

“Traverser les signes”: Michel de Certeau in Italy

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Between Paris and Urbino

“Mon cher Claude, quand tu m’annonçais ta profession du 23 septembre, j’étais sur le point de prendre une décision—prise aujourd’hui—d’entrer chez les jésuites. Je crois que Dieu m’appelle en Chine de cette façon” (My dear Claude, when you informed me of your profession on September 23, I was about to reach a decision—a decision I have taken today—to join the Jesuits. I believe that God is calling me to China by this path).¹ With these words, addressed to his friend Claude Geffré on December 9, 1949, Michel de Certeau reveals that he had finally resolved his hesitation regarding which religious order to join, linking his choice to the spirit and missionary vocation inscribed in the history and tradition of the Society of Jesus. Although his spiritual path would not ultimately take him to China as a missionary, Certeau was, as is well known, an indefatigable *Wandersmann*, and travel became a defining trait of his intellectual activity—marked by constant movement across disciplines and fields of knowledge, across countries and continents.² In a 1983 interview, when asked about how he spent his free time, Certeau offered his own definition of travel: “Sortir ailleurs: d’autres gens, d’autres pays, d’autres expériences...Le travail technique, rigoureux, érémitique est nécessaire mais il faut pouvoir respirer—aspérer plutôt laisser entrer l’air qui vient d’ailleurs...Il faut aliéner son petit savoir, essayer de le perdre, pratiquer l’oubli qui est vacance et vide offert à d’autre” (To go elsewhere: other people, other lands, other experiences...Technical, rigorous, eremitic work is necessary, but one must also be able to breathe—or rather, to inhale, to let in the air that comes from elsewhere...One must alienate one’s little store of knowledge, try to lose it, practise forgetting—a forgetting that is both a holiday and a void offered to the other).³

In his numerous journeys—which included extended stays in many Latin American countries and in the United States, particularly in California, where from the 1970s onward he would teach regularly, first in temporary positions and later as a tenured professor, at the University of California, San Diego (UCSD), all while continuing to engage with the projects, networks, and activities in which he was involved on the European continent—Certeau also developed a significant relationship with the Italian intellectual milieu, especially through his interest in semiotics, which he cultivated across many aspects of his work. It is important to recall that, beginning in the late 1960s, Certeau took part in numerous activities in France organized by a heterogeneous group of researchers gathered around the figure of Julien Greimas. The Lithuanian-born semiotician, who in 1965 had been permanently appointed director of studies at the *École Pratique des Hautes Études*, initially led a seminar on “General Semiology” and later founded the *Groupe de recherches sémio-linguistiques* (Semio-Linguistic Research Group); he was also among

¹ François Dosse, *Michel de Certeau: le marcheur blessé* (Paris: La Découverte/Poche, 2007), 45. All translations, unless otherwise noted, are my own.

² I include here the inevitable citation of Certeau’s self-description: “Je suis seulement un voyageur” (I am nothing more than a traveler). See Michel de Certeau, “L’Expérience spirituelle,” *Christus*, no. 67 (1970): 488.

³ Laura Willet, “Traverses: une interview avec Michel de Certeau,” *Paroles gélées: UCLA French Studies*, no. 1 (1983): 13.

the founders, in 1969, of the Cercle Sémiotique de Paris (Paris Semiotics Circle).⁴ Greimas's research and teaching activities made it possible, within the context of French structural semiotics, to establish a space for discussion and exchange—at times even critical—among scholars and researchers from a variety of backgrounds, generations, and disciplines: some were already recognized *maîtres à penser*, such as Claude Lévi-Strauss, Roland Barthes, and Umberto Eco; others were younger, including Michel de Certeau himself, Louis Marin, and Julia Kristeva. Among the diverse group of attendees and sympathizers at the Parisian meetings were also the two Italian scholars Pino Paioni and Paolo Fabbri.⁵ Both of them—who in the years to come became key figures in the development of semiotics in Italy—had already, by the late 1960s, been working to promote the first Italian translation of some of Greimas's studies, published under the title *Modelli semiologici* (Semiotic Models),⁶ and to build, starting from the intellectual and personal relationships forged in France, a series of workshops, seminars, and forums for discussion that led, in 1970, to the founding of the International Center for Semiotics and Linguistics in Urbino, with Greimas himself as its first director. Even before the official establishment of this institute, in 1967 Tzvetan Todorov had led an international seminar entitled *Metodi di analisi della narrazione* (Methods of Narrative Analysis) inaugurating a predominantly summer-based research practice, designed to take advantage of university facilities that could be made available to visiting scholars during the academic recesses. Although the collaboration between Italian and French scholars formed the backbone of these initiatives, the roster of participants in the many activities that took place bears witness to the international scope of the scientific project.⁷

Certeau began to participate in the Urbino center's events in 1971, presenting a paper titled “Le Discours démoniaque” (Demonic Discourse) as part of a symposium on mythology and folklore directed by the Romanian scholar Mihai Pop. Until 1982, with only rare exceptions, he returned to Urbino every summer, taking active part in all the events—some of which he even organized himself, such as the 1982 conference on “Le Discours mystique” (Mystic Discourse). To avoid misunderstanding these encounters as indicative of a “semiotic moment” in Certeau's intellectual trajectory, François Dosse—drawing on Louis Marin—described Certeau's engagement with semiotics as a “traversée sémiologique” (semiotic traversal).⁸ Marin himself had used the expression “traverser les signes” (to traverse signs) to describe Certeau's approach to semiotics.⁹ One might say that Certeau used semiotics as a heuristic framework that allowed him to explore the relationship between the act of saying and what is said in all those discourses in which speech is structured around an absence. If mystical discourse was, in this perspective, the privileged object of inquiry, the interdisciplinary openness of the Urbino colloquia enabled Certeau to explore this articulation far beyond the field of mysticism in the strict sense of the term. With regard to historiography, his investigations into the discourse on absence and on the Other—and

⁴ Eric Landowski, “Le Cercle sémiotique de Greimas,” *CASA: Cuadernos de Semiótica Aplicada* 13, no. 1 (2015): 13–41.

⁵ Paolo Fabbri's path intersected with Certeau's on multiple occasions: in addition to regularly staying in Paris during the 1970s, he met Certeau in California at the University of California, San Diego, and from 1980 also joined the editorial board of *Traverses*, a journal connected to the Centre Pompidou, where Certeau was active (Dosse, *Michel de Certeau*, 411–412, 471).

⁶ Julien Greimas, *Modelli semiologici* (Urbino: Argalia, 1967).

⁷ A full list of seminars and participants from 1967 to 1997 can be found at “Attività della memoria,” accessed May 24, 2025, <https://semiotica.uniurb.it/attivita/attivita-della-memoria/>.

⁸ “La Traversée sémiologique” is the title of Chapter 19 in the aforementioned work by Dosse.

⁹ Louis Marin, “L'Aventure sémiotique, le tombeau mystique,” in *Michel de Certeau*, ed. Luce Giard (Paris: Centre Georges Pompidou, 1987), 208.

into the discourse *of* the absent and *of* the Other—form the basis of his historical writing practice, both as a result and as a symptom of the peculiar nature of the past: it no longer exists, it eludes us, it resists us and yet, like a ghost, it continues to shape the present. Like Hamlet’s father, the past is dead, but its disappearance haunts us phantasmagorically;¹⁰ indeed, it is precisely this disappearance that allows for “le fait *différent* d’une écriture” (the *differential* fact of a [kind of] writing).¹¹

This same articulation also underlies Certeau’s complex studies on belief. The act of believing, which presupposes trust in the Other, functions as a social mechanism grounded in the expectation of a guarantee, a response from the Other: the relations that structure society, the possibilities for communication and interaction enabled by it, and the practices that define it, are ultimately guaranteed, within a network of reciprocity, by the assumption that: “il doit y avoir du répondant” (There must be a respondent).¹² To believe, then, is to make a gesture of openness toward someone who must respond—a figure that obviously varies across different epochs (a neighbor, a political party, a leader, the Church). It is never a matter of the here and now, since the “verification” of a *répondant* is always deferred in time: “Dans une société, le croire empêche donc l’unification totalisante du présent. Il y crée un renvoi à *de l’autre* et à un futur. Il évite aussi la dissémination. Il crée un réseau de dettes et de droits entre les membres d’un groupe. En somme, il garantit une socialité fondée sur une durée” (In a society, belief thus prevents the totalizing unification of the present. It creates in that society a return to the other and to a future. It also eschews dissemination. It creates a nexus of debts and rights amongst the group members. In sum, it guarantees a sociality based on a duration).¹³

Further evidence of Certeau’s sustained interest in semiotics—an interest that traversed the entirety of his intellectual production and aligns perfectly with the portrait of “the poacher” drawn by Andrés Freijomil,¹⁴ in which our Jesuit scholar appears as ceaselessly engaged in rethinking, revisiting, and rewriting—can be found in the interventions he delivered in Urbino. These address topics that would later reappear in *The Writing of History*:¹⁵ for instance, in 1974, during a seminar, he presented a paper entitled “Théorie du discours historique” (The Theory of Historical Discourse); *The Practice of Everyday Life*,¹⁶ for example, contains a revised version of his 1980 Urbino contribution entitled “Récits d’espace” (Spatial Stories); and, of course, *The Mystic Fable* emerged from Urbino.¹⁷ But we should also include presentations by him linked to ongoing research projects, only portions of which Certeau would eventually publish. One such case is his

¹⁰ Michel de Certeau, *The Writing of History*, trans. Tom Conley (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 329. Beyond the specific reference, this is the central theme, particularly in the last two chapters of the text, “Part IV: Freudian Writing.”

¹¹ Michel de Certeau, *Le Lieu de l’autre*, ed. Luce Giard (Paris: Seuil/Gallimard, 2005), 48.

¹² Michel de Certeau, “Une Pratique sociale de la différence: croire,” in *Faire croire: modalités de la diffusion et de la réception des messages religieux du XIIIe au XVe siècle* (Rome: École Française de Rome, 1981), 373. A portion of this contribution has been translated into English: Michel de Certeau, “What We Do when We Believe,” trans. Richard Miller, in *On Signs: A Semiotic Reader*, ed. Marshall Blonsky (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985).

¹³ *Ibid.*, 366.

¹⁴ Andrés G. Freijomil, *Arts de braconner: une histoire matérielle de la lecture chez Michel de Certeau* (Paris: Grasset, 2020).

¹⁵ Michel de Certeau, *The Writing of History*. The French edition was originally published in 1975.

¹⁶ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).

¹⁷ Michel de Certeau, *The Mystic Fable: Volume One*, trans. Michael B. Smith (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), and *The Mystic Fable: Volume Two*, trans. Michael B. Smith (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015). Both volumes were first published in French, in 1982 and 2013 respectively.

paper “Charogne: Le corps de l’autre, de Surin à Schreber” (Carrion: The Body of the Other, from Surin to Schreber), presented at a 1976 conference organized by Hubert Damisch. In this talk, Certeau analyzed the figure and discourse of the German judge Daniel Paul Schreber (1842–1911) within the framework of a broader reflection on torture that the French scholar had been developing since the mid-1970s, and which was only partially published.¹⁸

In terms of the Urbino meetings, particular attention is due to the theme of glossolalia. Even in this domain, the “Urbino materials” were later rearticulated or reconfigured in other texts by Certeau.¹⁹ However, his reflections on glossolalic practices extended beyond the boundaries of academia, finding a place in a project coordinated by the RAI’s (Italy’s national public broadcasting company) Research and Experimental Programming Division, which relied on the expertise of the already mentioned Paolo Fabbri.²⁰ According to François Dosse—citing a statement by the French linguist and historian Jean-Jacques Courtine, who knew Certeau—this project was also supported by the Vatican, which sought to promote a study of what it considered to be the troubling spread of charismatic movements.²¹ RAI therefore “aveva raccolto molte ore di registrazione di eventi glossolalici, soprattutto nel corso di assemblee di pentecostali, combinandole poi con interviste e cultori del fenomeno” (collected many hours of recordings of glossolalic events, especially during Pentecostal assemblies, and then combined them with interviews and commentary from experts on the phenomenon)²² including Paolo Fabbri, the Africanist linguist William J. Samarin from the University of Toronto, and Michel de Certeau himself. The latter was, moreover, by no means unfamiliar with collaborations involving institutions responsible for shaping or implementing cultural policies.²³ As Giorgio Cardona recounts, these materials were screened during the 1978 summer conference in Urbino, *Ricerche sulla glossolalia* (Studies on Glossolalia), at which Certeau presented a paper entitled “L’Absolu de la langue ou l’abjection du sens: glossolalies mystiques” (The Absolute of Language or the Abjection of Meaning: Mystical Glossolalias). He would return to this theme again in 1980 at a conference on *Oralité: culture, littérature, discours* (*Orality: Culture, Literature, Discourse*) in which he participated with the talk: “Corps parlants: orants et mystiques (XVI^e et XVII^e siècles) / Utopies vocales: glossolalies” (Speaking Bodies: Prayers and Mystics [Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries] / Vocal Utopias: Glossolalias).

¹⁸ The figure of Judge Schreber would later be the subject of a study (“The Institution of Rot”) included in Michel de Certeau, *Heterologies: Discourse on the Other*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986). In France, the essay was included in the collection of writings by Certeau, *Histoire et psychanalyse entre science et fiction* (Paris: Gallimard, 1987). As noted by Luce Giard in the introduction to the 2002 edition of that text, the study was part of a broader research project on torture, of which at least one other fragment was published by Giard herself under the title “Corps torturés, paroles capturés” in the aforementioned 1987 *Michel de Certeau*.

¹⁹ All of Certeau’s interventions on glossolalia were later collected in both volumes of *The Mystic Fable*.

²⁰ See Giorgio R. Cardona, “Glossolalia a Urbino,” *L’uomo società tradizione sviluppo*, no. 2 (1978): 161–164, available at <https://rosa.uniroma1.it/rosa03/uomo/article/view/15656>; and Michel de Certeau, *Utopie vocali: dialoghi con Paolo Fabbri e William J. Samarin*, ed. Lucia Amara (Milan: Mimesis, 2015). More broadly, on the conception of glossolalia in Certeau and Fabbri, see Ivan Darrault–Harris, “Une Utopie langagière: la glossolalie,” *Actes Sémiotiques*, no. 129 (2023), <https://doi.org/10.25965/as.8067>.

²¹ Dosse, *Michel de Certeau*, 314.

²² Cardona, “Glossolalia a Urbino,” 161.

²³ See, for instance, Luce Giard’s introduction to the revised edition of Michel de Certeau, *L’Invention du quotidien* (Paris: Gallimard, 1990), as well as some of Certeau’s essays collected in *Culture in the Plural*, trans. Tom Conley (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), especially Chapters 9 and 10, which were originally prepared for a conference on European cultural policy held in France in 1972. *L’Invention du quotidien* is available in the above-cited English translation (entitled *The Practice of Everyday Life*) based on the 1980 French edition.

Returning to the activities coordinated by RAI, in 1977 (in preparation for the following summer's initiatives) Fabbri, Certeau, and Samarin—as reconstructed by Lucia Amara—recorded a series of conversations on glossolalia in Rome. These dialogues demonstrate that the shared interest of the three scholars, which had found a pivotal moment of convergence in the Urbino initiatives, extended into a broader configuration of work involving other groups, networks, and concerns. The dialogues—and the accompanying activities such as letters and reports—offer compelling testimony to Certeau's open mode of working. As shown in documents published in the appendix to Amara's volume, Certeau shared insights and reflections, wove connections, and circulated materials and bibliographies.

From our perspective, it is particularly interesting, when placing these dialogues in relation to other texts by Certeau on this topic, to observe how his interest in glossolalia moved across domains, centuries, and diverse practices. Glossolalia is defined as a fiction of speaking, or rather, a way of speaking a language that is not, in fact, a language, but rather a deception that pretends to function and acquires meaning only at the very moment when a system of signification is undone.²⁴ “This semblance, which can be produced artificially if we know its phonetic rules, is an aural illusion, just as there are visual illusions. It speaks ‘to say nothing,’ precisely to avoid being fooled by words, to escape the traps of meaning, to be a pure *fable* (*fari*, to speak) and get back to primary *speech* in its anteriority.”²⁵ Whatever the form in which it manifests itself—infantile, pathological, literary, or religious—it presupposes that “there is, somewhere, a reservoir of voices ready to speak.”²⁶

In this sense, glossolalia fits as an additional and invaluable piece in the mosaic of Certeau's broader analyses of the social *dispositif* of belief. The expectation of a *répondant* renders the act of believing a gesture of openness toward someone who must “respond” and without whom social life would be impossible. Belief, therefore, results from a wager on the possibility of existing with others. Understood as a practice of interaction, agreement, and negotiation, it ensures the functioning—if not the very existence—of society. In this light, Certeau—who never separated theoretical reflection from his role as an acute observer of his own time (a role he assumed beginning with his groundbreaking article on May 68, which allowed him to metaphorically step out of the Society of Jesus and to take his place, fully, in the French intellectual world)—did not limit himself to defining glossolalia as a phenomenon within the linguistics of enunciation. Rather, he sought to analyze it, starting from the rise of charismatic movements, as a symptom of the crisis of belief in institutions—including ecclesiastical ones. Thus, in the conversations prepared for the RAI program, Certeau revisited a number of ideas he had previously explored in debates and discussions held in France.²⁷ In particular, he focused on the fact that glossolalic movements, within the broader context of the charismatic revival, were largely animated by members of the middle class who, in the wake of the crisis of the model of society shaped by modernity, no longer identified with the bourgeois tradition and were therefore in search of a new symbolic framework for their social role. Observing that in glossolalia the act of saying counts far more than the enunciated content, Certeau noted how this practice—so widespread among charismatics—occupied the void left by the demythologization of religious ideology, “un segno diventato in gran

²⁴ Dosse, *Michel de Certeau*, 301.

²⁵ Certeau, *The Mystic Fable*, 212.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 214.

²⁷ See, for instance, two roundtable discussions on charismatic movements in which Certeau participated, published in *La Lettre*: “Voyage à l'intérieur du mouvement charismatique,” *La Lettre*, no. 211 (1976): 8–18, and “Les ‘Charismatiques’: nouvelle pentecôte ou nouvelle aliénation,” *La Lettre*, no. 219 (1976): 12–14.

parte inattendibile nei contenuti dogmatici, non è più credibile o non è più dicibile” (a sign whose dogmatic content has become largely unreliable, no longer credible or even sayable).²⁸ In this perception of emptiness, glossolalic discourse—lacking a truth content, since enunciation itself also occupies the space of the enunciated—becomes performative: it is salvific because it reconciles each individual with themselves and constitutes the group as a group.²⁹ For this reason, even if it says nothing verifiable, it layers its own truth in that excess of meaning that sustains the belief in the possibility of a word that once again signifies.

In this Italian journey, even the cities’ narratives speak. For reasons that were partly personal and partly scholarly, Certeau was invited to write the introduction—titled “Una iconologia urbana” (An Urban Iconology)—to the 1982 republication of *Le feste anconitane* (The Anconitan Festivities), a text written by the canon Francesco Borioni on the occasion of Pope Gregory XVI’s visit to Ancona in 1841. The work had been composed to celebrate the city’s reconquest following a rebellion that, notably, had been supported by French troops.³⁰ Beyond Certeau’s precise grasp of the historical episode and its context, what stands out in his introduction is his ability to extract from Borioni’s narrative a particular form of urban “invention” that takes shape through “manières de faire” (ways of operating)—practices and gestures—and through the proliferation of memory itineraries. Though these may seem at first to conform to the ritual form of papal visit narratives, they in fact escape that form and subvert it, sabotaging—much like the ordinary man in *The Practice of Everyday Life*—the symbolic inscription of pontifical authority. Certeau reveals a first layer of theological reading, which reiterates both the structure and the themes of traditional accounts of papal visits, punctuated by cyclical returns of the plague. Borioni claims to recount the city as only the pope could have seen it: the citizens could perceive a reborn Ancona only through “la nostra sagra immagine” (our sacred image)³¹ of the Madonna in procession, which thereby becomes a metonym for the city itself. However, this reiteration of a narrative tradition ends up reinventing the city’s spatial configuration. The places, now described as adorned for the pontiff, now recalled in the abandonment brought by the plague, transform Ancona into a “vocabolario di topoi... versatile, suscettibile di essere volta a volta utilizzato e segnato da visitatori esterni” (vocabulary of topoi... versatile, susceptible to being repeatedly reappropriated and reinscribed by outside visitors).³² Not only does the narrative present each location as potentially ambivalent but, in reclaiming the chain of stories, it reinvents them: the account becomes a *mise en abîme*, generating new layers of signification—chief among them, the political. Moving from one place to another within this versatile space, the papal and civic authorities—recently restored to papal sovereignty—exchange ceremonial honors. But Certeau asks the reader: “chi è l’ingannato, e chi l’ingannatore?” (Who is the deceiver, and who the deceived?).³³ At the fortified citadel, for instance, the pope’s reconstruction efforts are praised following the expulsion of the French, without any mention of the uprising, as if the shifts in sovereignty were mere turns of fate

²⁸ Certeau, *Utopie vocali*, 56.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 73.

³⁰ Michel de Certeau, “Una iconologia urbana,” introduction to *Le feste anconitane*, by Francesco Borioni (Ancona: Il lavoro editoriale, 1981), vii–xvi. The publisher and geographer Giorgio Mangani recounts his meeting with Certeau in an extensive interview about the publishing house (Giorgio Mangani, “Trent’anni di lavoro editoriale,” interview by Barbara Pasquelli, in *Il lavoro editoriale: Catalogo storico* (Ancona: Il lavoro editoriale, 2009), available at <https://lavoroeditoriale.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/Catalogo-storico-estratto.pdf>. Certeau’s introduction was republished under the title “La Visitation de la ville: le Pape à Ancona,” *L’Esprit Créateur* 25, no. 3 (1985): 52–63.

³¹ “La nostra sagra immagine” is the title of the first paragraph of Certeau’s introduction.

³² Certeau, “Una iconologia urbana,” x.

³³ *Ibid.*, xi.

with no reference to the citizens of Ancona, who in the narrative are transformed, through their industrious agency, into the true guardians of the city. As one walks through the streets—punctuated by the headquarters of various local powers—it is the catalogue of the citizens’ glories, their creativity, and their accomplishments that shapes the path of the story. Thus, in Borioni’s account, what ultimately proves real is the city itself—an invention of its own citizens.

A Mystical Language

As Louis Marin observed, Certeau’s semiotic traversal was rooted in a theoretical framework informed by the linguistics of enunciation, with a focus on the conditions that make speech possible. As a condition of possibility for speaking, enunciation becomes for Certeau an object of knowledge in itself, independent from the enunciated content into which it is typically transposed. In this light, the privileged site for investigating enunciation is, for him, mystical discourse. Certeau sought to explore the *modus loquendi* of mysticism by attending to the conditions and practices of enunciation within a specific historical context—namely, the threshold of modernity—marked by the disappearance of the voice of God. It is for this absent voice that mystics, using their own bodies as a theater of enunciative experimentation, sought to recreate the conditions that might allow it to resound once again. In Certeau’s analysis, the mystical experiment lays bare the formal apparatus of enunciation, since it represents an effort to construct a space in which the divine word might echo and reemerge or, in other words, an effort to reestablish the conditions for speaking without saying, to define and isolate the very scene of enunciation. As Carlo Ossola has written: “Certeau ha percorso l’arduo varco che separa l’archiviazione degli enunciati—da riassumere in una narrazione (la *fabula* dello storico)—dall’*enunciazione* di una *Wesenheit*, di una ‘essenzialità’ che tarda a venire, che non sarà mai discorso” (Certeau traversed the arduous gap that separates the archiving of enunciated statements—to be summarized in a narrative (the *fabula* of the historian)—from the *enunciation* of a *Wesenheit*, an ‘essentiality’ reluctant to manifest itself and that will never become discourse).³⁴

It is precisely on the terrain of mysticism that Certeau found a strong convergence with many Italian scholars. Once again in Urbino in July 1982 (the first volume of *La Fable mystique* had been published just that May), he organized a conference on *Le Discours mystique (Mystic Discourse)*, attended by, among others, Jacques Le Brun, Georges Didi-Huberman, Régine Robin, Louis Panier, and Mino Bergamo. The Urbino conference was the result of an ongoing engagement with the semiotic analysis of mystical discourse, which in preceding years had led Certeau to work closely with biblical scholars and theologians aligned with structural analysis methods, both in theology and in biblical studies. Among them, Louis Panier stood out as one of the most active semioticians applying Greimas’s tools and insights to the study of religion.³⁵ A professor at the Catholic University of Lyon, Panier was among the members of the Centre pour l’Analyse du Discours Religieux (CADIR), which had been founded in 1975 as an evolution of a structural analysis group led by the biblical scholar Jean Delorme within the faculty of theology. Delorme, engaging with the inquiries and problems discussed in Greimas’s seminars, had turned to semiotics after attending the national congress of the French Catholic association for the study of the Bible,

³⁴ Carlo Ossola, “Introduzione,” in *Il parlare angelico*, by Michel de Certeau (Florence: Olschki, 1988), 3.

³⁵ Massimo Leone, “Sémiotique de la religion: histoire, méthode et perspectives,” *Les Sciences des religions en Europe: état des lieux 2003–2016* (Paris: Société des amis des sciences religieuses; École Pratique des Hautes Études, 2016), 14.

organized in 1969 by Certeau and Xavier Léon-Dufour, to which Roland Barthes had been invited as a semiotics specialist.³⁶

However, if we can say that mysticism represented a significant point of contact between Certeau and Italian scholars, it is also because a substantial part of his intellectual relationships as well as the Italian reception of his work during his lifetime passed precisely through the prism of mysticism. In Urbino in 1982 the scholar Mino Bergamo, who at the time was preparing his doctoral dissertation at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales under the supervision of Louis Marin, was also present. Bergamo had already begun frequenting French historians in the late 1970s while completing his undergraduate studies at the University of Venice, where he attended lectures not only by his future advisor, but also by Michel Foucault and Jacques Le Brun.³⁷

If, in some respects, one could subscribe to the idea that Certeau was a “master without disciples,” such a claim is likely true only due to the premature death, in 1991, of Mino Bergamo. His studies on seventeenth-century mystical literature—strongly influenced also by Lotmanian semiotics—can be read as an ideal deepening and development of Certeau’s reflections on the subject. Probably the writings of the Italian scholar that most clearly align with Certeau’s line of inquiry are those dedicated to the *Anatomia dell’anima* (Anatomy of the Soul)³⁸ in which Bergamo reconstructs, through the analysis of mystical texts, the formation of a space of interiority as the site where the subject is constituted. Access to interiority, which he examines in relation to mystical writings, is marked by “nulla di spontaneo o di immediato” (nothing spontaneous or immediate), but appears rather as the result of a process of modeling that could itself be the object of a cultural history in which, he writes, “le topiche freudiane dell’apparato psichico, il nodo lacaniano Reale-Simbolico-Immaginario e tutti i diversi modelli della mente che la psicoanalisi ha prodotto fino ai nostri giorni, formerebbero solo l’ultimo capitolo (e non certo il più esaltante)” (the Freudian topographies of the psychic apparatus, Lacan’s triad of the Real, the Symbolic, and the Imaginary, and all the different models of the mind that psychoanalysis has produced up to today would form only the final chapter [and not necessarily the most inspiring one]).³⁹ Yet his work seeks to emphasize how the modeling tools used to map the inner world in seventeenth-century French mystical literature cannot be dissociated from writing—which, also for Certeau, serves as a litmus test for the forms of modern subjectivity.

The special issue of *Asmodeo* entitled *Sul discorso mistico: un omaggio a Michel de Certeau* (On Mystical Discourse: An Homage to Michel de Certeau), edited by Bergamo together with Valerio Marchetti, stands—thanks to its contributions—at the intersection between the history of mysticism and semiotics that marked the relationship between Michel de Certeau and Italian scholars. Bergamo, in particular, investigates the subject of mystical discourse not as a given but as the result of the text itself, around which the conflictual relation between experience and doctrine is structured. Focusing on the *Science expérimentale des choses de l’autre vie*

³⁶ Dominique Avon, “L’Aventure sémiologique des bibliistes français et la Compagnie de Jésus,” in *Jésuites et sciences humaines (années 1960)*, ed. Étienne Fouilloux and Frédéric Gugelot (Lyon: LARHRA, 2014), <https://doi.org/10.4000/books.larhra.3301>.

³⁷ For an intellectual portrait of Bergamo, see Sophie Houdard, “Écriture et forme de vie: Mino Bergamo interprète des textes mystiques (1956–1991),” paper presented at the conference *L’Université face à la mystique : un siècle de controverses?* Geneva 2017, available at <https://univ-sorbonne-nouvelle.hal.science/hal-01814125v1>.

³⁸ Mino Bergamo, *Anatomia dell’anima: da François de Sales a Fénelon* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1991).

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 27.

(Experimental Science of Things of the Other Life) by the Jesuit Jean-Joseph Surin (1600–1665),⁴⁰ Bergamo observes that the act of writing aims to “separare i dati dell’esperienza dal loro orizzonte di riferimento e di ricondurli a un nuovo orizzonte, a un nuovo insieme di condizioni di possibilità” (separate the data of experience from their original frame of reference and reorient them toward a new horizon, a new set of conditions of possibility).⁴¹ In Bergamo’s analysis—in continuity with Certeau’s approach—the *Science expérimentale* becomes an epistemological obstacle course shaped by the interplay, relationships, and positionalities of personal pronouns (e.g., an “I” speaking in the present, recounting a “he” in the past).⁴² The text is exemplary in its display of the misalignment between experience and doctrine, an analysis that, by highlighting the gaps between inner experience and the doctrinal body, ultimately defines a spiritual autobiography. One could also say, elaborating on a suggestion by Paolo Prodi, that Mino Bergamo revived Certeau’s focus on the formal nature of practices. As is well known, the chapter of *The Writing of History* entitled “The Formality of Practices” (originally presented as a contribution to the Conference on Social and Religious History held in Paestum in May 1972)⁴³ attempted to articulate a sociology of behaviors and a history of doctrines. In a context where political logic had begun to overlap with religious logic in the symbolic operations of social legitimation, religious practices had undergone a change of “form”: they functioned differently, but without this transformation being accompanied by “properly apportioned theoretical expression.”⁴⁴ In other words, in the shift from moral theology to the ethics and economics of the eighteenth century, the reference point for normativity was no longer to be found in religious doctrine, but rather “nella coscienza o nell’ordine esterno del potere” (in conscience or in the external order of power). This is the very context of Bergamo’s analysis, which portrays a “pullulare di modelli...tutti indirizzati a definire in qualche modo ‘un’anatomia dell’anima’ come esigenza del nuovo individuo, di una definizione di un territorio interiore di fronte all’avanzata della legge positiva” (swarming of models...all aimed at defining in some way “an anatomy of the soul” as a demand of the new individual, as a definition of an interior territory in response to the positive advance of law).⁴⁵

Within the realm of mysticism studies, the scholars Carlo Ossola and Michele Ranchetti played a key role in fostering Certeau’s dialogue with the Italian intellectual world. Ossola, for his part, promoted the publication of several of Certeau’s writings on the subject, which appeared posthumously in 1988 under the title *Il parlare angelico* (Angelic Speech). This volume was based on a project that Certeau himself had outlined as early as the late 1970s and subsequently developed in collaboration with Ossola in 1981.⁴⁶ The book, which was originally to be titled *Théories de parole* (Theories of Speech), traced a path of openings toward new worlds (Purgatory,

⁴⁰ Surin was one of the main figures involved in the Loudun possession. Sent to exorcise the nuns of the convent, he succeeded especially through the relationship he established with the prioress Jeanne des Anges—but at the cost of a long illness, whose healing is partially recounted in the *Science expérimentale*. A true alter ego of Certeau, who had edited his *Correspondance* in 1966, Surin appears in both volumes of *La Fable mystique*.

⁴¹ Mino Bergamo, “Il problema del discorso mistico,” in *Asmodeo: idee, immagini, segni. Sul discorso mistico: un omaggio a Michel de Certeau*, ed. Mino Bergamo and Valerio Marchetti (Florence: Ponte alle Grazie/Usher, 1989), 24.

⁴² On this, see especially Certeau, *The Mystic Fable*, 144–60.

⁴³ Certeau submitted the text, titled “Du Système religieux à l’éthique des lumières (XVII^e-XVIII^e siècles): la formalité des pratiques,” as a contribution to the proceedings of a 1972 conference in Paestum: *La società religiosa nell’età moderna: atti del convegno “Studi di storia sociale e religiosa”* (Naples: Guida, 1973), 447–509.

⁴⁴ Certeau, *The Writing of History*, 148.

⁴⁵ Paolo Prodi, “L’istituto della penitenza: nodi storici,” *Chiesa e Storia: Rivista dell’Associazione Italiana dei Professori di Storia della Chiesa*, no. 1 (2011): 55.

⁴⁶ The genesis and details of the project are presented in the aforementioned “Introduzione” by Carlo Ossola.

the other world that opens up in Montaigne's writing reflecting the encounter with the Americas, the space of desire evoked by the *Spiritual Exercises*, and so on) and toward new spaces of speech embodying the fracture introduced by modernity. As Ossola writes, the book also arose from the need to reshape the tools of literary criticism in Italy, particularly in the study of religious language, which had traditionally been examined primarily in its social function within the framework of Church history, and treated merely as a kind of archival document.⁴⁷

Far more radical—and arguably unique within the Italian reception of Certeau—was the endeavor undertaken by the philosopher, literary critic, and poet-translator Michele Ranchetti, who sought to identify what he called the “subversive position of the existent”⁴⁸ embodied in Certeau's thought. In 1975, Ranchetti facilitated the translation of a series of Certeau's essays, intitled *Politica e mistica* (Politics and Mysticism), published by Jaca Book⁴⁹ (a publishing house affiliated with the Catholic movement *Comunione e Liberazione* [Communion and Liberation]) as part of the series *Saggi: per una transizione della teoria* (Essays: For a Transition in Theory). The editorial project behind the series sought to challenge the conception of culture as a system for the organization, hierarchization, and compartmentalization of knowledge—structures devised precisely to neutralize knowledge's potential for disruption. In this spirit, the essays included in the series aimed to destabilize established epistemic orders by forging heretofore forbidden connections or introducing displaced words, thereby fracturing the tight bond between “produzione intellettuale ed oppressione-segregazione-emarginazione” (intellectual production and oppression-segregation-marginalization). This aim was expressed with a disarming clarity: “Poiché se è vero che non basta l'arma della critica ed occorre la critica delle armi, il problema è allora il braccio che le regge e non basta rispondere che il braccio è guidato da un cervello. Questo cervello sarebbe forse un edificio perfetto del sapere? A sua volta calibrato su una nuova perfetta organizzazione del potere?” (Since it is true that the weapon of critique alone is insufficient, and what is needed is a critique of the weapons themselves, the problem then lies with the arm that wields them, and it is not enough to reply that the arm is guided by a brain. Would this brain perhaps be a perfect edifice of knowledge? In turn calibrated upon a new, perfect organization of power?).⁵⁰ It is in this context that Certeau finds his place as a “storico del nostro tempo” (historian of our time). The title *Politica e mistica* is taken from one of the essays published in the volume, “Politica e mistica: René d'Argenson (1596–1651)” (Politics and Mysticism: René d'Argenson), evoking at once the political orientation that defined the series' editorial project and the evolution of Certeau's historical method, which unfolds across the three parts of the collection. This evolution pushes historiographical categories to the edge of their dissolution, or rather toward what Ranchetti describes as “un ‘discorso’ storico in cui si mostri o si compia tutto il ‘reale,’ senza residui, in cui l'‘atto’ della storia non si disgiunga e non si liberi dall'attività dello storico, per riuscire solo ad un *farsi*” (a historical “discourse” in which the entirety of the “real” is shown or enacted without remainder, in which the “act” of history is neither severed from nor emancipated from the historian's activity, but culminates only in a “becoming”).⁵¹ This development aims to

⁴⁷ Ossola, “Introduzione,” 6–8.

⁴⁸ To echo the expression used by Mireille Cifali in reference to Certeau and his practice of psychoanalysis. See Mireille Cifali, “Psychanalyse et écriture de l'histoire,” in *Michel de Certeau, histoire et psychanalyse: mises à l'épreuve*, ed. Christian Delacroix, François Dosse, and Patrick Garcia, special issue, *EspacesTemps: les cahiers*, 80–81 (2002): 23.

⁴⁹ Michel de Certeau, *Politica e mistica*, ed. Michele Ranchetti (Milan: Jaca Book, 1975).

⁵⁰ *Ibid.* The quotation is taken from the presentation note of the series, which does not include page numbers.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

recover, almost ontologically, a practice of history that is, at one and the same time, a practice of theology.

It is certainly no surprise that Certeau's work should have found a place in a series published in Italy with such a pronounced political vocation. In 1972, he gave an interview to a small journal, *Il Gallo*, that gave voice to the demands of progressive Catholicism. In response to the interviewer's pressing questions, Certeau explicitly defined his own political stance as revolutionary.⁵²

The Absent Historian

In any case, between the late 1970s and the 1980s, Certeau's editorial presence in Italy was significant. *L'Écriture de l'histoire* (*The Writing of History*) was translated in 1977,⁵³ but already in 1973 the Center for Semiotics and Linguistics in Urbino had published the Italian translation of *L'operazione storica* (*The Historical Operation*), which would originally appear in France in 1974 as the first chapter of *Faire de l'histoire* (*Making of History*), edited by Pierre Nora and Jacques Le Goff. *La Fable mystique* was translated in 1987 by none other than Carlo Ossola.

Undoubtedly, the context in which Certeau's work reached Italy in the 1970s was shaped by studies, interests, and practices related to the investigation of the sign, understood in a very broad sense: i.e., the context of the "traversée sémiologique" to use Dosse's formulation. This element shaped for a long time the reception and legacy of Certeau in Italy. What arrived in Italy was a semiotic Certeau (and it is in this context that his investigation of mysticism—mediated also by Ossola's reading—should be understood), whereas, despite the translations mentioned, the historian Certeau failed to take root. His writings did not find, within the Italian historiographical tradition—one more heavily shaped by the methods of classical philology—the kind of interlocution necessary to spark debate. When *The Writing of History* was republished in 2006, within the broader context of a Certeau "Renaissance," a philosopher was asked to write the book's introduction.⁵⁴ The historian Certeau had already exploded onto the French scene with the 1970 publication of *La possession de Loudun* (*The Possession at Loudon*), shaking the foundations of French historiography and leaving even a major figure like Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie visibly unsettled. In his review, Le Roy Ladurie concluded—clearly discomfited—that "Father Certeau" had written the most diabolical book of the year.⁵⁵ That sense of subversion, however, did not cross the Alps and did not—nor would it ever—threaten the pillars of Italian historical scholarship. *La possession de Loudun* was not translated into Italian until 2011 (and even then, by a philosopher) for a publishing house with predominantly academic circulation.⁵⁶

Likewise, *L'Invention du quotidien* (*The Practice of Everyday Life*) did not attract much attention upon release: the Italian translation had to wait until 2001 and came from a Catholic publishing house, which presented it in the preface as a work of sociology of labor or communication.⁵⁷ This translation, however, was not an isolated sign of Catholic interest in

⁵² Michel de Certeau, "Fede cristiana e politica," *Il Gallo* 26 (1972). The interview appeared in serialized form in the January, February, June, and September issues, and has now been republished in Michel de Certeau, *In prima persona: tra cultura, religione e politica*, ed. Luigi Mantuano (Brescia: Scholé, 2025), 87–122.

⁵³ Michel de Certeau, *La scrittura della storia*, trans. Anna Jeronidimis (Rome: Il Pensiero Scientifico, 1977).

⁵⁴ The 2006 edition, published by Jaca Book, was edited by philosopher Silvano Facioni.

⁵⁵ Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, "Le Diable archiviste," *Le Monde*, November 12, 1971.

⁵⁶ Michel de Certeau, *La possession di Loudun*, trans. Rossana Lista (Bologna: Clueb, 2012).

⁵⁷ On the Italian reception of *L'Invention du quotidien* see Alberto M. Sobrero "La macchina antropologica: Michel de Certeau— I parte," *Lares* 84, no. 2 (2018): 229.

Certeau. As early as 1993, Enzo Bianchi—priest and founder of the influential Comunità di Bose—had edited a collection of Certeau’s writings from *L’Étranger ou l’union dans la différence*, under the title *Mai senza l’altro* (Never Without the Other).⁵⁸ Yet it was undoubtedly the theologian Stella Morra who pioneered the reconstruction of Certeau’s theological profile.⁵⁹ Her studies paved the way for a deeper and more nuanced engagement with the spiritual dimensions of Certeau’s thought within the Italian Catholic world, encouraging the publication of collections that brought to light the more spiritual aspects of his work. This interest was reignited by remarks made by Pope Francis (Jorge Mario Bergoglio), who, in a conversation with Jesuit priest Antonio Spadaro on August 19, 2013 (a conversation recounted but not quoted verbatim by Spadaro), cited Michel de Certeau—alongside Pierre Favre and Henri de Lubac—as a key figure in his theological formation.⁶⁰

Generally speaking, from the 1970s to the present, Certeau’s image in Italy has remained crystallized—albeit with shifting fortunes—within the scholarly imagination as a heterodox and perhaps slightly eccentric figure. Two fictional texts, written nearly fifty years apart, curiously reflect this perception. The first, “Il santuario era vuoto” (The Sanctuary Was Empty), written by Father Virgilio Fantauzzi, a member of the editorial board of *Civiltà Cattolica*, is a short theological tale published in 1975 in *Carte segrete*, a journal known at the time for its avant-garde literary sensibility. The story’s protagonist is the historian Henri Brémond. The narrative recounts Brémond’s inner turmoil prior to meeting Certeau, who appears in the story under the guise of “Michel, un giovane discepolo dal cuore sincero, lo sguardo penetrante, il futuro amico di Foucault e Lacan, di Barthes e della Kristeva, l’indagatore di miti, il distruttore di riti e di cattedrali, colui che avrebbe pubblicato, tanti anni più tardi, un opuscolo dal titolo *Il grado zero del sentimento religioso in Francia*” (Michel, a young disciple with a sincere heart and a penetrating gaze, the future friend of Foucault and Lacan, of Barthes and Kristeva, an investigator of myths, destroyer of rituals and cathedrals, who would later publish, many years later, a pamphlet entitled *Religious sentiment degree zero in France*).⁶¹

The second, more recent, piece resembles an “impossible interview” in the style of a famous RAI radio program that aired between 1974 and 1975.⁶² It was published in June 2024 in the magazine *Jesus* (and can also be read on Enzo Bianchi’s blog). In this brief fictional text, journalist and sociologist Piero Pisarra interviews Certeau.⁶³ The latter recounts how, in his own time, he was regarded as a “disruptor” of institutional knowledge. He lets slip a few thoughts about the present, reflects on TikTok, and muses on how the Society of Jesus is “polyvalent,” just like the Beaubourg Center, which he observes from a nearby café while it is undergoing renovation.

⁵⁸ Michel de Certeau, *Mai senza l’altro* (Magnano: Qiqajon, 1993).

⁵⁹ *L’Étranger ou l’union dans la différence* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1969). Stella Morra began working on Certeau with her doctoral dissertation, published as “*Pas sans toi*”: testo parola e memoria verso una dinamica della esperienza ecclesiale negli scritti di Michel de Certeau (Roma: PUG, 2004), and later focused on disseminating his more theological texts, translating *Il cristianesimo in frantumi* (Cantalupa: Effatà, 2010) e *La debolezza del credere* (Milano: Vita e Pensiero, 2020).

⁶⁰ The interview can be accessed at <https://bit.ly/3GWEZBe>.

⁶¹ The story was republished in *Civiltà cattolica* II (2020): 68–75. The title of the fictional pamphlet is a word play masking the well-known *Le Christianisme éclaté* (Paris: Seuil, 1974).

⁶² These were fictional interviews with historical figures, interpreted by contemporary actors or intellectuals (such as Italo Calvino and Umberto Eco).

⁶³ Michel de Certeau, “Michel De Certeau, il gesuita pellegrino delle frontiere,” interview by Piero Pisarra, *Il Blog di Enzo Bianchi*, accessed May 5, 2025, <https://www.ilblogdienzaenziobianchi.it/blog-detail/post/236305/michel-de-certeau-il-gesuita-pellegrino-delle-frontiere>.

Clearly, in the year marking the centenary of Certeau's birth, this imaginary should not trap us in a mere hagiography of the heretic. Rather, perhaps it is precisely Certeau's distance from more institutionalized paths—being, in the 1970s, a Jesuit whose affiliation with the Society of Jesus was uncertain; a celebrated historian who only assumed an academic position late in life; and an intellectual now studied within the field of theology—that marks the most enduring trace of his passage through Italy, and perhaps beyond. Remaining within the Italian context, the most meaningful legacy of his restlessness may lie in his capacity to provoke reflection on the notion of *limit*—not as withdrawal or the glorification of dispossession, but, in some respects, in the Kantian sense of limit as something learned through the negotiation of conflict, and essential to the foundations of civil life. This sense of limit (as the awareness of the impossible totalization of “knowledge”) is one that cannot be found in hagiographic contributions that attempt to cast Certeau as the patron saint of a discipline. To articulate it better, I would rather turn to another—alongside Mino Bergamo—of his true disciples in Italy, the late anthropologist Alberto Sobrero, whose book *Michel de Certeau: prospettive antropologiche* (Michel de Certeau: Anthropological Perspectives) was published posthumously. In his work, Sobrero consistently placed at the center of inquiry the issue of the limit that thought must confront in the practice of anthropology. Paolo Bettiolo recounts a reflection by Sobrero that aptly captures Certeau's legacy to those who encountered his writings shortly after his death:

Così in questo nostro tempo “in cui le certezze si offuscano” minando ogni “credenza,” ogni vivere comune, “chi fa etnografia,” scrive Sobrero, se ha coscienza “non può non avvertire la duplicità implicita” nella sua pratica: “per un verso...la sensazione frustrante di restare sempre all'interno della propria tautologia esistenziale,” del proprio mondo “e, per altro verso, la sensazione che c'è sempre un'alterità che si sottrae alla vista, uno spazio che non è possibile percorrere. Diciamolo con Conrad—conclude—basta essere abbastanza uomini per percepirne la voce.”

In these times “in which certainties are clouded,” undermining all “belief,” all forms of common life, “those who practice ethnography,” Sobrero writes, “cannot help but sense the implicit duplicity” in their work: “on the one hand...the frustrating sense of always remaining within one's own existential tautology,” within one's own world, “and on the other hand, the awareness that there is always an alterity that escapes perception, a space that cannot be traversed. To borrow Conrad's words,” he concludes, “it suffices to be *human enough* to hear its voice.”⁶⁴

⁶⁴ Paolo Bettiolo, “Postfazione,” in *Michel de Certeau: prospettive antropologiche*, by Alberto M. Sobrero (Brescia: Scholé, 2025), 291.