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“Things that used to be familiar . . . become strange”: de Certeau and the *Possession at Loudun*”

DOUGLAS E. CHRISTIE

They appear at first almost as lovers. He whispers in her ear of the most intimate things. She is lost to herself and is moved by his tenderness toward her. But she belongs to another and guards herself carefully, resolving, “not to open her heart to him.” Still, she does not send him away. He spends long hours with her, speaking to her of love. His ardor is fierce. But so is her resistance. Eventually, he finds “the key to enter into [her] heart.” But in crossing that threshold, he risks more than he knows. The intimate space they share proves too volatile, unstable. He loses his balance and begins a long descent into madness. Or something like madness. And she begins to recover herself. But at this moment, as the charged space between these two souls opens up, everything is still possible. Nothing is determined. It is the moment when the story of love, possession, illness, healing, and holiness between Jeanne des Anges and Jean-Joseph Surin—which forms the center of Michel de Certeau’s brilliant and strange *The Possession at Loudun*—begins.¹

“The Devil’s theaters are also centers for the mystics.”² This simple but provocative observation comes near the beginning de Certeau’s analysis of the outbreak of demonic possession that afflicted the city of Loudun in France between 1632 and 1637. It serves notice early on of his determination to examine the phenomena of demonic possession and mystical experience *together* and to consider both the seeming incommensurability of these experiences as well as their unexpected and sometimes-troubling kinship. It also drives the dramatic force of his analysis, which draws the reader inexorably from the extended and sometimes violent public spectacle of exorcisms in Loudun to the intimate encounter and eventual rapprochement between the Jesuit, Jean-Joseph Surin (the mystic), and the Prioress of the Ursulines, Jeanne des Anges (the possessed). Here in this encounter, the intermingling and confusion of experience and identity become so pronounced that it is almost impossible to discern the boundaries between them. These two figures will become joined in a terrible struggle that is also an intimate embrace. Jeanne des Anges will be transformed from demon-possessed to mystic and visionary, and Jean-Joseph Surin will (through an extraordinary gesture of exchange), it seems, become possessed. The intense instability that marks their encounter, their respective experiences

and the necessary fluidity between the language of possession and the language of mysticism reveal the immense difficulty facing anyone, especially the historian, who would offer an interpretation of this event.

De Certeau's self-awareness regarding the complexity of this task marks one of his most significant contributions in *Possession*. In the time since its original appearance in 1970, other scholars such as Nancy Caciola, David Frankfurter, David Brakke and Moshe Sluhovsky have deepened and extended de Certeau's insights regarding the intricate and often-confounding relationship between possession and mystical experience.³ But de Certeau's *Possession* retains its importance as a model of how to engage and respond critically and sensitively to historical expressions of intense spiritual experience in a way that accounts honestly for their historical, cultural and religious specificity while also remaining open to and curious about the hidden and often unknowable dimensions of such experience. De Certeau refuses to reduce the phenomena in question to categories of interpretation that are too weak to encompass or illuminate them. His work reminds us that the only way to engage such experience fully and honestly is to allow it to emerge in all its complexity—to listen to the many voices and perspectives through which it comes into being, to be suspicious of ideologies that gloss over difference, to remain alert to unexpected contradictions and convergences, and to look for patterns that illuminate the complexity of experience without simplifying or erasing it.

De Certeau's treatment of the strange events that unfolded among a small group of cloistered nuns in the French city of Loudun beginning in October 1632 has long been appreciated both for the sophistication and complexity of its phenomenological analysis and for its formal elegance and ingenuity. Regarding the former, *Possession* remains a model of what it means to contend with and take account of the myriad social, cultural, psychological, political, geographic and even epidemiological forces that so often contribute, as they surely did at Loudun, to creating the conditions under which such an extreme spiritual experience can unfold. With regard to its formal qualities, de Certeau's thoughtful and capacious use of documentary sources—they comprise a remarkably large portion of the book—remains an important reminder of how the simple gesture of giving voice to multiple witnesses, especially the marginalized, can destabilize the authority of received interpretations arising from the centers of power. All the major actors in this drama are given their turn to speak. But they do not speak the same language or even of the same things. The resulting tension in the text reveals much about the wildly conflicting currents of thought and opinion that shaped events in Loudun, and why it is impossible to arrive at a coherent narrative of these events. De Certeau recognizes this and proceeds instead by giving careful attention to discrete moments (and the actors within them), often suspending judgment about what these mo-

ments mean in themselves and allowing the pattern, if such a pattern exists, to emerge from a sense of how these different moments diverge from, contradict or illuminate one another. This has particular significance when it comes to our effort to understand the nature of the spiritual experience of key actors in this drama, especially the fraught and mysterious relationship between Surin and Jeanne des Anges.

De Certeau turns to this crucial encounter only after having rehearsed at great length all that has come before and that has contributed to the climate of social and personal fragmentation in which both the possessions and the intense mystical experiences he is considering took hold. This includes the bruising impact of recent religious wars on the social and political life of Loudun; the still-fresh trauma from the plague that decimated the city in 1632; the sudden rise of cases of possession at the Ursuline convent (beginning at almost the precise moment the plague subsides); the procession of civic and ecclesiastical “notables” who enter the “theater” of possession and give it its particular ritual form; the public “performance” of possession and exorcism (which does almost nothing to relieve the crisis); the scapegoating and public execution of the priest Urban Grandier. And finally, the summons to the Jesuit Surin who arrives in Loudun in December, 1634.

De Certeau notes the fundamental and radical shift that occurs when Surin enters the scene at Loudun. Everything turns on Surin’s resolve to refrain from employing the highly scripted, public and ritualized performance of exorcism that had previously dominated the proceedings in Loudun and to devote himself instead to a strategy of engaging Jeanne des Anges through continual prayer, or what he calls the “inner path.”⁴ At the heart of this work was his hope that he “might enter into her and devote himself to her soul . . .” so that he himself would be “burdened with the evil of that poor girl and . . . participate in all her temptations and suffering, to the point of asking to be possessed by the devil. . . .”⁵ There is intimacy and tenderness reflected in this gesture, qualities that are also reflected in Surin’s way of engaging the prioress, drawing close to her and speaking softly in her ear of the inner life and of “good things that are found in divine union.”⁶ He was convinced of the truth of this. But he never pushed too hard. Instead, he waited. He listened. He opened himself to the tormented space she occupied. But this intimate, inner work lead Surin slowly toward the precipice: he found it increasingly difficult to discern the boundary between the divine and the demonic. The space was too porous, indeterminate, and confounding to navigate with confidence. Surin lost his way and began his long descent into silence and darkness.

De Certeau’s account of Surin’s plight, both during his time in Loudun and later during his long affliction, reveals the challenge facing the historian who wishes to engage and interpret such ambiguous experience. There is a long

history of reflection on such experience in the Christian tradition, the origins of which can be traced at least as far back as the fourth century writings of Evagrius Pontus and John Cassian. Here too one often encounters the incursion of ambiguous, anomalous (demon-provoked) thoughts and feelings into the space of prayer. There is a widely shared recognition that here in this ambiguous space one can be easily deceived. “Without discernment,” one of the early monks declared ominously, “we are lost.” Nor was discernment of spirits seen as simply a personal matter, for it impacted and in some senses arose from the life of the community. And the anxieties that surfaced in this struggle with demons had their own complex social, historical causes, while also reflecting them. The events at Loudun reflect a similar dynamic. What Surin experiences as he begins falling into possession takes place at a particular historical moment and is affected by the complex historical events unfolding around him; but the effort of the historian to accompany Surin down into that darkness is fraught with difficulties and does not give one confidence that such experience can be accounted for in purely historical terms. “History is never certain,” de Certeau notes. In the case of Surin’s immersion in a space of prayer that unexpectedly opens out onto a formidable and debilitating encounter with the demonic, there is immense uncertainty. Nor can one easily account for the seemingly elegant symmetry of the exchange that takes place between these two figures—as Surin’s condition deteriorates, the prioress’s steadily improves. What strange alchemy can account for such an exchange?

De Certeau listens carefully to the testimony of the witnesses and is particularly sensitive to Surin’s account of the acute suffering he endured—both in his body and his mind—as he opened himself more and more to the prioress’s affliction. “The devil” Surin notes, “would always begin his operation with the bottom of the stomach, and there would always inflict such pain that I could have no peace unless I lay on the ground. And lying down, the agitations would seize me in all my limbs.”⁷ The embodied character of this experience, both for Surin and the nuns, is something to which de Certeau devotes serious attention. Bodies matter, and his analysis of the social meaning of the embodied performance of possession is masterful. But his treatment of Surin’s embodied affliction leads him also to consider the mysterious and painful breakdown of Surin’s mind. De Certeau examines this carefully, relating at length Surin’s remarkable account his own experience of possession. At the heart of this account is an experience of doubleness, the Jesuit’s growing sense of living with two souls. “I cannot explain to you what happens in me during this time,” says Surin, “and how that spirit unites itself with mine without depriving me either of my senses or of my freedom of soul, and becoming nevertheless as another myself, as if I had two souls.” He experiences deep peace in the presence of God; and he rages against and feels an aversion towards God. He relates:



Voyage Dans L'Inconnue, quittant la vitesse autorisée, © Norbert Heyers

“I even feel that the same cries that leave my mouth come equally from these two souls, and am unable to tell if it be happiness that draws them forth or the extreme furor that fills me.”⁸

Understandably, such discourse, along with the increasingly strange and erratic behavior that surrounds Surin’s experience gives rise to much uncertainty among his contemporaries about his stability, even his sanity. Surin himself wondered whether he was being punished for some illusion or sin, whether he had perhaps already been condemned by God. This acute sense of alienation from himself and from the divine would afflict him for much of the next twenty years, even driving him at one point to an attempt at suicide. But he found unexpected solace in his reduced, infirm condition. “I remain where I am and would not change my fortune with another,” he declared at one point, “being firmly persuaded that there is nothing better than being reduced to great extremity.”⁹ Much has been written about the function and meaning of language of self-abnegation and surrender in the history of Christian spirituality. De Certeau notes that, already during Surin’s lifetime, such statements were met with great skepticism: these were the ravings of a madman. Still, others saw in Surin’s willingness to enter the abyss of suffering on behalf of another an indication of his great holiness. History is never sure.

In the events at Loudun and in the strange, intimate exchange between Surin and Jeanne des Anges, one confronts again the uncertainty that almost always accompanies mystical experience, what de Certeau calls the “ruins” or emptied place inhabited by the mystic.¹⁰ Surin descended into these ruins and only very late in his life did he regain anything like a stable place to stand. Yet, de Certeau’s analysis cautions us against setting stability and instability, or darkness and light against one another or settling too easily on a simple valuation of these dimensions of experience. Rather, as the case of Surin and Jeanne des Anges suggests, it is often precisely in the raw, unfinished, ambiguous, broken character of such experience that one finds the most significance and meaning and perhaps the greatest potential for intimate knowledge of God.

In his remarkable book *Believe Not Every Spirit*, Moshe Sluvsosky builds on de Certeau’s analysis to raise important questions about what he sees as the inherently confusing and unstable character of such intense spiritual experience. Sluhovsky notes: “Surin’s account of his struggle with . . . the highest stage of contemplation—and its mirror experience of demonic possession portrays better than any other early modern spiritual text the inevitability of confusion and the inherent ambivalence of advanced stages of mystical pursuit. Infusion is possession, and it could derive equally from God and from the devil.” Surin himself knew this: “When God wants to possess a soul completely,” he explained in a letter to Mother Angelique de St. Francois de Loudun, “[God] inverts everything in it to such a degree that it is separated from itself.

Things that used to be familiar . . . become strange.” But as Sluhovsky notes (and one senses that de Certeau would agree), these activities could equally describe the activities of the devil. And so we return again to the inherent and perhaps irreducible ambiguity of certain spiritual experiences.

One of the enduring lessons from de Certeau’s brilliant analysis of the events at Loudun is the recognition that discernment of spirits at the highest level of spiritual experience is not always possible.¹¹ He also recognizes the depths of suffering that could arise from such uncertainty, and does not minimize its significance. But he sees possibilities inherent in such extremity and confusion as well. The person who enters this charged space, he suggests, is capable of being “carried to incandescence,” of living with an acute awareness of the “impossibility of . . . limited meaning.”¹² Certainly there is tremendous risk and dislocation involved in living with such awareness. “Things that used to be familiar . . . become strange.” The events at Loudun make that clear. But that strangeness can also create the very conditions in which an intimate exchange with another becomes possible. Many years after his first meeting with Jeanne des Anges, and in spite of the terrible suffering that this encounter provoked in him, Surin confessed that she was still “the only person in whom I have enough confidence to tell . . . my deepest thoughts.”¹³ This remarkable confession points to the depths of displacement into which they were both drawn, and which they alone shared. It also leaves one wondering about whether certain kinds of prayer—especially prayer born of brokenness and a desire to accompany another in suffering—can take hold and flourish only amidst such estrangement and “great extremity.” Like a lover risking everything for the beloved.

NOTES

1. Michel de Certeau, *The Possession at Loudun*, trans. Michael B. Smith (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 200–203.
2. Michel de Certeau, *Possession*, 5. On Certeau and Surin, see especially: “Surin’s Melancholy,” in *Heterologies: Discourse on the Other*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 101–115; “The Enlightened Literate,” in de Certeau, *The Mystic Fable: Volume One. The Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, trans. Michael B. Smith (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 206–240.

Recent reflections on de Certeau’s work that have been helpful to me include: Natalie Zemon Davis, “The Quest of Michel de Certeau,” *The New York Review of Books* LV: 8 (May 15, 2008): 57–60; Philip Sheldrake, “Unending Desire: De Certeau’s ‘Mystics,’” *The Way Supplement* 102 (2001): 38–48; Andrew Louth, *The Wilderness of God* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1991), esp. Ch. 6, “The Devils of Loudun and Père Surin.”

3. See: David Frankfurter, *Evil Incarnate: Rumors of Demonic Conspiracy and Ritual Abuse in History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006); and more recently, “Where the Spirits Dwell: Possession, Christianization, and Saints’ Shrines in Late Antiquity,” *Harvard Theological Review* 103: 1 (2010): 27–46; David Brakke, *Demons*

and the Making of the Monk: *Spiritual Combat in Early Christianity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006); Nancy Caciola, *Discerning Spirits: Divine and Demonic Possession in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2003); Moshe Sluhovsky, *Possession, Mysticism and Discernment in Early Modern Catholicism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).

4. De Certeau, *Possession*, 201.
5. De Certeau, *Possession*, 202.
6. De Certeau, *Possession*, 203.
7. De Certeau, *Possession*, 207.
8. De Certeau, *Possession*, 208. These experiences of Surin echo testimony found in the ancient Christian monastic tradition. However de Certeau, who makes note of the importance of formal precedents in the language of possession at Loudun, makes no allusion to these older traditions, some of which are remarkably consonant with the testimony of Surin and others involved in the events of Loudun. This is especially true of the earlier tradition's analysis of the subtle ways in which the demonic could insinuate itself into the terrain of the self.

Peter Brown has argued that for the early monks, the demonic was “sensed as an extension of the self. A relationship with the demons,” he suggests, “involved something more intimate than attack from the outside: to be ‘tried by the demons’ meant passing through a stage in the growth of awareness of the lower frontiers of the personality. The demonic stood not merely for all that was hostile *to* [the monk]; the demons summed up all that was anomalous and incomplete *in* [him].” This acutely psychological understanding of the encounter with the demons is confirmed by the monks’ own testimony. One day Abba Abraham asked Abba Poemen: “How do the demons fight against me?” Poemen responded: “The demons fight *against* you? . . . Our own *wills* become the demons, and it is these which attack us in order that we may fulfill them.” *Apophthegmata Patrum*, Poemen 67; Benedicta Ward, *The Desert Fathers: Sayings of the Early Christian Monks* (Penguin: London and New York, 2003), 176. Cf. Peter Brown, *The Making of Late Antiquity* (Cambridge: First Harvard University Press, 1976), 89–90.

9. De Certeau, *Possession*, 208.
10. De Certeau, “Surin’s Melancholy,” 9.
11. See Sluhovsky, *Believe Not Every Spirit*, 164, who notes: “This is . . . not only because external signs are untrustworthy and because truthfulness of interior movements cannot be easily deciphered, but also because people can be possessed by diabolic entities at the same time that they are possessed by the divine spirit.”
12. De Certeau, “Surin’s Melancholy,” 109.
13. De Certeau, “Surin’s Melancholy,” 106.