

Unending desire

De Certeau's 'mystics'

Philip Sheldrake

THE LATE MICHEL DE CERTEAU was one of the most creative French intellectuals of the late twentieth century but, at the same time, one of the most difficult to summarize or to interpret definitively. This difficulty lies partly in the way he wrote and partly in the enigma of his own life. To begin with, de Certeau's writings consciously resist systematization. He also brought an extraordinary range of intellectual interests to every subject he examined. He drew extensively upon history, theology, Christian spirituality, cultural theory, philosophy, psychology, politics, social sciences, semiotics and linguistics. There was also an inherent ambiguity to de Certeau's life. In his later years he abandoned institutional Christianity and moved to the margins of religious belief, yet never formally resigned as a Jesuit priest and continued to be driven in strange ways by what might be called the 'Ignatian project'. Increasingly, de Certeau was preoccupied with exploring the idea that human identity and existence was a form of fluid and mobile 'practice' rather than a matter of being able to define the nature of an abstract 'self'.

Interiority and desire

Michel de Certeau's interdisciplinarity and eclecticism is readily apparent in his study of mysticism. A number of problems with his approach to the subject have been noted,¹ yet it cannot be denied that his originality has stimulated people to think of mysticism in new ways. True, his interest focused predominantly on sixteenth and seventeenth-century Spanish and French mysticism, and on his perception that the period saw a significant move 'inwards'. There was a growing preoccupation during that period with the experiential and with the autobiographical. This conformed to de Certeau's own fascination with modern psychoanalysis. However, de Certeau's understanding of the meaning and role of 'mysticism' cannot be reduced to sheer subjectivity, interiority or individual experience in isolation. For one thing, he wrote in the context of a western European culture that had lost faith in the bedrock of an autonomous, clearly defined human

subject – whether grounded in ‘the soul’ or in the Cartesian individual ‘mind’. At the same time, de Certeau’s interest in mysticism as a social *practice* rather than simply subjective *experiences* brought him close to the emphasis on mysticism as a way of life present in other recent commentators such as Bernard McGinn.²

For de Certeau, mysticism was bound up with *desire*. ‘Desire’ is a key word in his writings – one that he shared with such French postmodern philosophers as Foucault and Derrida but which also summarizes the heart of the Ignatian spiritual tradition to which de Certeau was so indebted. For both the mystic and the postmodern person, ‘desire’ expresses a certain kind of drivenness, an intensity and movement ever onwards inspired by what is *not* known, *not* possessed, *not* fixed or final.

They are, she [Hadewijch, the Beguine mystic] said, ‘drunk with what they have not drunk’: inebriation without drinking, inspiration from one knows not where, illumination without knowledge. They are drunk with what they do not possess. Drunk with desire. Therefore, they may all bear the name given to the work of Angelus Silesius: *Wandersmann*, the ‘wanderer’.³

Desire is also expressive of embodiment in which an unstable and incomplete ‘self’ is continually being constructed in a movement outwards and in encounters with what is other than itself. For de Certeau, mysticism is inherently engaged with the public world and is a form of ‘social practice’. Indeed, one of de Certeau’s central and most controversial views was that Christian mysticism is essentially radical and disruptive, both religiously and socially.

The concept of ‘a mystical tradition’

In his early work and researches on ‘mysticism’ or ‘mystics’ (*la mystique* – his word for the study of the mystical life), Michel de Certeau can be more or less credited with establishing that ‘mysticism’ as a distinct category, associated with subjective religious experiences, originated in early seventeenth-century France.⁴ Although de Certeau admitted that ‘mysticism’ in this sense began to emerge much earlier, in the late thirteenth century, especially with Meister Eckhart and the Beguines, he believed that the key point in its formalization was between the mid-sixteenth century and the mid-seventeenth century.⁵ This paradigmatic period of mysticism proliferated in the context of what de Certeau refers to as ‘a loss’. The various movements and

writings were born (to use de Certeau's words) 'with the setting sun'. This 'sunset' was the gradual demise of a previously dominant Christian religious worldview.⁶ De Certeau asserted that the 'dark nights' expressed in various mystical texts refer not merely to interior, subjective states of spiritual loss and absence but also to the 'global situation' of religious faith in western culture.⁷

De Certeau was a first class historian. Consequently, he was fully aware that the change in mystical writings during the late sixteenth century and the seventeenth century towards an emphasis on interior experiences, detached from doctrine or Church life, eventually *created* the very concept of 'a mystical tradition'. The notion of a specific 'mystical tradition', stretching back from the post-Reformation period through the Middle Ages to the early Church, is an artificial construct. It involved a retrospective recruitment of earlier spiritual writings into a particular experiential framework – or what de Certeau referred to as 'experimental knowledge'. On the heels of the construction of a mystical 'tradition' followed the gradual psychologization of the study of mysticism, where private insights and special (even odd) experiences became the criteria for the presence and validity of 'the mystical'. This would reach its height in the late nineteenth century with the work of William James.

Mysticism as subversion

The classic sixteenth- and seventeenth-century mystical texts that de Certeau studied did not attempt to replace an ailing intellectual system of theology by setting up new *systems of knowledge* or alternative fixed *places of power*. For de Certeau, mysticism subverted this way of thinking. Rather, mysticism pointed towards a quite different approach to the Christian tradition. This was to be not a set of structures or a body of doctrines, but a practice, an action. The language of movement implies a continual transgression of fixed points. This approach to Christianity as a journey, practice or action, with its emphasis on variety rather than organization or a dogmatic order, was explicitly drawn from de Certeau's membership of the Jesuit Order and original immersion in Ignatian spirituality.⁸ There are clear echoes in de Certeau of Ignatius Loyola's language for the Jesuit way of life as *nuestro modo de proceder*, 'our way of proceeding'.⁹ Precisely because mystic language tentatively engages with the absolute, it can only 'say' what is absolute or unbounded by, in de Certeau's words, 'erasing itself'.¹⁰ Because the object of mystical texts is infinite, such a text is 'never anything but the unstable metaphor for what is inaccessible'. So, for de

Certeau, the modern discipline of 'mystics' 'only assembles and orders its practices in the name of something that it cannot make into an object (unless it be a mystical one)'.¹¹

For de Certeau, the subversive quality of mysticism is represented by the theme of perpetual departures. There is a close relationship between the post-Enlightenment emphasis on knowledge as objective and issues of power. Thus Michel de Certeau suggested that people whose lives spoke of the 'otherness' of an essentially mysterious God were outsiders to the 'modern' project.

Unbeknownst even to some of its promoters, the creation of mental constructs . . . takes the place of attention to the advent of the Unpredictable. That is why the 'true' mystics are particularly suspicious and critical of what passes for 'presence'. They defend the inaccessibility they confront.¹²

As early as the thirteenth century, that is, since the time when theology became professionalised, spirituals and mystics took up the challenge of the spoken word. In doing so, they were displaced towards the area of 'the fable'. They formed a solidarity with all the tongues that continued speaking, marked in their discourse by the assimilation to the child, the woman, the illiterate, madness, angels, or the body. Everywhere they insinuate an 'extraordinary': they are voices quoted – voices grown more and more separate from the field of meaning that writing had conquered, ever closer to the song or the cry.¹³

De Certeau's interest in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century mysticism arose from the parallels he perceived between this period and his own time when the word, especially of Scripture, could no longer be spoken to believers in the old ways. The world was increasingly seen as opaque and unreadable. In response to this disenchantment the people we refer to as mystics sought to invent a different kind of place, that was not a fully formed or complete place at all. As de Certeau says himself, this 'is only the story of a journey' that is necessarily fragmented and ultimately defies conclusive investigation. In his somewhat opaque words, 'it overpowers the inquiry with something resembling a laugh'.¹⁴ Mystic literature offers routes to whoever 'asks directions to get lost' and seeks 'a way not to come back'.¹⁵

The various strains of *mystics*, in their reaction to the vanishing of truths, the increasing opaqueness of the authorities and divided or diseased institutions, define not so much a complementary or

substitutive knowledge, topography, or entity, but rather a different treatment of the Christian tradition . . . they institute a 'style' that articulates itself into *practices* defining a *modus loquendi* and/or a *modus agendi* . . . What is essential, therefore, is not a body of doctrines (which is the effect of these practices and above all the product of later theological interpretation), but the foundation of a field in which specific procedures will be developed . . .¹⁶

Mysticism and social 'practice'

At first sight, the writings of de Certeau concerning mysticism appear to make it not only marginalized but also privatized. Indeed it is precisely an act of withdrawal from social 'place' that gives rise to a definable 'mystics'. 'A prophetic faith organized itself into a minority within the secularized state.'¹⁷ Any ambition by the western Catholic tradition after the Council of Trent to, in de Certeau's words, 'reconstitute a political and spiritual "world" of grace' ultimately failed. However, while de Certeau describes a movement by spirituality to the cultural margins, and its redistribution in mystic groups with new kinds of discourse, de Certeau's understanding of 'mysticism' is that it is always contextual and particular and consequently a social reality rather than a purely personal, interior one. In fact de Certeau differs from many other twentieth-century commentators in *not* stressing the individual 'mystical experiences' in isolation, but treating them as social phenomena. Mysticism is social not merely *passively* (that is, it reflects a particular historical context) but also *actively*, in that it affects and transforms the world, and even *consciously* in that the outstanding mystics set out to create new forms of discourse and new religious groups.¹⁸

While the overall location or 'site' of mystic literature in this period should not be oversimplified, Michel de Certeau suggested that there were 'privileged places' for the development of mystical insight and practice, not least within certain social categories. These were people with little or no power in the public world. De Certeau noted that mysticism seemed to be closely related to forms of instability or social disinheritance. Thus the rise of mystic literature often reflects the decline of a society based on various ideologies of stability – social, economic and religious. Mystics tended to appear in the:

social categories which were in socio-economic recession, disadvantaged by change, marginalized by progress, or destroyed by war . . .

Aside from a few mystics on the road to social promotion . . . the majority of them . . . belonged to social milieux or 'factions' in full retreat. Mysticism seems to emerge on beaches uncovered by the receding tide.¹⁹

Many mystics were people who existed socially, culturally or religiously on boundaries. De Certeau noted especially the sixteenth-century Spanish mystical movement where an unusual proportion of the most significant figures came from the 'excluded' class of *conversos* or converted Jews. These include Teresa of Avila, Luis de León and two figures central to the early Jesuits, Diego Laínez and Juan de Polanco.²⁰

Sometimes mystics actively associated themselves with contexts of 'nothing'. This was a serious response to a radical situation of loss. De Certeau mentions two features. First, some mystics made the symbolic gesture of entering a corrupt religious community to seek the seeds of a new beginning within the 'nothing' or, as de Certeau put it, 'a repetition of a founding surprise'. Thus Teresa of Avila entered a decadent Carmel and Ignatius Loyola committed himself to religious life even though overall it was an institution in decline. Second, some members of the spiritual and social elite (for example the circle of Bérulle in seventeenth-century France) actively sought to associate themselves with the poor, the simple and the illiterate. As de Certeau put it, they sought to leave behind traditional sources of authority in order 'to turn to the exegesis of "wild" voices'.²¹

Mysticism and Christian discipleship

We should recall the relationship between de Certeau's interest in mysticism and the way he understood himself to be speaking in a twentieth-century world where institutional Christianity was no longer the place of definitive meaning. A critical question for de Certeau concerned how we can continue to believe in the absence of a distinctively Christian place. In the end, after examining various models, he suggested that there is no *theoretical* construct available to describe Christian identity definitively. What is left is the age-old tension between discipleship (following), and conversion (change). The believer is one called to follow faithfully and to change.

As the ecclesial 'body of sense' loses its effectivity, it is for Christians themselves to assure the articulation of this 'model' with actual situations. This 'model' refers to the New Testament combination of

'following [Jesus]' and 'conversion'. . . The first term indicates a going beyond which the name of Jesus opens up, the other a corresponding transformation of consciousness and of conduct.²²

For de Certeau, the Christian call is to wander, to journey with no security apart from a story of Christ that is to be 'practised' rather than objectively stated.²³ This practice is profoundly disruptive of all systems. De Certeau characterized the whole Christian tradition, as well as specifically mystical withdrawal, as a 'way of proceeding' – not institutions but movements or pilgrimages across all fixed 'places' and fixed locations of power. Christian spirituality must avoid the temptation to settle down into a new and definitive 'place'.

The temptation of the 'spiritual' is to constitute the act of difference as a site, to transform the conversion into an establishment, to replace the 'poem' [of Christ] which states the hyperbole with the strength to make history or to be the truth which takes history's place, or, lastly, as in evangelical transfiguration (a metaphoric movement), to take the 'vision' as a 'tent' and the word as a new land. In its countless writings along many different trajectories, Christian spirituality offers a huge inventory of difference, and ceaselessly criticises this trap; it has insisted particularly on the impossibility for the believer of stopping on the 'moment' of the break – a practice, a departure, a work, an ecstasy – and of identifying faith with a site.²⁴

In de Certeau's terms, the particularity of the event of Jesus Christ is the measure of all authentic forms of Christian discipleship in the sense that they presuppose that event but are not identical repetitions. In a sense, the particularity of the event of Jesus Christ 'permits' the contextual nature and the particularity of all subsequent discipleship. There, too, God may eternally say 'yes' to us without condition. However, for de Certeau the primary symbol of discipleship is now an empty tomb.²⁵ 'He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said . . . indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee' (Matthew 28: 6–7). God in Jesus cannot be pinned down to any here and there, this and that. The place of Jesus is now perpetually elusive. He is always the one who has gone before. To be in the place of Jesus, therefore, is literally to be disciples, to be those who 'follow after' in the direction of Jesus' perpetual departure.

Again, to adopt the language of de Certeau, discipleship simultaneously demands a 'place' and an 'elsewhere', a 'further', a 'more'. It is impossible to grasp the heart of de Certeau's perspective without

detailed attention to his Jesuit roots and life-long preoccupation with the Ignatian mysticism of 'practice' or 'action', especially through the medium of the life and writings of the seventeenth-century Jesuit mystic Jean-Joseph Surin. This mysticism of practice offered de Certeau among other things the language of the *magis*, the *semper maior*, the always greater, the always more, the always beyond. Hence the values of movement and the transgression of boundaries, always exceeding limit in search of *oikumene*.

Within the Christian experience, the boundary or limit is a place for the action which ensures the step from a particular situation to a progress (opening a future and creating a new past), from a being 'there' to a being 'elsewhere', from one stage to another . . . A particular place – our present place – is required if there is to be a departure. Both elements, the place and the departure, are interrelated, because it is the withdrawal from a place that allows one to recognise the enclosure implicit in the initial position, and as a result it is this limited field which makes possible a further investigation. Boundaries are the place of the Christian work, and their displacements are the result of this work.

And again:

In order to pass from one place to another, something must be *done* (not only *said*) that affects the boundary: namely, *praxis*. It is this action which transcends, whereas speeches and institutions circumscribe each place successively occupied.²⁶

Thus, paradoxically, the radical social role both of Christian practice and specifically of mysticism is to become non-places, disruptive acts of resistance at the heart of all systems and attempts at definitive statements about the nature of reality.

Mysticism as 'fable'

De Certeau wrote in terms of the 'mystic fable'. Mysticism is a fable because it cannot claim the status of definitive truth. It is a language without obvious power. Yet paradoxically, that is its strength. It calls into question strategically defined, and apparently definitive, systems of meaning. Believers in Christianity are called in this postmodern age to become once again wanderers who are always departing in answer to a call to follow, without the burden of power, authority or even secure identity. The Christian community carries the fabled tale of Christ,

which subverts all our fixed places, across an alien territory towards the unnameable that we call 'God'. De Certeau suggests that any discourse, not least religious discourse, is always in danger of being shattered. 'Faith speaks prophetically of a Presence who is both immediately felt and yet still to come, who cannot be refused without a betrayal of all language, and yet who cannot be immediately grasped and held in terms of any particular language.'²⁷

The intellectual assumptions of 'modernity' place a powerful emphasis on intelligibility, not least that of God language. Because of this, De Certeau sees those people whose lives affirm the elusiveness and essential 'otherness' of God as outsiders to the modern project.²⁸ Echoing de Certeau, the American theologian David Tracy suggests that mystics, like the mad, represent a kind of 'otherness' on the social margins. This 'otherness' has an active quality. It has the capacity to challenge traditional centres of power and privilege.²⁹ Perhaps this is why de Certeau was fascinated throughout his writings by Jean-Joseph Surin (whom he called 'my guardian'). Surin also was for many years profoundly disturbed psychologically, and consequently isolated and oppressed.³⁰ Because the way of 'knowing' present in mystical texts is based on union with God rather than on the power of human intellects to control reality, it bears some resemblance to the 'subjugated knowledges' spoken of by Michel Foucault. This resists dominant structures of power and knowledge and opposes established forms of discourse rather than simply offering a pleasing alternative.³¹

The never-ending quest for 'the always more'

At the end of Michel de Certeau's life it appears that his approach to 'spirituality' in the broad sense eventually became completely detached from any sense of a divine Other as it dispersed into the 'practice of everyday life'. Spirituality was not so much the 'ecstasy' of a religious mystic but a more tentative self-transcendence experienced in a succession of fragmented encounters with everyday 'others'. Yet, is the poignant last page of the first volume of the unfinished *The mystic fable* merely a nostalgic lament for lost beliefs by one who no longer has any form of religious faith? Or was it, perhaps, that de Certeau was expressing, in a typically enigmatic way, the necessary pain of denial? Was his 'agnosticism' that of the person who (like the mystics he studied) realizes that he cannot escape the never-ending journey of the human spirit beyond definable goals or desires that can be named? For if deep desire and a kind of faith remained at the heart of de Certeau, the inner logic of his thinking surely demanded that 'the Other' that we are

continually to seek is necessarily 'absent' from the contingent world of the tangible and bounded. It is beyond what can be fixed or located. It can only be spoken about continually as *semper maior* – forever greater, always more.

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 lives nowhere.³²

Philip Sheldrake is Vice-Principal and Academic Director of Sarum College, Salisbury and is also Honorary Professor in the Department of Theology and Religious Studies, University of Wales, Lampeter. He is the author of a number of books, most recently *Love took my hand: the spirituality of George Herbert* (Darton, Longman & Todd and Cowley Publications).

NOTES

- 1 See, for example, Bernard McGinn, *The foundations of mysticism: origins to the fifth century* (London: SCM Press, 1992), 'Appendix: Theoretical Foundations', pp 310–313.
- 2 See McGinn, *op. cit.*, 'General Introduction', pp xi–xx.
- 3 Michel de Certeau, *The mystic fable*, English translation by Michael B. Smith (ET Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1992), p 299.
- 4 Michel de Certeau, "'Mystique" au XVIIe siècle: Le problème du langage "mystique"' in *L'homme devant Dieu: mélanges offerts au Père Henri de Lubac* (Paris: Aubier, 1964), vol 2, pp 267–291.
- 5 The essay 'Mystic speech' in Michel de Certeau, *Heterologies: discourse on the other*, translated by Brian Massimi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), p 83.
- 6 'Mystic speech', p 80.
- 7 'Mystic speech', p 81.
- 8 A point noted by Luce Giard, one of de Certeau's closest collaborators and co-authors, in Michel de Certeau, Luce Giard & Pierre Mayol, *The practice of everyday life*, volume 2 (ET Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), pp xxii–xxiii.
- 9 See comments by John O'Malley in his *The first Jesuits* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1993), p 8.
- 10 'Mystic speech', p 81.
- 11 *The mystic fable*, p 77.
- 12 *Ibid.*, p 5, but see the complete Introduction, pp 1–26.
- 13 *Ibid.*, p 13.
- 14 *Ibid.*, p 13.
- 15 *Ibid.*, p 14.
- 16 *Ibid.*, p 14.
- 17 *Ibid.*, p 20.

- 18 *Ibid.*, 'Introduction', pp 1–26.
- 19 De Certeau, 'Mystic speech', ET in Graham Ward (ed), *The Certeau reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), p 191.
- 20 *Ibid.*, pp 191–192.
- 21 See 'Mystic speech', pp 85–86.
- 22 Michel de Certeau, 'The weakness of believing: from the body to writing, a Christian transit', ET in Graham Ward (ed), *The Certeau Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), p 226.
- 23 See, 'The weakness of believing', *passim*.
- 24 'The weakness of believing', p 236.
- 25 'The weakness of believing', p 234.
- 26 In 'How is Christianity thinkable today?' in Graham Ward (ed), *The postmodern God* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), p 151.
- 27 Michel de Certeau, 'Culture and spiritual experience', *Concilium* 19 (1966), pp 3–16.
- 28 *The mystic fable*, especially 'Introduction', pp 1–26.
- 29 David Tracy, *On naming the present: God, hermeneutics and Church* (New York: Orbis Books, 1994), pp 3–6.
- 30 See *The mystic fable*, *passim* but especially chapter 7, 'The enlightened illiterate'. De Certeau also edited the work of Surin, *Jean-Joseph Surin: correspondence* (Paris: Desclée, 1963) and *Jean-Joseph Surin: guide spirituel pour la perfection* (Paris: Desclée, 1963).
- 31 Michel Foucault, *Power/knowledge: selected interviews and other writings 1972–77* (ET London: Pantheon Books, 1980), p 81.
- 32 *The mystic fable*, p 299.