as Emmanuel Lévinas, Michel Foucault, Clifford Geertz and Edward Said, and uses them as a framework through which to articulate the nature of Certeau's work on alterity. This is a legitimate and helpful exercise. It corresponds to the way in which Certeau has often been received by anglophone readers, and even constitutes a viable research project. The danger which it runs, however, is that of flattening or erasing the specificity of Certeau's oeuvre. As Godzich himself observes, few of the authors cited above (with the notable exception of Foucault) are explicitly at issue in Certeau's thought. I have therefore opted for a different approach. If nothing else, this should provide an interesting detour to be undertaken before reinscribing Certeau into a comprehensive heterological 'countertradition'.

I have concentrated in this study on those intertexts which work

most powerfully in Certeau's major writings. These comprise, broadly speaking, contemporary French historiographical production; the writings of early modern mystics and travellers; Michel Foucault and Pierre Bourdieu; Freud read in a somewhat oblique manner (itself marked by Certeau's critical participation in Lacan's *École Freudienne*); the linguistics of 'utterance' and a range of work on contemporary cultural practices. The principal objective of my work has not, however, been to produce a general comparative study based on a flow-chart of influence and critique. I have sought rather to draw out a set of problematics which are distinctive either in their form or their treatment to Certeau: the history of early modern and modern 'economies' of writing, reading and speech; the gap between representations and practices; the relation between 'strategic' social and intellectual programmes and 'tactical' political or poetic activity; the question of religious belief and desire; the operations of thought in their bodily complication (psycho-analysis and socio-analysis); the development of what might be called an ethics/aesthetics. I have organized my study around one central problematic – 'interpretation and its other' – which cuts a transversal line across the multiplicity of Certeau's intellectual engagements. The interpretation in question is generally a 'certified' form of interpretation (the homophony may possess more than a passing significance), institutionally based and founded on a set of written authorities. I examine Certeau's reflection on the relations between such practices of interpretation and that which lies 'outside' them, either historically or culturally, and which they aspire in various ways to control.

In the course of my analyses, I will endeavour to gloss a variety of terms which are peculiar in their usage or connotations to Certeau's writing, and which are liable to unsettle a first-time reader ('scriptural economies', 'fables', 're-employments', 'formalities', 'operations', 'insinuations', '*poesis*', 'strategies', 'tactics', etc.). I will also introduce for the purposes of demonstration a number of my own categories. These are designed to help clarify my reading of Certeau's work on alterity, and to prevent the term from becoming an undifferentiated catch-all or rhetorical device. They enable me to elucidate more effectively just what Certeau is doing at different points when he refers or appeals to otherness. I will talk therefore of 'implicit' forms of social or historical alterity, of a transcendent Other, a projected 'other', a fantasmatic *other*, a 'virtual' or 'secreted' other, etc. It will be most helpful to unpack these terms as and when they are needed. I would like here simply to

emphasize their limits. They are themselves conceived not as a fantasmatic or technical nomenclature for alterity. I use them rather to distinguish particular forms of 'alteration' as they are analysed by Certeau. As concepts, they cannot themselves remain immune from the complex and ubiquitous effects of alteration for which they provide a necessary schematization. Indeed, I should also alert the reader to the organizing presence in my own writing of the lexis of 'complication' (implication, explication, complex, complicity, multiplicity, duplicity, etc.). The etymological force of these terms (from the Latin, *plicare*) provides a means of approach to the vertiginous and properly mani-fold interweaving of alterity and identity which emerges from Certeau's work.

I have focused on the work which Certeau published from 1970 onwards. This date marks what Certeau himself might have called a 'founding rupture' (*rupture instauratrice*).<sup>5</sup> His work broke away from the restricted networks in which it had circulated throughout the previous decade, and entered into a more 'common life'. This is by no means to say that one should disregard the work which led up to this turning point. In many ways it prefigures the 'shattering' (*éclatement*) which was to follow, and I will frequently use it as a means of illuminating his later work.<sup>6</sup> Neither should one overlook the haunting presence in his writing of Surin, whom Certeau was later to call 'the ghost who has haunted my life'.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, the body of his writings after 1970 constitutes the principal object of this book. Given the nature of Certeau's intellectual activities, it is hardly possible to treat these writings in a strictly chronological manner. At any one time, Certeau would be working in a heterogeneous set of intellectual spaces. He would produce texts (or 'communications') for different publications and addressees, and would intermittently combine ('re-employ') these texts with other writings in order to form coherent books. I have based my study for the most part on these books, supplemented by the posthumous collections of Certeau's essays edited by Luce Giard, *La faiblesse de croire* [The weakness of believing] and *Histoire et psychanalyse entre science et fiction* [History and psychoanalysis between science and fiction]. I have produced a thematic analysis, treating my corpus as though it were a synchronic collection, while also introducing diachronic nuances. This seems the most helpful way of introducing the reader in a limited space to both the breadth and rewarding complexity of Certeau's thought.



Part I  
Implications



# 1

## The Historiographical Operation

Michel de Certeau's analysis of contemporary historiographical production provides a useful starting point for an introduction to his work. Notoriously difficult to categorize as a thinker, Certeau tended when pressed by institutional necessity to define himself primarily as a 'historian'.<sup>1</sup> I will show in this chapter how there emerges from his encounter as a practising historian with the alterity of the past a combination of questions concerning interpretation and otherness which will help us to elucidate the broader range of his writings.

### **Figuring Interpretation**

Certeau conceives his historiography as a treatment for absence. He analyses it as an activity which is irredeemably separated from the presence of its object. This thwarted relation to its object constitutes for Certeau both the starting point and the vanishing point of historical interpretation. I shall begin by examining how such an existential situation is figured in his writing in a particular series of tropes. These tropes convey important information about Certeau's understanding of the interpretative act, at a level prior to subsequent formal analysis.

The first set of figures I want to consider concerns the 'sea' and its uncertain and moving borders with the 'land'. These figures

present in a quasi-mythical form the interpreter's initial encounter with the historical inscription which he or she must endeavour to render intelligible. They also place the interpreter's relation to this 'other' in the shadow of a transcendent Other:

Like Robinson Crusoe on the shore of his island, before 'the vestige of a naked foot imprinted upon the sand', the historian travels along the borders of his present; he visits those beaches where the other appears only as a *trace* of what has *passed*. Here he sets up his industry. On the basis of imprints which are now definitively mute (that which has passed will return no more, and its voice is lost forever), a literature is fabricated. (AH 8-9)

The 'literature' of the historian, a 'fabrication' (whose metaphors I will go on to examine), brings us only a trace of a trace (here that of the footprint, which so obsesses Crusoe). Certeau returns repeatedly to such figures of the 'trace'.<sup>2</sup> Yet it is equally characteristic that he should place the apprehension of this trace at the borders of that which has withdrawn its presence, which will return – in another of its protean guises – to erase the trace, and which finally exceeds and dissolves, in its vast and fluctuating indeterminacy, the determined limits of both trace and interpretation. The place of the interpreter emerges in Certeau's writing as precarious, fleeting and finite. His apprehension of the other which he aspires to understand is both given to him and taken away by a larger Other which, precisely, can never be apprehended as such:

The violence of the body reaches the written page only across absence, through the intermediary of documents that the historian has been able to see on the shore from which the presence that left them behind has been washed away, and through a murmur that lets us hear – but from afar – the unknown immensity which seduces and menaces our knowledge. (WH 3/9)

The cumulative effect of such figures, or what one might call their performative force, is considerable. Certeau's writing continually wears away at deep-rooted visually based models of interpretation, according to which the past might through the workings of exegesis reveal itself to the naked eye.<sup>3</sup> In the quotation above, what the historian can see is destabilized by what he or she can at best indistinctly hear (it is a 'murmur'). The visible 'proofs' of the historian's trade (indispensable as they are) seem to assume

an uncertain, flickering status against the encroaching background of what is invisible. Certeau challenges myths of interpretative transparency and mastery. He sets against these, in the very texture of much of his writing, the resistance of an opaque corporeal struggle, the confusion of distant voices and the mute unintelligibility of 'hieroglyphs' (MF 17/29). In the first instance, such figures disarm interpretation. They overturn the figure of the European conqueror which stands as a frontispiece to *The Writing of History*.<sup>4</sup> At the same time, however, in the relationship full of menace and seduction which they establish between the interpreter and his object, they introduce into Certeau's writing a diffuse 'erotics' of interpretation.

Such figures represent myths of historical interpretation in so far as they stage its activity in a 'place' which has no effective existence other than that of its poetic figuration. In more concrete terms, the flotsam and jetsam evoked above are the documents and archival traces which constitute the standard material basis for the work of the historian or literary critic. Certeau seeks elsewhere actively to reduce the relationship between the interpreter and this documentation to a peculiar kind of material banality. He adopts, so to speak, a cultivated naivety which paradoxically demands from us a certain intellectual effort if we are to break with habitual conceptions about our relation to 'historical' material.<sup>5</sup> Certeau subjects this relation to a form of estrangement.

Generally, we think of these relics and inscriptions which come down to us as 'belonging' to the past. Given this a priori categorization (which one could hardly say is simply wrong), it would be the historian's task to refine the 'arrangement' of these traces according to their originary provenance or respective position in time – time here being intuitively understood as an ordered geometrical space which one could lay out before oneself. Certeau problematizes this conception of time. He underlines that it represents not an adequate grasping of historical temporality, but rather a construction in and of the present. All those residual items which we come across – in museums, in archives, in books – do not really belong to the past. Whenever we apprehend them, they have always already been preselected and configured according to the structures of perception which govern our present. The vestigial organizations thereby produced are not history itself. We are given not the past in its immediacy, but rather a series of objects laid out and dispersed in the flatness of a present. Before such objects can in Certeau's terms be called properly 'historical', they must become

the object of a particular kind of treatment. They must be turned around, reordered:

No doubt it is an overstatement to say that 'time' constitutes the 'raw material of historical analysis' or its 'specific object'. Historians treat according to their methods the physical objects (papers, stones, images, sounds, etc.) that are set apart within the continuum of perception through the organization of a society and through the systems of relevance which characterize a 'science'. They work on materials in order to transform them into history. (WH 71/82)

Certeau defamiliarizes the historical artefacts which we perceive, foregrounding their status as artifices of contemporary systems of meaning. Furthermore, by bracketing, as it were, our common figuration of time as an organizing (and simultaneously reassuring, identificatory, consolidatory) principle, he emphasizes the degree to which the conditions of our temporal existence isolate us in the present, with no certain guidelines as to what to do with the debris we are given as 'history'.

Nevertheless, the principal thrust of Certeau's writings on historiography is precisely that the historian should indeed do something with these traces. Hence the importance of figures of 'fabrication': 'what do historians really fabricate when they "make history"?' (WH 56/63).<sup>6</sup> It would be reductive to see such figures, or ways of presenting interpretative activity, merely as figures. Nevertheless, it is useful to begin by juxtaposing them as such to the figures evoked above based on the 'sea' and its borders. If the first set of metaphors, heavy with ontological and even cosmic resonances, serves to disarm interpretation, the second set, in a vigorously down-to-earth and 'debasement' movement (in Mikhail Bakhtin's sense), serves to return interpretative practice to its concrete tasks and conditions of possibility.<sup>7</sup> It is the very movement between such contrasting figures, rather than a harmonious coexistence, which characterizes Certeau's own interpretative practice. Their alternation and combination is itself significant. We distort Certeau's thought if we privilege one of these metaphorical complexes over the other.

Historians, then, 'fabricate' the history which they produce. A disciplinary combination of rules, techniques and conventions defines for Certeau historiographical practice. These determine the treatment to which archival material will be subjected. They also work against the claims of any exclusively personal and