

Seeking the European self

Three 'other selves' of Michel de Certeau

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SPIRITUALITY, IN THE BROADEST SENSE, has always been defined by its dialogues – not least its dialogue with philosophy. In the late twentieth century French philosophers such as Lacan, Deleuze, Foucault and Derrida, in their different ways, have deepened the crisis attending one important theme – the understanding of the post-Cartesian, enlightened subject. This crisis has diminished the private and first-person colouring of European theory of knowledge and has turned it into an account of bodily desire. Explanations offered of what were once thought of as 'inner' experiences have become much more social and public. New conceptions of the human person and of subjectivity are being asserted and contested in much larger 'spaces' than those bounded by self-consciousness. The crisis of the European subject unfolds in every branch of philosophy, in critical theory and in religious thought.

The impact of this dialogue between philosophical and religious thought can be seen in the writings about spirituality of the Jesuit historian Michel de Certeau. De Certeau was an archaeologist excavating in the ruins of the European subject. An older religious discourse had emphasized the distinction between the European 'I' or self and that Other which is God. This crisis of confidence about the subject has been accompanied by a parallel crisis in belief in the Other. If there is no self, is there no Other either? Even if we find ourselves a little resistant to Certeau's interim conclusion that religion, theology and spirituality can be detached from the transcendent order, and are merely strategies that shape and control certain patterns of human experience,¹ we might nevertheless be intrigued by his case studies in which religious discourse is revealed to be less about a tension between spirit and matter, body and soul, and much more a dynamic of power and embodiment.

Certeau's historical research into mystical experience and writing in the early modern period illuminates this dynamic. Resistant as we might be to some biographical fallacy that too naïvely proposes rapprochements between the lives studied by the historian and his own life,

nevertheless there is no doubt that Certeau invested himself to an unusual degree in his research.² He returned repeatedly to certain lives, and was haunted by them.³ They were other selves for him.

Pierre Favre, traveller and pilgrim

Pierre Favre is described as the most likeable of the companions of Ignatius Loyola. In Favre's spiritual autobiography, the *Mémoriale*, begun in 1542, Certeau discerns a European subject endeavouring to describe a very particular religious experience. Favre, the quiet companion, was mainly silent about his mystical life.⁴ He was a traveller and pilgrim. His itinerant Jesuit life was spent under the constant shadow of danger 'from animals, wild beasts in forests, denunciation as a spy, hunger, thirst, infested bedding and nights in the open'.⁵ Certeau considers Favre to have been a somewhat rootless person, always the stranger, and ill at ease amid the customs, languages and ideas with which he was confronted.

Just as some philosophers try to establish the point of departure for metaphysics, so, according to Certeau, spiritual travellers like Favre are endeavouring by their numerous departures to find the Other in a new way. The pilgrim or missionary is transporting the body to many different places partly in the hope of finding the right circumstances or context for a certain sort of departure from the self. Certeau himself has been described as expressing his own 'desire for the Other' in a 'vast array of journeys, institutional affiliations and writings'⁶ on diverse subjects. Favre and Certeau have in common a tendency to look back, to represent even the most innovative departure as a recovery, investigation or survey of the past. Favre's writings are full of expressions of nostalgia and of regret at parting: his ambition is to reunite and to be reunited.⁷ Certeau's project was not so much nostalgic or re-foundational as expressive of the hope that to revisit the mystical works of the past, with all their inhibitions and reticences, might help construct a framework for interpreting today the silence of others and the Other.

Bodily separations entail silence and breaks in communication. Language was constantly failing Favre as he arrived in a new place where he could not make himself understood. Memory and prayer allowed him to make present to himself those others with whom he could communicate and from whom he was separated. The network of his friends and acquaintances sustained a populous inner life. 'The Spirit who can exile people from their native land can *also fill the whole surface of the earth*'.⁸ Favre understood his travelling as part of a

strategy of unification, which, ultimately, was preferable to stability and rootedness.⁹ Difference came to seem less important to Favre as he travelled widely and noticed the similarities between people. His considerable human sympathy was enlisted especially by the inarticulate frustrations of those who were suffering.¹⁰ Certeau notes that 'his European experience deepened in Favre his sense of the universal'.¹¹ The parallel movement in Certeau was to extend his interest in the history of cultures to ones ever more remote and different from his own.

Fragmented discourse – fragmented continent

The planned journey to Jerusalem of the first companions of Ignatius can be understood, in Certeau's analysis of Favre, as an emblem of the belief that the diversity to which, in a certain sense, incessant travelling draws attention, is not as important as the unity between different peoples, revealed by common experiences and parallel faith-commitments. Certeau, however, in his own case 'deliberately fragments his discourse',¹² and resists any globalizing schematization that might unify his erudite contributions to a number of intellectual disciplines in different places. By contrast, he schematizes Favre's backwards and forwards journeys between Rome, Madrid and Cologne in 1536 and 1546 to illustrate what he perceives as a tension between the desire to be in places where he had friends, ease of access and sympathy, and an opposing impulse, missionary and counter-reforming in character, which took him to destinations – for example, in the Rhineland – where he was much less welcome. Favre's experience was of a fragmented Europe which had, nevertheless, the possibility of unity. His prayer and apostolate were directed towards unifying, or reuniting, a divided Christendom. His personal experience of the suffering which division between persons and communities could inflict was acute. The quiet companion's written reflections on this include as much regret for the past as vision of the future.

The editor of the *Mémoriale* similarly sought an alternative to the violence with which the Other can sometimes be represented to the subject, the 'I', and the sort of fragmentation which turns the subject into the other. Certeau saw in Favre, even twenty years before the Bastille of post-war austerity came tumbling down, the wandering prophet of continental harmony.¹³ Just as he would one day see himself as a revolutionary plotting *la prise de la parole*,¹⁴ so Certeau's Favre is an often silent traveller towards an Utopian destination in which the

European subject could tolerate not only the differences between the self and others, but also between the self and the great Other. Certeau's own pilgrimage was a search for a place where 'the fragile and necessary boundary between a past object and a current praxis begins to waver',¹⁵ and where the Other can be met as truly other and not just as some alter ego 'forced into a fragmenting passivity'.¹⁶

Everyday life and the language of space

'Spaces', 'maps' and 'tours' abound in the collection of Certeau's work, published in 1980 as *The practice of everyday life*.¹⁷ This book might serve as the general title for his philosophy and spirituality. The language of place and location (and a parallel and darker discourse of dislocation) was anticipated in his exegesis of Favre's memoirs. The early Jesuit's missionary geography was presented as a sort of image of his understanding of the movements of spirits. The quiet companion found his destinations embodied in shrines of the saints, and in other holy places. The self, the *subiectum*,¹⁸ was described as being in easy intimacy with spiritual forces. There were certain echoes of all of this in Certeau's own life. The Jesuits had directed him towards scholarship in Europe instead of the missionary work in China or Africa which he would have preferred. He understood his vocation as implying a degree of homelessness. The Other would be encountered through a willingness, a desire even, to be perpetually on the move. Luce Giard says that 'he had had from childhood an intense desire to "not belong", to free himself, to overcome the limits of family, milieu, of a province and a culture, and to encounter the Other in order to be "transformed" and "wounded"'.¹⁹ For Certeau, interest began to focus less and less on the Other, abstractly conceived, and perhaps known, and more and more on a rich variety of fragmentary instances of particular 'others'. If there is violence in conceptualization, Certeau began to want to resist it by seeking to speak of the Other only through those 'others' which and whom one might encounter, say, in walking about the city or on a railway journey. He was unsympathetic, however, to an impulse he detected in Favre to 're-locate' attention on the Other to less powerful others. There is often in the *Mémoriale* much less about God than there is about intermediaries, saints and angels.

Certeau responded to his subject's angelology with a certain condescension. 'Favre is very much of his time,' he says, 'and the range of his experience clearly very limited, but the important thing is to retrieve the interior intuition which guided him in his travels, and both in his

spiritual direction and his personal conduct.²⁰ Yet there was perhaps something Aristotelian about wanting to explain cosmic reality by reference to superior beings, and Certeau also suspected a Neoplatonist rationale for constructing an elaborate celestial hierarchy. He perceived these old philosophies as being a dream of reason addressed principally to people's worries, 'their obscure desires, the well-founded anxieties which haunted them, and their extreme sensitivity to invisible forces'.²¹ In Favre's world witchcraft, astrology and sorcery abounded, and the pilgrim jousted with evil spirits, helped by good angels and spiritual solidarity. The quiet companion mapped out a plan of campaign, which involved the capture of both speech and silence for those Christian subjects who sought his help. The itineraries which he proposed took people to 'places' of both colloquy and mystical quiet.

The Spiritual Exercises, of which Ignatius Loyola thought Favre to be the best exponent, were the context for patterns of spiritual experience of different sorts. This experience could be expected to generate a docility, in the self, to the Spirit, which would stimulate the person making the Exercises towards a personal faithfulness to God, away from 'immobilization in painful narcissism'.²² The *Mémoriale* is the personal record of a subject seeking, within such patterns, the sort of interior silence which would allow the free discernment of different feelings and thoughts. It is a record of grace. Certeau draws attention to a constant dialogue, in this work, between an 'I' and a 'You', where most often the I is a self or subject who is on the side of God, and the You is a self or soul called to some transformation such as repentance or conversion.²³ The limitations of this sort of dualism notwithstanding, Favre is presented by Certeau as an active mystic with a daily and everyday experience of the living God.

If the contemporary crisis of the European subject is anticipated in Certeau's version of the life of this remarkable wanderer in early modernity it would be in Favre's experience of a long-running interior conversation between a self, understood in relation to a transcendent and generous Other, and another more isolated, 'on-the-move' self, conceiving itself, principally, within (from some modern perspectives) a rather constricting structure of religious practice, and ways of knowing.

Jean-Joseph Surin – suffering and loss

Certeau's second 'other self' is Jean-Joseph Surin, whose thorough spiritual education under Louis Lallemant did not prevent prolonged

physical suffering after his attempts to help the diabolically possessed Ursulines of Loudun in 1634–7. The body and its problems were arguably the chief factors in his spiritual development. Certeau edited Surin's *Guide spirituel*²⁴ and his *Correspondance*, and frequently alludes to him in important works of his own such as *The mystic fable*²⁵ and *La faiblesse de croire*.²⁶ Certeau is not one of those readers of Surin who feel that his psychological problems raise serious questions about the reliability of his spiritual doctrine. In the early seventeenth century, there was a certain reaction among Jesuits, and in the Church more widely, against what were seen as the excesses of undisciplined mysticism, and Lallemant's pupils, and even the texts of their teacher, were the victims of this reappraisal.

The detachment, generosity and simplicity of spirit which are Surin's chief recommendations to any person seeking intimacy with God are perhaps the correlatives of his enthusiasm for visions, and other extraordinary phenomena of the mystical life. Some Jesuit superiors were concerned that intimacy or union with God should not be presented to students of the spiritual life as an end in itself, considering that service and mission were higher aims, at least in their particular calling. Certeau again found himself in the subject of his research. Surin's efforts to find a language in which to communicate that loss of self which is the mystic's delight and sorrow, was bound to provoke anxiety in his religious superiors. They were looking to provide recruits to the order with a strong identity rooted in a certain experience of the Spiritual Exercises and could not be expected to smile on an educator who lapsed into silence and dwelt, when speaking at all, on the fragility of the self. Certeau, analogously, saw himself, at least at first, as a believer looking for a way to express belief in a world which feels that God has become absent. Like the melancholic Surin, he thought himself cruelly limited by the narrow expectations about religious experience which were to be found among his contemporaries, both inside and outside the Christian Church.

In 1634, already bodily fragile, Surin was sent to Loudun to be one of the exorcists of Jeanne des Anges and her companions. For three years he visited the Ursulines, but did not consider that he was able to be of much help to them. His own health never recovered from the strain under which this work placed him. For the rest of his life, nearly thirty years, he needed fairly close supervision. Certeau traces Surin's fragility to difficulties in Lallemant's tertianship (1629–30) and to his feeling thereafter that he was on his own. 'Surin knew he was not a saintly person, but one exiled from salvation.'²⁷ Self-destructive

impulses and a suspicion that he was hated by God accompanied all sorts of bodily and mental troubles. This was worse than the asceticism, that of the inscribing of religious ideals on the body, to which his initiation into religious life had inured him. His old instructor might have thought it was simply a matter of generosity. Lallemant, himself a martyr to headaches and stomach cramps, encouraged heroic generosity in his pupils, who included Jean de Brébeuf, Isaac Jogues and other missionaries to North America.

The itinerant lifestyle of the Jesuit spiritual, with its numerous contacts, and the varied networks in which, in an earlier generation, Favre, for example, had learned to thrive, does not really seem to have suited Surin, who was not without reclusive tendencies. He felt that his training had been cut short and that he was ill-prepared for the service required. Lallemant had warned: 'We spend entire years, and often our whole lives, haggling over whether we will give ourselves totally to God.'²⁸ Surin's body, one might say, refused to allow the spiritual transaction to proceed in the way suggested by the teacher. Illness and confusion would thwart Surin's efforts at allowing in himself abandonment and docility to the Spirit. As Certeau puts it, 'His defeat is already inscribed within himself by that other who nonetheless is himself and who opposes his desire'.²⁹ Surin experienced an intense frustration at being unable to separate himself radically; the 'I' could not be abstracted from the body and its ills. The 'possessed', whether in upheaval in Loudun, or in the tranquillity of the Jesuit tertianship, could not even describe the symptoms of their own malady, far less hope for a cure. Surin felt himself in solidarity with the Loudun women, and felt himself lost.

The utopianism of Jean de Labadie

A third case study in Certeau's anticipation of the contemporary crisis of the European subject is Jean de Labadie. Certeau examines the life and work of yet another nomadic Jesuit, this time one whose spiritual itinerary took him out of the order in 1639 after fourteen years of membership. Labadie had been a brilliant student, and had acquired a high reputation as preacher, teacher and spiritual guide. In this success, and in his wistfulness and utopianism, Certeau would find yet another mirror to hold up, with fascinated curiosity, to his own life and personality. In 1637, however, Father General Vitelleschi, cautiously observing the spread of mysticism among some French Jesuits, was alarmed to hear that Labadie, then still a theology student, was living *per modum puri spiritus*. The prayer of silence which he was practising

seemed less well adapted to the spirituality of service which the Jesuit authorities considered most suitable, even for someone very far from being a recent recruit. Certeau points out that in just fifty years, 'the Jesuits had increased their membership tenfold, multiplied the number of their foundations, diversified their occupations, extended their influence and increased their wealth'.³⁰ Vitelleschi's predecessor, Claudio Aquaviva (Superior General from 1581 until 1615) had, in Certeau's view, adopted a more flexible view of regional variations in the Ignatian pattern, and had, incidentally, been more relaxed about the secular academic specialities taken up by his subjects.

At Bordeaux in 1638 and 1639, Surin tried to help Labadie to find his place in the Jesuits, but their discussions seem to have brought the difficulties to a head and Labadie sought dismissal from the Society. One suffering mystic was not able to rescue another. There was a resistance to ecclesiastical authority in Labadie which was not present in Surin, or, for that matter, in Certeau, whose close reading of the French Jesuit mystics did not move him to any notable longing for martyrdom, even of the gentler sorts inflicted within the modern Church. The given reason for Labadie's departure from the Jesuits was his poor health, and, in particular, sleeplessness. He worked as a secular priest from 1632 until 1650 in various cities, including Bordeaux, Amiens and Toulouse. His ministry was Jansenist in temper, which seems to have been much more than mere theological anti-Jesuitry. Godly intensity of life and eucharistic temperance were the characteristics of a devotional attitude, which, nevertheless, probably owed as much to the Spiritual Exercises as to Port Royal. The spiritual itinerary of Jean de Labadie was far from over, however, since in 1650, at Montauban, he embraced Protestantism and became a pastor. Resisting an attractive summons to a pulpit in London, he preferred to minister for several years in Geneva. In due course, Labadie found he wanted to reform the Reformers in the direction of an even more primitive church, and founded his own ecclesial community, the Labadists, in 1669.

For three or four years the sect tried to put down roots in Holland and Denmark, where Labadie died, at Altona, in 1674. The creed of Labadism included the view that contemplation was the key to knowing God, that the scriptures were a hindrance to spiritual progress. The Labadists avoided infant baptism, devotion to the real presence and Sunday observance. Certeau, however, was less interested in details of the content of Labadie's teaching, mystical or theological, or in the precise beliefs of his followers, than in that 'movement of perpetual departure'³¹ which constituted his religious 'style' or practice.

Religious practice without belief, which some might consider rather pointless, attracted Certeau for a time. He began to see, however, in Labadie the type of a certain kind of perpetually frustrated religious quest, upon which one embarks 'at the behest of an Other, without knowing one's destination, and without even knowing what it could possibly mean to arrive'.³²

Spiritual nomads and a theology of absence

Labadie and his followers were helped by various *grandeers*.³³ The present crisis of the European subject unfolds in a society, and, to some extent, in a Church, less hierarchized. The spiritual nomad has fewer fixed points by which to measure progress towards or away from that self which has now become other. Certeau felt that he himself had been engaged in 'migrations through institutions of meaning'.³⁴ Following his own spiritual itinerary had left him remote from the beliefs and practices of the church and religious order in which he had begun: he was quietly coping, as best he could, with a life led according to a theology of absence. Certeau was quite open about the autobiographical, even self-regarding character of his scholarship. His research into Surin, for example, was 'a mirror-like structure'³⁵ which allowed him to understand himself as an historian of mysticism who 'seeks one who has vanished, who in turn sought one who had vanished, and so on'.³⁶

Absent, in the end, from Certeau was belief in God, about which he could only read in the writings of the mystics, and absent too was faith in the European subject, an identifiable self, or 'I' who could respond to the invitation of the hidden God to lead a particular life in a particular way. Labadie, for all his 'apostasies', seems the more committed figure. The ceaseless wandering was not a substitute for some more constructive activity but was itself a life of action. Suspicious of even the most sacred texts, Jean de Labadie was not reduced to finding God in books, but remained faithful, after his fashion, to the call which Surin and Favre, in their way, had understood as not so much a rejection of the self discovered in one's places of origin, but an invitation to discover the Subject in other places as well. As Ahearne puts it, 'They aspired to convert their own I into the site of the Other'.³⁷ This is the very opposite of relegating religion to being mere interiority. Labadie, disappointed as he was by the various communions, gave up neither on God nor on common life. The content of his youthful mystical experience, looked at askance by the Jesuit General, was such as to impel and inform a very energetic evangelization, from within the different denominations to which he belonged. Although perhaps a

marginal figure, Labadie did not move to the edge of mainstream Christianity because of an inability to settle, or out of a wish to sample everything, but in the hope of finding the truth.

As an historian, Certeau was preoccupied by two conditions which he felt informed his research: absence and difference. He was struck by the absence of much that he would wish to know. Historical texts, for example, are only traces of the past. He was also very conscious of the difference between ways of thinking which were practised in the past and those which go on now. As he studied the spiritual writings of the seventeenth century he was acutely aware of their strangeness and that theirs was a Christianity quite different from his own. Many religious and cultural upheavals separate us from them. Certeau had to give up the proximity to his authors which had initially drawn him to them. Luce Giard has described the humiliation which Certeau experienced in this discovery that the old spiritual writers had something which he could not possess.³⁸ He shared the 'internal exile' of Surin, by whom he felt so haunted, and the experience of being held suspect by institutions which Labadie had known.

As a religious person, Certeau considered himself to be in an awkwardly persistent state of bereavement. The family need not, however, wear mourning. Certeau's embarrassment in the presence of the religious convictions of others, or of himself when young, did not turn out to be an invitation to reconsider the content of those beliefs. The sense of being cut off from something lost might have prompted projects for securing its retrieval. Certeau, notwithstanding this possibility, was well and truly exiled from his subject matter and mourned painfully the loss of that presence of God which is celebrated by his mystic authors in their texts. He felt severed not only from the writers but also from the One about whose felt presence they had so much to say. The mystics, of course, had also felt the absence of God, and loss and separation. This absence is inscribed in their texts, and many of them felt acutely that inscription in the body also. The present crisis of the European subject is a loss of the known self with which the mystics of the threshold of modernity would have sympathized, and, even, in a certain sense envied. Their anguished historian, Michel de Certeau, entered fully into their pain.

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NOTES

- 1 Michel de Certeau, *La faiblesse de croire* (Paris, 1987), pp 183–266.
- 2 Luce Giard (ed), *Le voyage mystique de Michel de Certeau* (Paris, 1988), introduction.
- 3 Luce Giard, 'La passion de l'altérité' in *Michel de Certeau* (Paris, 1987), p 27.
- 4 Michel de Certeau, *Bienheureux Pierre Favre: Mémorial* (Paris, 1959), introduction, pp 39–40.
- 5 *Fabri monumenta* (Rome, 1941), p 185.
- 6 F. C. Bauerschmidt, 'The Abrahamic voyage of Michel de Certeau and theology', *Modern Theology* 12, 1 (1996), p 4.
- 7 E.g. *Fabri monumenta*, p 166.
- 8 *Ibid.*, p 34.
- 9 *Ibid.*, p 398.
- 10 Pierre Favre, *Mémorial*, sections 385–386, pp 394–395 in Certeau's edition.
- 11 *Bienheureux Pierre Favre: Mémorial*, introduction, p 43.
- 12 Bauerschmidt, 'Abrahamic voyage', p 5.
- 13 See Julia Kristeva, *Strangers to ourselves*, trans L. S. Roudiez (New York, 1991), ch 4: 'The therapeutics of exile and pilgrimage', p 87.
- 14 Michel de Certeau, *La prise de parole et autres écrits politiques* (Paris, 1968), trans T. Conley, *The capture of speech and other political writings* (Minneapolis, 1997).
- 15 Michel de Certeau, *L'écriture de l'histoire* (Paris, 1984), trans T. Conley, *The writing of history* (New York, 1988), p 36.
- 16 Michael Barnes, *Traces of the other* (Chennai, 2000), p 73.
- 17 Michel de Certeau, *L'invention du quotidien, Volume I, Arts de faire* (Paris, 1980, 1990), trans S. Rendall, *The practice of everyday life* (Berkeley, 1984).
- 18 Series of allusions in the *Mémoriale* for December 1542, written at Mainz; Certeau's edition, pp 262–265.
- 19 Luce Giard, 'Michel de Certeau's heterology and the new world', *Representations* (Winter 1991), p 216.
- 20 *Bienheureux Pierre Favre: Mémorial*, introduction, p 72.
- 21 *Ibid.*, p 50.
- 22 Julia Kristeva, 'Europe divided: politics, ethics, religion' in her *Crisis of the European subject*, trans S. Fairfield (New York, 2000), p 160.
- 23 *Bienheureux Pierre Favre: Mémorial*, pp 80–82.
- 24 Left unfinished at Surin's death, and first published in 1801.
- 25 Michel de Certeau, *La fable mystique, Volume I: XVIe–XVIIe siècle* (Paris, 1982, 1987), trans Michael B. Smith as *The mystic fable, Volume I: sixteenth and seventeenth centuries* (London and Chicago, 1992).
- 26 Edited by Luce Giard (Paris, 1987).
- 27 Michel de Certeau, *Heterologies: discourse on the other*, ed and trans B. Massumi (Minneapolis, 1986), ch 7: 'Surin's melancholy', p 102.
- 28 F. Courel (ed), *La vie et la doctrine spirituelle de Louis Lallemant* (Paris, 1959), p 90.
- 29 *The mystic fable*, p 226.
- 30 *Ibid.*, p 242.
- 31 *Ibid.*, p 299.
- 32 Bauerschmidt, 'Abrahamic voyage', p 16.
- 33 Including James I and VI's granddaughter, Princess Elizabeth of the Palatinate, Abbess of Hervord.
- 34 *The mystic fable*, p 292.
- 35 *Ibid.*, p 10.
- 36 *Ibid.*, p 11.
- 37 Jeremy Ahearn, *Michel de Certeau: interpretation and its other* (Cambridge, 1995), p 116.
- 38 'La passion de l'altérité' in Luce Giard (ed), *Michel de Certeau* pp 17–38; see also Michel de Certeau, *La faiblesse de croire*, pp 307–314.