
Presentation

After the publication of the first volume of *The Mystic Fable, Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* in May 1982, Michel de Certeau worked indefatigably on the preparation of a second volume, which his illness prevented him from completing. He intended, as was his habit, to include in that work—reworked and with additional material, new developments, and ample modifications—various articles already published as so many milestones in a long-term reflection on mystic texts. To these chapters, the object of an initial version that he would have reread and modified, he intended to add others that were in the process of development. He had gathered the material for these texts, but had not yet committed them to written form. His files contained only disparate preparatory notes. Some notes are ranged under a title intended for a lecture or seminar, in which case they are accompanied by the outline of a plan, although that ad hoc organization does not constitute a coherent format. In their present state these roughed-out manuscripts are not publishable, even as fragments.

When he understood during the last trimester of 1985 that his days were numbered and that he would not be able finish the work in progress, he decided to confide the future publication of his writings to me. I accepted, without thinking through all that this would entail. In the days following his passing in January 1986, I began to realize how

difficult that task would be. Being unable and unwilling to take on everything at once, and to give myself time to think things out, I opted to proceed methodically by incremental steps.¹ First I had to establish his complete bibliography in order to track down his many publications in several languages.² This survey then gave me the occasion to compile and edit four thematic collections, grouped according to specific interests:³ *Histoire et psychanalyse entre science et fiction* [History and Psychoanalysis between Science and Fiction] (1987),⁴ *La Faiblesse de croire* [The Weakness of Believing] (1987),⁵ *La Prise de parole et autres écrits politiques* [The Capture of Speech and Other Political Writings] (1994),⁶ *Le Lieu de l'autre: Histoire religieuse et mystique* [The Place of the Other: Religious and Mystic History] (2005).⁷ At the same time, in order to make earlier works available in bookstores, I had to take on the task of reediting them, verifying the faithfulness of the texts to the manuscripts, correcting printing errors, completing elliptic references, in many cases writing an introduction, in all cases an index of names, and occasionally some supplementary notes to clarify allusions to contemporary events. Such was the case with *L'Étranger ou l'union dans la différence* [The Foreigner or Union in Difference] (1991),⁸ the two volumes of *L'Invention du quotidien* [The Practice of Everyday Life] (1990–94),⁹ *La Culture au pluriel* [Culture in the Plural] (1993),¹⁰ *L'Écriture de l'histoire* [The Writing of History] (2002),¹¹ *Une Politique de la langue. La Révolution française et les patois: L'Enquête de Grégoire* [A Politics of Language. The French Revolution and Patois: The Inquest of Grégoire] (2002),¹² *La Possession de Loudun* [The Possession at Loudun] (2005).¹³ During the same time period, to inform a new generation of readers, I instigated and edited three collective volumes on Michel de Certeau.¹⁴ In addition to my preoccupations with the French area, I became increasingly involved abroad: I devoted my efforts to networking, increasing the number of contacts, organizing academic conferences and media activity in such a way as to prompt publishers to have this or that work translated. This required verifying the quality of the translations.¹⁵ It was a long-term and time-consuming commitment, demanding patience and tenacity, but one that led to the successful circulation of the work throughout Europe, in North and South America, and even as far as Asia. Of course none of that would have been possible without the intrinsic quality of the work in question, without the strength and originality of these books that continue to attract new readers everywhere, and nothing could have been accomplished without the attentive and effective support of so many friends worldwide.

Having completed this part of my task, I returned to the haunting

problem of the second volume of *The Mystic Fable*. I was asked with great insistence to have that volume published, but little did anyone know the difficulty involved. How could I best avail myself of the fragmentary material found in the author's files? How could I harmonize these contradictory plans, how assemble these disconnected notes, these barely identified quotations? For a long time I entertained hopes of finding a satisfactory way to proceed. But all my efforts were in vain. The transmutation of those elements, scattered in heteroclitic fragments and elliptic notes, could have been achieved by the alchemist-author who had chosen them, grouped them, separated them into broad themes in his files: for anyone else it is impossible. That is why I have resigned myself to editing this volume the way I have, including only articles published by their author. Only one chapter, the longest, dedicated to Nicholas of Cusa, is partially unpublished, but the author wrote it out in its entirety, and then carefully reread and corrected the typed manuscript.

The choice of texts gathered here (which would have constituted approximately half of the second volume as the author intended it to be), their titles and their arrangement into ten consecutive chapters, framed by an introduction ("Mystic Historicities") and a conclusion ("The Opera of Speech: Glossolalias"), is based on Michel de Certeau's instructions during his last weeks as I carefully noted down at the time. He repeated several times, clearly and firmly, that he did not wish any pseudo "unpublished manuscripts" to be brought forward after his death, taken from recordings of courses and seminars, or based on the notes of his listeners, or made up of an assemblage of manuscript fragments found in his drawers. This refusal is consistent with his exigency with respect to writing, and with the long labor he devoted to putting the finishing touches on his work. He was of the view that there is an intrinsic difference in quality between an oral presentation, albeit prepared with care and based on a series of detailed notes, and a "truly written" text.

The production of one of his writings could extend over time, the composition of a book going through successive versions of its chapters, each considered as provisional. In the meantime, one or another of these versions might be published separately in the form of an article, launched like a trial balloon, and submitted to the criticism of his readers, whose remarks would then inspire an eventual reworking of parts of the text. The goal of the work of rewriting was to clarify the expression and sharpen the analyses. If, by these procedures, the author aimed to enhance the articulation of his argumentation, if he thus succeeded in nuancing his assertions, in further specifying his sources, this process

also contributed to the condensation of his thought and the complexification of his style, and it also delayed the completion of his texts. Thus, on the printed proofs of the first volume of *La Fable mystique* [The Mystic Fable], he wanted to make such extensive corrections that the publisher asked him to assume the costs, which he did.

His stringent requirements with respect to his writings explain the long years of gestation of *La Fable mystique*, the subject of which was so important to him. That project, still ill-defined, preoccupied him beginning in 1958, when he began his research on Pierre Favre (1506–46), the mystic and close companion of Ignatius of Loyola.¹⁶ Michel de Certeau was severe with respect to his own texts, and did not hesitate to rework or eliminate perfectly good pages with which he was, for whatever reason, dissatisfied. Here there come to mind his lines from the last page of the first volume of *The Mystic Fable*, so often quoted and paraphrased since then: “He or she is 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*.”¹⁷ We may therefore be certain that the articles grouped here would also have been reworked by their author before being incorporated into the second volume.

How would that volume 2 have been organized? In the author’s files there are various plans, some in the form of typed manuscripts, and replete with handwritten corrections, others handwritten and equally filled with crossed-out words or expressions. Not all of them are dated; their chronology is uncertain, but it is possible to reestablish a plausible succession, as the hypothesis of a volume 3, barely sketched out, emerges—extending from the eighteenth to the twentieth century, containing the Convulsionaries of Saint-Médard, Charcot (and Janet), Freud (and Romain Rolland), Mallarmé and Wittgenstein. As for volume 2, a handwritten letter, sent from Paris on 25 August 1984 to an American friend, Michael B. Smith (later to become the translator of the first volume of *La Fable mystique*),¹⁸ who thoughtfully sent me a copy of it, contains a “résumé” in which Michel de Certeau explains:¹⁹

Indeed I am working on volume 2, devoted to the analysis of the “experimental science” of *mystics* from the sixteenth century till the seventeenth. Volume 1 covered the constitution of a new “science”; its central axis, its formal features (enunciation: the speaking subject); and lastly its dissemination (“figures of the savage”). Volume 2 is the presentation of the *content itself* of that science, from Nicholas of Cusa (fifteenth century) to Fénelon and Pascal.

Part 1: from the (mystic) event to history, or the problem of the “foundations” of new historicities, on the basis of four theoretic figures: Nicholas of Cusa (the inductive “look” of society), Teresa of Avila (the autobiography or history of the subject), John of the Cross (the poem generative of a historical “prose”) and the “foundations” of societies, orders, convents, etc. (the articulation of experience with a utopian society, societal model: the “constitutions”).

Part 2: the “protocols” or *techniques* of that science: a. “spiritual direction,” exercise of the dialogue analogous to the psychoanalytic cure; b. corporal and mental “methods,” that is, a physics of the soul; c. the reading, or practice of the text (arts of reading, etc., *id est* oral and written); d. the reinterpretation of the past or invention of a personal tradition (the arts of memory).

Part 3: “the economy of the subject,” or theoretic unfolding of experience: a. the rhetorics of the speaking body (sensorial experiences, the economy of the body, etc.); b. the problem of the passions (the affective, narratives of passions and their theories); c. folly (“excess” and the relation to the pathological); d. language and angelic manifestations (a poetics of the spoken word or of the soul, the word as “echo” of the other, etc.).

Part 4: the “diaspora” or dispersion of that science with the appearance of the sociopolitical and scientific figures of “modernity.” Four essential figures break the mystic science: a. the recovery of the ecclesiastic institution and the pastoral strategies, *id est* the opposition of “theologians” to the “spirituals”; b. political absolutism, and the separation between the public and the private (cf. a few cases of “politician and mystic”); c. the progress of erudition and historicism (case of the interpretation of the Bible, Richard Simon); d. a new logic or art of thinking (cf. the case of Pascal, etc.).

The conclusion will attempt to take stock of the ethical and poetic significance of that literature, of the “art of loving” it develops, and the relation between the “fable” and the problem of God.

This plan corresponds roughly to the one Michel de Certeau had sent a few days earlier, on 19 August, to Pierre Nora, at Gallimard (and which François Dosse included in his biography of him),²⁰ but it differs in certain subtitles, and with respect to the introduction. It is also more explicit on the content and intention of the announced parts and their various chapters. The manuscript plans that the author wrote in 1985 and commented on during his last days, as he was explaining to me how his files were organized, are somewhat different from the two texts of August 1984. They contain still other chapters for which there is no written version. In any case, compared with the two plans from August 1984, we can see that the thematic gaps in the articles already published are distributed fairly equally across the four projected parts. Thus, for

the first part, what is missing is material concerning the autobiography of Teresa of Avila and the foundations of orders and convents. For the second part, the lacunae are the spiritual direction and the “methods” or spiritual exercises, but the very beautiful article of 1973 titled “The Space of Desire, or the Foundation of the *Spiritual Exercises*” might have served as the generating nucleus.²¹ In the third part, we do not know what the rhetorics of the speaking body would have been; it is possible that the 1977 article “Le Corps folié” [The Crazy Body] constitutes a rough outline of it,²² but its tonality seemed to me too different to be included in this volume. Last, as for the fourth part, no existing article focuses on pastoral strategies, but the dictionary entry of 1977 dedicated to Charles Borromée (1538–84) might have been put to good use;²³ as for the question of royal absolutism, the author intended to include his study on René d’Argenson (1596–1651), which dates back to 1963, and in 1985 he asked me to reread it with that in mind and to suggest possible modifications. The difference in the tone of writing and type of sources used led me to leave that text aside as well.²⁴

In assembling the present volume, I took as my ultimate authority the oral instructions of Michel de Certeau with respect to the previously published articles that he intended for volume 2. As for the order to be adopted, and the titles to be given to the various chapters, I have followed his instructions and added, when necessary, what was said in the last manuscript plans. As you will see, the included texts are of unequal length; the shortest ones probably would have been completed by the author, if he had had time. None of the included texts have been modified. I have limited myself to checking the previously published version against the author’s own printed copy, on which he had occasionally made corrections. When I found in his files a typed version of the published text or even a prior handwritten version, I compared it with the printed version, which enabled me to correct some printing errors and to eliminate a few textual obscurities. Moreover, I have completed certain references in the notes and corrected errors that had slipped in. I have also unified the presentation of the notes, which differed from publication to publication.

Rereading all these texts, we note that among the mystic authors, Nicholas of Cusa, in a very long chapter, and John of the Cross, in three chapters, loom large. Next comes—less than in the first volume—Jean-Joseph Surin, that contemporary of Descartes, into whose writings Michel de Certeau breathed new life.²⁵ Teresa of Avila is also less present than in the first volume, while Pascal and Angelus Silesius take on much greater importance. The first chapter, the longest, partially

unpublished, returns, through Nicholas of Cusa, to the question of seeing, which occupied a privileged position in the meditations of the author, as may be verified in his 1982 article on Merleau-Ponty, “La Folie de la vision” [The Madness of Vision],²⁶ or in the poetic parable titled in 1983 “Extase blanche” [White Ecstasy], which I included at the end of *La Faiblesse de croire*.²⁷ With respect to Michel de Certeau’s way of proceeding in the present volume, it should be remarked that the historical work is sometimes based on a close analysis of a key text. This applies, in chapter 1, to the preface of Nicholas of Cusa’s *De icona*, and in chapter 2 to the prologue of John of the Cross’s *Cántico*, and also, in chapter 10, to Pascal’s fourth letter to Mademoiselle de Roannez. This *modus operandi* was already at work in volume 1; in chapter 6, for example, in the preface to Surin’s *The Experimental Science*, and at the beginning of Teresa of Avila’s *Interior Castle*.

Here is the list of articles contained in this volume, with their references and original titles:

Introductory. “Historicités mystiques,” *Recherches de science religieuse* 73 (1985): 325–54.

Chapter 1. Partial publication in “Nicolas de Cues: Le Secret d’un regard,” *Traverses* 30–31 (March 1984): 70–85.

Chapter 2. “Le Poème et sa prose: Le Cantique spirituel,” in Michel de Certeau et al., *Le Discours mystique: Approches sémiotiques*, Urbino, Centro internazionale di semiotica e di linguistica, documents de travail, B/150–52 (January–March 1986): 1–19. This text, the outcome of the conference “Le Discours mystique” (Urbino, July 1982), had been sent to Urbino by the author on 3 January 1983.

Chapter 3. “Le Dire en éclats” [preface], in John of the Cross, *Les Dits de lumière et d’amour. Dichos de luz y amor*, followed by *Degrés de perfection. Grados de perfección*, trans. B. Sesé (Sens: Obsidiane, 1985), 13–22.

Chapter 4. “Jean-Joseph Surin interprète de saint Jean de la Croix,” *Revue d’ascétique et de mystique* 46 (1970): 45–70.

Chapter 5. A shortened version, modified on several points, appeared with the title “La Lecture absolue (théorie et pratique des mystiques chrétiens: XVIe–XVIIe siècles),” in Lucien Dällenbach and Jean Ricardou, eds., *Problèmes actuels de la lecture* (Paris: Clancier-Guénaud, 1982), 65–80.

Chapter 6. “L’Absolu du pâtir: Passions de mystiques (XVIe–XVIIe siècles),” *Le Bulletin* (Groupe de recherches sémiolinguistiques, EHESS-CNRS) 9 (June 1979): 26–36.

Chapter 7. “Voyage et prison: La Folie de J.-J. Surin,” in Bernard Beugnot, ed., *Voyages, récits et imaginaire*, Paris-Seattle-Tübingen,

Biblio 17, Papers on French Seventeenth-Century Literature (1984), 439–67.

Chapter 8. “Le Parler angélique: Figures pour une poétique de la langue,” *Actes sémiotiques: Documents* (Groupe de recherches sémiolinguistiques, EHESS-CNRS) 6, no. 54 (1984): 43–75.

Chapter 9. “L’Idée de traduction de la Bible au XVIIe siècle: Sacy et Simon,” *Recherches de science religieuse* 66 (1978): 73–92.

Chapter 10. “L’Étrange Secret,” *Rivista di storia e letteratura religiosa* (Florence) 13 (1977): 104–26.

In conclusion, “Utopies vocales: Glossolalies,” *Traverses* 20 (November 1980): 26–37.

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