

**Michel de Certeau's Biography (Petite Bibliographie en anglais)
par Luce Giard Dept of History, UC San Diego February 5, 2006**

Michel-Jean-Emmanuel de la Barge de Certeau was born on May 17, 1925, in Chambéry (Savoie), the first of four children (three sons, a daughter). His father Hubert was an engineer from a Savoyard petite noblesse family, and his mother Antoinette de Tardy de Montravel, an early orphan from a Dauphiné family, had an only brother who was a Benedictine monk. After completing the well-structured curriculum of a French school at the secondary level (with Greek and Latin, plus German and philosophy, as his main topics), he studied at different Universities, following the medieval tradition of peregrinatio academica, when students travelled from town to town in quest of great masters. Summer time would bring the whole family to their country-house near Saint-Pierre d'Albigny (Savoie), with its attached farm tended by a tenant farmer and his family. Both family's children would take some part in the farm's summer tasks and enjoy common outdoor activities in a combination of closeness, mutual respect, and social distance in the tradition of Ancien Régime society. Michel de Certeau would always keep some deep feeling for the old family house, the mountainous countryside, and the happy days of childhood adventures with his siblings. The house itself was a composite, with some seventeenth-century buildings contiguous to a massive but harmonious fifteenth-century Charterhouse. In his late teens, he would be attracted by the Carthusian monastic life, which combines solitary life to the minimum of community links, and he would often remind friends that the order had emerged from a humble hermitage in the Alps, that the Grande Chartreuse area was close to his dear Savoy.

After the dark years of World War II, which had deprived his generation of the usual teenage freedom, he felt much "in need of some fresh air away from his provincial milieu", as he would say later on. He went on long solitary rides on his bicycle through France, sleeping "à la belle étoile", eating light meals of bread, cheese (and chocolate, a treat which had been totally absent during the War), drinking water from springs and public fountains, reading and annotating some book, meditating a lot. Without any pre-selected itinerary, "il allait à l'aventure", stopping here or there, at some remote village square, because of the light, the music of voices, the quietness of a hot day. He would draw the medieval local church or the "fontaine de l'abreuvoir", while observing the daily life of villagers. He enjoyed those days of pensive retreat, "loin du bruit du monde", and "dans le monde", as seventeenth-century spiritual literature would present such experience.

From that time on, he taught himself a way of training his mind and body, to make the most of the time and the energy given to him. He was aware of the general fragility of the human condition, even if he was and would be in a very good physical condition until the sudden diagnosis of a cancer in late July 1985, from which he would die on January 9, 1986, in his Paris apartment. Until then he would show a rare resistance to long hours of work, day and night, to numberless travels and duties. But he would always find some time to welcome his visitors, to listen to their questions, to read their papers, as if they were messengers he had been waiting for. He had acquired frugal habits in eating, drinking, sleeping, and the like, habits inspired by his reading of an ancient life of Aristotle and by the sayings of the Desert Fathers. He carried this frugality with him, adapting it to all situations in an elegant way. In his tranquil demeanor, there was no need for a moralistic discourse nor for a rhetorical denial of physical life. Asceticism was a private matter for him and stayed such, to any question on this issue he would answer with his mystical smile: "Oh, well, it is not the matter of a championship". Later on, when I read the Jesuit Constitutions and Ignatian spirituality, I recognized in his lifestyle the mark of this tradition. His major excess concerned his work habits, he would work long hours over his books, his manuscripts, his lectures, his friends' and students' drafts, and he would at first seem surprised when someone could not do the same and would ask for a break or a delay. But soon, with a gleam of joy in his eye, he would add: "It is a very good idea, let us stop here, I have another paper to write for to-morrow" and he would quickly leave in the direction of his study. After his death, Marc Augé, President of the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, the very institution where Certeau taught his last seminars in December 1985, drew an acute portrait of him : « His was an intellect which knew no fear, no

lassitude, no pride » (C'était une intelligence sans peur, sans fatigue et sans orgueil).

He studied at the universities of Grenoble, Paris, and Lyons from Fall 1944 to Spring 1950, receiving degrees in Classics and Philosophy. In Paris he was among the two or three persons attending Jean Baruzi's last seminars on mystical literature at the Collège de France, an inspiring experience for which he would feel in debt when developing his own reading of Juan de la Cruz : the Spanish Carmelite, who, with Teresa de Avila and Jean-Joseph Surin, will be his dearest and most visible textual source in *The Mystic Fable* (University of Chicago Press, 1992). During his formative years, he also studied at Catholic seminaries. He felt called to the service of God, but kept looking for a rule of life and a community model able to fulfil his desires. In his enquiry about traditions and rules of life, he was a student at the “Séminaire des Messieurs de Saint-Sulpice” at Issy-les-Moulineaux, a Paris suburb, for two academic years (1944-1945, and 1946-1947). Then he moved to Lyons where the Catholic University offered a strong program in biblical studies (Old Testament Hebrew, New Testament Greek, exegesis, Church Fathers' commentaries) and in scholastic philosophy. When in Lyons he encountered the Jesuit theologian Henri de Lubac (who would become a cardinal in his old age) and other Jesuit fathers at the Jesuit residence of Fourvière. Some of them would be departing to or returning from distant countries (China, the Americas, Madagascar, the Middle East), they would share all kinds of information about political events, social transformations, intellectual debates. He was impressed by their Ignatian alliance of action and contemplation, their mobility between tradition and modernity, he admired their open minds, the attention given to contemporary issues. Soon he felt that he might find his “natural place” (in the Aristotelian sense of it) among them, and in Fall 1950 he decided to join the Society of Jesus.

He was accepted in the Jesuit province of France, in spite of his University degrees he was granted no short cut across the usual long training of a scholasticus approbatus. Once again, he went back to school, this time with his Jesuit cohort, in order to get a B.A. in philosophy and theology. Many years after their time of study, some of his companions would still remember how frightening his brilliance had been for them. Although he was neither arrogant nor aggressively competitive, his intellectual superiority was too visible to be easily accepted by some of his fellow students. The strongest moment in this training came in 1953-1954 at the well-known Jesuit Seminary Les Fontaines (Chantilly, Oise) when he was admitted with the most advanced members of his cohort to the special one-year program dedicated to Hegel's philosophy: the “happy few” spent one full year, for six hours every day, in close reading and commenting of Hegel, read in the German text, under the guidance of Father Joseph Gauvin. Later on, he would often declare his gratitude to Gauvin, “who had taught him so much”. He was ordained as a priest in Lyons on July 31, 1956. Meanwhile, he had completed the required series of Jesuit experimenta (service of the sick in a hospital, catechizing and preaching in a parish, etc.) , among which there was a one-year teaching position at a Jesuit school (his was in philosophy for the equivalent of 12 th grade students in Brittany at Vannes, Morbihan, in 1954-1955).

Then he was permitted to return to the preparation of a dissertation on Saint Augustine, that he had started to research before joining the Jesuits. He had long been interested in the conceptual instruments and writing style of the leading Latin Church Father (pace Saint Jerome and his admirers). He wanted to analyze how Augustine's doctrinal decisions had determined the future of Latin Christianity. His hypothesis was that, by selecting and isolating some elements from the theological corpus of the Greek Fathers, Augustine had reshaped Christian theology into a pessimistic legalist doctrine, because he had thought it better adapted to uneducated Western Christians whose institutions owed much to Roman Law. Certeau would always be fascinated by the remploi (transformative recycling) of concepts, institutional rules, social codes, and practices.

For similar reasons, he would later on enjoy travelling, lecturing, and teaching in Latin America, which he discovered in 1967 through the Jesuit university networks and to which he would return several times. He entertained a special dilection for Brazil and Brazilians. The sixteenth-century travel narrative of Jean de Léry inspired a remarkable chapter in *The Writing of History* (Columbia University Press, 1988) . He would equally praise the subtle minds of contemporary intellectuals

and the creativity of poor people making do on the street. He had also numerous friends, among them several Jesuits, much involved in Allende's Chile, whose social and political evolution he followed with close attention. In September 1973, on the morning when the military coup d'état was announced, we had scheduled to work together. He came to the appointment with a dark look on his face, saying : "It is the end of it. They will kill him [Allende] and many others around him"; we did not work, we talked for two hours about Chile. What had attracted him to his unachieved study of Augustine, what would mean so much in his Latin America encounters, concerned a key problem on which he would always be thinking and collecting information, from theology to history, from anthropology to sociology : how are lasting social communities able to associate conflicting individuals, how could "union" be made acceptable between persons and social groups separated by their "differences" and eager to preserve them ? The phrase *l'union dans la différence* was the subtitle of his first book dedicated to the general public (*L'Étranger*, 1 st ed. 1969, revised ed. 2005).

The work on Augustine was soon interrupted, when his superiors changed their plans for him. He was asked to invest his mind and work into another field of study. It was the time when, under the guidance of Father Maurice Giuliani (d. 2003), a scholar well versed in Ignatius' writings, French Jesuits launched a strong research program in the first spiritual authors of the Order, including Ignatius, for the years 1540-1650. As expected from his Jesuit vow of obedience, Michel de Certeau complied with his Superiors' new will for him. In order to deepen his knowledge of early modern history, he went back to graduate seminars at the Sorbonne (with Professors Alphonse Dupront and Roland Mousnier) and at the Fifth Section of the *École Pratique des Hautes Études* (with Professor Jean Orcibal, a renowned specialist of Jansenism). Under Orcibal's supervision, he received a Doctorate in religious history with a Dissertation on Pierre Favre's spiritual diary in 1960. Favre (1506-1546), a Savoyard whom Ignatius Loyola had encountered at the University of Paris, was among the first companions who joined him to found the Society of Jesus in 1543. He was also one of the first to die from overwork and great poverty, after many exhausting travels between Italy, France, Spain, and Germany. But he left his holy mark on many, both within and outside the Society, through his preaching, his insightful practise of the Spiritual Exercises, his letters and diary.

After his dissertation on Favre, which gave him the matter of his first book, *Mémorial de Pierre Favre* (1960), Certeau moved to a more controversial figure that he would never leave, while also conducting investigations in other fields. His new hero, Jean-Joseph Surin, was a Jesuit from Bordeaux, contemporary of Descartes, a writer of beautiful French prose on devotional literature, whose hundreds of letters, copied and recopied by numberless devotees, were circulated throughout France. Surin had also been the famous exorcist on the "theatre of devils" at Loudun in the years 1634-1637, the only one who was able to defeat Jeanne des Anges' perverse demons, but who suffered a nervous breakdown under the stress. For Michel de Certeau, Surin " was at once the Don Quixote and the Hölderlin of that 'extraordinary adventure'. The Devil's theatres are also centres for the mystics" (*The Possession at Loudun*, University of Chicago Press, 2000, p.5). Certeau provided magisterial editions of Surin's *Guide spirituel* (1963) and of his *Letters* (1966). His scholarly introductions and annotations reconstructed the unity of a corpus broken into pieces after Surin's fall into melancholy and the dissemination of his manuscripts. His desire to better understand Surin's destiny brought him to the active psychoanalytical milieu in Paris. With three other Jesuits, he was among the sixty people who took part in the decisive meeting, summoned by Jacques Lacan in order to found his *École freudienne*. Without having undergone a long psychoanalysis, Certeau acquired an in-depth knowledge of Freud's works (he often read Freud in the original German version), remained an active member of the Lacanian milieu, discussed his work in progress on mystics at diverse psychoanalytical venues, and often said that psychoanalysts were among his best interlocutors on that topic. After his death, I edited a collection of his main essays on Freud's legacy (*Histoire et psychanalyse entre science et fiction*, 1 st ed., Gallimard, 1987, revised ed. 2003; half of it had already been translated in *Heterologies*, University of Minnesota Press, 1986).

During his years of intensive work on Favre and Surin, Certeau's Superiors kept him busy with

editorial duties on the board of Jesuit journals to which he contributed many articles. He steadily worked for four Jesuit journals: an influential monthly *Études*, dedicated to the analysis of current trends and contemporary issues for the general public; a new-born quarterly *Christus*, inspired by Maurice Giuliani to provide Jesuit school teachers and alumni with Ignatian spirituality from past to present; and two scholarly journals on religious history and theology, *Revue d'ascétique et de mystique*, and *Recherches de science religieuse*. In those two journals, he would publish some of his major papers on historiography and on mystical literature. Either because of his editorial responsibilities, which required the quick production of informed papers on different topics, or because this work schedule fit with his turn of mind, he would always keep the habit of circulating a first version of his work-in-progress in the format of well-documented journal papers, which he would later on review, expand, and finally transform into book chapters. It was not that he was unable to compose long books, that his mind could not sustain a long run. It came, I think, from an interior feeling that time would be short, that the task could be interrupted at any time, and the writer made unable to achieve his work. Family events reinforced his intuition: his brother Jean (younger by ten months) died in his twenties, his sister Marie-Amélie in her early thirties, he lost one eye in a car crash (August 1967) near Chambéry, in which his mother died (his father, the driver, had no injury). When remembering the dark days spent at the hospital after the accident (for a few days, physicians could not tell if he would survive), he would say: "I was afraid that I had turned idiot and nobody was telling me the truth. I had a book in my bag on the day of the crash, I tried again and again to read it but I could not make sense of the words." Well, that book was Jacques Derrida's newest, *De la Grammatologie*, which did not provide the easiest reading-test for a patient with several fractured bones, recovering from serious surgery on his face, and waiting for another delicate operation on his eye.

The turning-point in his career was brought by the social "events" in May 1968. His fast response to them appeared in instalments in *Études* from June to October, then were collected in a short book published in late October. One of his opening sentences caught media attention: "En mai dernier, on a pris la parole comme on a pris la Bastille en 1789" ("Last May, speech was taken the way, in 1789, the Bastille was taken", *The Capture of Speech*, University of Minnesota Press, 1997, p.11). Suddenly, he was asked to lecture in many towns, to take part in radio programs, to sit on special committees with the duty of suggesting a quick reform of the university system, and to participate in other such activities in the public sphere. The time of his *vie cachée* was over, he had entered his *vie publique* forever. He started to engage with many social milieus, entered new intellectual networks, was often interviewed in newspapers and on radio, as he became a well-known intellectual on the French scene. He also met a new generation of junior scholars who would become his friends and sometimes would co-author texts with him. Later on, many of them would climb to top positions, among them historians such as Roger Chartier, Dominique Julia, and Jacques Revel, sociologists such as Danièle Hervieu-Léger, who presently presides over the *École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales*.

These were his most creative years, when he was able to weave all threads in his writing: the breadth of his reading, the accuracy of his scholarship, the brilliance of his style, his powerful grasp of critical theory. From 1970 on, he would publish book after book which would mark his readers: on demons and possession (1970), on historiography (1973, 1975), on linguistic policy and social hierarchy (1975), on mass media, consumption and daily life (1980), on mystics (1982). At the same time, he would regularly teach graduate programs in different research fields at various universities: theology (Catholic University, Paris), anthropology and psychoanalysis (Université de Paris-Vincennes), then anthropology and history (Université de Paris VII- Jussieu), literature and much more at UCSD in 1978-1984. His Californian experience in San Diego ended when he accepted a new position at EHESS in Paris on "the historical anthropology of beliefs (16-18 th centuries)", he opened his teaching there in Fall 1984. In spite of extensive cancer surgery in Summer 1985, he taught again in Fall 1985 and died at the end of the Christmas break.

One week after his death, a former student of his sent me a magnificent bunch of white flowers with

those words: “According to Saint Irenaeus of Lyons, Man is the glory of God. Michel is the proof” (La gloire de Dieu, c'est l'homme; Michel en fut la preuve).

Luce Giard
Dept of History, UC San Diego
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