

# Certeau:

## “The Question of the Subject”

Bennett Gilbert  
bennettbg@yahoo.com  
www.porlockspensum.com  
16<sup>th</sup> August, 2010.

*A.* A city is an immense concentration of efforts driven by human intelligence. Though our drives are many, the great enterprises of life, both creative and destructive, collect them into just a few main channels, nourishing societies like water flowing in an aqueduct to a great city. Giambattista Vico listed these as the phases of society:

Men first feel necessity, then look for utility, next attend to comfort, still later amuse themselves with pleasure, thence grow dissolute in luxury, and finally grow mad and waste their substance.<sup>1</sup>

One must not mistake this for a theodicy. These phases apply to every level of historical narrative: the strictly temporal, the simply causal, the intellectually narrative, and the teleological. These are in fact the parts of intelligence, in which the necessities of survival, the necessities of logic and the necessities of desire conflict diachronically in the mutability of cultures because they work in synchronic development. Our successes, over time and often in the great places we call cities,

---

<sup>1</sup>Vico, par. 241 (Axiom 66) (p. 78).

sound of madness as well as of reason. The genius of cities is to form these elements, common to the strivings of millions, into a congruence that takes a new shape with each challenge. Yet even in the most fortunate circumstances, the clue of madness remains. We may always detect the vanishing trail of forces become destruction, fugitives that undo the equilibria that banished them. In order to detect these forces as well as possible in the run-up of the centuries, we have to figure out what is reason and what is madness no matter that both might be congenital in us; for as much as we can do so, our persons and our societies survive, and they do not survive once we can no longer specify what is madness.<sup>2</sup> Critical theory can detect madness amidst rationality. This was arguably its first great task and first great success.<sup>3</sup> Even in its deconstructivist mode, it has sought to find where reason begins in understanding where it has stopped in building civilization.<sup>4</sup>

But critical theory, in finding reason and madness to be co-laborers in culture, rests upon a primary *aporia*: the fraught relation between dialectic and rhetoric. For if what is logical is not always persuasive, and what persuades is not always logically necessary, there are dangers to survival that come from both directions; then we are called upon to explore the interior permeable boundary between these two ways of thinking, the dialectical and the rhetorical. In this one hears echoes of some of the oldest philosophical debates: those between letter and spirit, or *scriptum* and *voluntas*,<sup>5</sup> as well as between fate and chance or necessity and free will. Michel de Certeau saw cultural and social spatiality as subject to these issues and not as a facile escape from them.

Starting from Nietzsche's attack on the historical roots of morality, Foucault developed a wider critique of historicism. He directed the attention of theorists away from unifying temporal progressions to fissiparous and synchronous conflicts and thereby to spatiality.<sup>6</sup> In this he has been followed by speculative urbanists, geographers, architects, and artists in a thousand directions. Because these people generally conduct these inquiries within the perspectives of naturalism, physicalism,

---

<sup>2</sup> Jared Diamond's *Collapse: how societies choose to fail or succeed* (New York: Penguin, 2005) is a natural scientist's study of the same theme.

<sup>3</sup> I refer to Adorno and Horkheimer's *Dialectics of Enlightenment*, first published in 1947.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Norris, p. 79.

<sup>5</sup> Eden, pp.7ff *et pass.*

<sup>6</sup> Foucault NG&H, sec. 2, with reference to Nietzsche's essay "On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life," in his *Untimely Meditations*.

materialism, dialectical materialism, positivism, and even phenomenology, the logic of rationalist empiricism often nudges them closer to dialectic than to rhetoric. In the hands of Walter Benjamin, “the spatial turn” holds steady the tension between these two directions; in the hands of David Harvey and Edward Soja, spatiality turns wholly dialectical.<sup>7</sup>

As an historian and critical thinker, Michel de Certeau is never an ontologist.<sup>8</sup> His interests are virtually always epistemological in the widest sense, used in confronting a bad ontology that leaked out of structuralism in the hands of thinkers less capable and subtle than its founders. In Certeau, we see a proleptic attempt to reinforce the strength of rhetoric in cultural studies, whether directed to objects or to cities, in critical thought.<sup>9</sup> In two of his essays in *The Practice of Everyday Life* he offers a line of thought tending to support the contention that we properly view space for these purposes as a form of memory and not itself as constitutively produced by cultural or urban actuality, any more than is time. Instead, the subject in his or her peculiarity is the productive agent in the flow of rhetoric from person to objects and back again. I argue that Certeau concludes that de-temporalized space as the constitutive site of conflicts is inadequate to the human practice of life, that if we take space constitutively its actual content drains away and are replaced by dialectic, and that we correctly understand spatiality by seeing it within a fundamental personal and moral capacity to respond to the world.

**B.** An ontology of space, supposedly derived from Henri Lefebvre,<sup>10</sup> is common today in all cultural studies. The same idea operates in the study of objects, of art, and of the city. I wish to look at its implications as Certeau saw them. We will see that Certeau drew a fundamental concept from this problematic and then look at his application in a close reading of two of his essays.

---

<sup>7</sup> Soja’s most concise summary of this is in Soja SSJ, pp. 67-71; see also Soja PG pp. 76-93 and Soja TS pp. 6ff., and Soja SSD.

<sup>8</sup> He does not directly reveal his ontology, though he begins to do so in such late and essays as Certeau G.

<sup>9</sup> Certeau had an important or even decisive in development of the entire field of the study of “everyday life”; *q.v.* Highmore, pp. 145-173.

<sup>10</sup> One scholar has contended that Lefebvre has been widely misread and had in fact a Bergsonian view of time, *q.v.* Benjamin Fraser “Toward a philosophy of the urban: Henri Lefebvre’s uncomfortable application of Bergsonism,” in *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, vol. 26, no. 2 (2008), pp. 338–358.

Irit Rogoff, in the preface to his *Terra Infirma*,<sup>11</sup> sharply defines this question of the constitutive relations between dialectic and persuasion at its currently keenest edge, which lies in the area of material culture studies: the difference between “looking at cultural artifacts as reflective” and “perceiving them as constitutive.” Though Rogoff presents this as post-structuralist development of critical theory in the 1980's, it is also an intensification of original principles of critical and structural theory—that the entire exchange history of objects of study (rather than simply their aesthetic meaning or the meanings of discrete parts) comprise their meaning and that one always places one's self by language and by society into subjectivity. Whereas representation (the “reflective”) had for not a few decades been a sufficiently profound category for unfolding human productivity, it excludes the interactions between cultural material and the observer, whether lay or scholarly. It does so by means of generic or hierarchical divisions that, though they were well on their way to obsolescence in modernism, still exert enough pressure by way of rationality and categorization to inhibit people from understanding the persuasive character of culture and its objects. Some, such as Harvey and Soja, have applied this to Lefebvre's idea of the social production of space. In this case, as in the other, we look to the critical theoretical approach to explain existence (*i.e.*, constitution) rather than simply the means of knowing (*i.e.*, reflection of representation). The critical theoretical idea of teasing apart the claims of reason according to social and individual exchange value by means of detecting the rhetorics of persuasion—always to find and affirm the best limits and powers of reason, whether in the hands of Adorno or of Derrida—ascends “almost beyond limits.”<sup>12</sup> Some of this is self-glorification by material culture students, to express their desire to seek deeper understanding of the relations between persons and objects. When applied to the vast collective of the city, it ought similarly to express an aim toward a more comprehensive and profound understanding of what the constitution of a subject.

One can collect objects of inquiry into one or more physical locations or intellectual compasses, both voluntary or involuntary, as chosen selection or as chance proximity, by analysis of forces of production and exchange or conceptual analysis. Following the Industrial Revolution, collecting of all kinds of things took on the more complicated referentiality that has made it part of the basic concepts of modernism, post-modernism, and contemporary rhetoric. Napoleon

---

<sup>11</sup> Rogoff pp. 6-9.

<sup>12</sup> Rogoff, *Ibid.*,

was a cause, in part, firstly because he looted most of what has been in dealers's stockrooms over the last two centuries, and secondly because he brought the ideological practices of the French Revolution to most of Europe. People felt that precious objects were no long solely the domain of kings and nobles. People had a lot more money, too, so as a collector of rarity or beauty almost any man might be a king with a cabinet-kingdom.<sup>13</sup>

For three broad reasons, philosophers, theorists, artists, and other people have increasingly focused on the issues that the status of objects in collections raise. First, in world society since the European Industrial Revolution, automated and hand manufactures have produced objects in incalculably greater numbers than human artifice had ever before made. Also, conurbation has made permanent habitation into an ever denser and more feverish piston-action of institutions, associations, ideologies, corporations, and plain human drives, so that each chief function of the city—as citadel, market, and fortress—all is at least in part a species of archival activity, organizing and maintaining the momentum in good health. Finally, we know far more about nature and about humanity than ever before. This is true not only of the newly invented and the newly made but also of old objects. During the course of the nineteenth century as collections grew knowledge of the artifacts of culture grew, and this in turn increased the value of finding and preserving more of them. In this way knowledge, whether in the realm of the natural or the man-made, serves as both cause and effect of the collection of objects of inquiry. Its potentiality to grow greater on the basis of growth already achieved has been called “epistemic basis.”<sup>14</sup> One can usefully draw from this concept indications of the way in which knowledge persuades, as well as materially enable, people to produce more knowledge, whether through technology or abstract thought.

Whatever the limits of the idea of epistemic basis, it helps to summarize the acceleration of the co-ordinated development of natural and humane studies in the last two centuries. Critical theory and structuralism are themselves specimens of this process—to say nothing of material culture studies and urban studies, especially in so far as they grew out of post-Kantian critical thought. The proper setting of

---

<sup>13</sup> Pomian, pp. 30-44.

<sup>14</sup> This idea was developed by Joel Mokyr in his *The Gifts of Athena: historical origins of the knowledge economy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002).

Benjamin's *Arcades Project* is by and large Paris during the July Monarchy of Louis-Philippe (1830-1848). This period is one of the home bases, one may say, of the work of modern culture. Another such home-base is the Crystal Palace Exhibition in London in 1851, which flabbergasted or disgusted the European intelligentsia. Paris and London were the capitals of the Industrial Revolution; they were the central metropolises of the societies and economies through which flowed vastly increased inventiveness, manufacture, design, publication, and marketing. One of these societies was politically stable and the other was not. But the phenomenon of discovery and distribution of ideas forcefully continued in both Britain and France, and then in Germany, America, and virtually every other land of the northern hemisphere. This acceleration means that the job of the artifex to persuade others increased as well. In fact it became so visible that even abstract thinkers began to grapple with the artifex as rhetorician. Here is one of the reasons that questions of authenticity, reproduction, collecting, appropriating, critical commentary, and collage, and why curatorship and museumship, of art history, reception-studies, and conceptual art have become such profound inquiries: because Walter Benjamin, looking at the obsolescence of the first great consumerism society, realized that every transmission of any part of a tradition—objects, ideas, cities—is a blank page of possibilities.

Here are two of the epistemic achievements that have enabled theorists to think about the uses of agglomeration, whether pleasant or repulsive. Certeau specifically recognizes both of them at length in various texts.

Along with the great monuments of art and culture slowly being dug out of distant ground or passing through the fledgling chain of dealers in rarities, in both cases to end up on exhibition as documenting the rhetoric of progress, a few collectors began to preserve material vestiges of popular life. Things used by the masses tended to decay and be lost faster than those things used by and for the rich and powerful, because they were simply used up faster and harder. The instinct of the collector applied to preserving popular culture had tremendous effect. Michel de Certeau recognized this by making the first study outside of bibliographic circles of Charles Nisard (1808-1809).<sup>15</sup> Despite his initial favor among the French as a good bourgeois, Louis-Philippe quickly became the object of derision in a barrage of pamphleteering and widely-distributed imagery that the mechanics and print culture

---

<sup>15</sup> Certeau H, ch. 8, pp. 119-36.

after the Industrial Revolution made possible. Because he was shaped just like a pear, he was a perfect target of visual caricature. Since censorship prohibited writers and artists from satirizing the King, they used the word and the image of *le poire* to stand for him. The government instructed the police to suppress the most fugitive component of the popular press, the *colporteurs*, who were inheritors of the French form of one of the earliest function of the press, that of being the printed and material by which the masses spoke to one another about money, love, sex, food, God, health, their ancestors, their culture, and their social conditions. The Superintendent of Police told an Assistant Superintendent to keep the literature collected from the streets. This was Nisard who, by a natural transition, collected the older, and yet older versions of this material.<sup>16</sup> Thus, in a small *cabinet* deep within the *préfecture*, there began the first systematic collection of popular imagery and texts ever assembled. Book collectors in other countries followed, after a while, and now we treasure these images among most precious parts of national heritages, studied by historians, artists, and theorists.<sup>17</sup> Courbet was the first established artist to draw upon *colportage*,<sup>18</sup> followed by many others in the long story of the meeting of high art and popular art in the last century.<sup>19</sup>

The second of these developments is the modern modes of information storage and retrieval, both scientific and artistic. Around the time Benjamin was making his *Arcades* archive, Aby Warburg in London was building the greatest collection of artistic imagery in history. He had a project too, resulting in his *Mnemosyne Atlas*.<sup>20</sup> On smaller scales, Andre Malraux started his *Musée imaginaire* and Duchamps made his *Boîte en valise*.<sup>21</sup> We recognize a similar impulse in the digitization lot information. In the 1930's the Belgian crank Pierre Ottlet first conceived of an electronic referential link system for all information; in

---

<sup>16</sup> Nisard's great work is *Histoire des livres populaires, ou de la littérature du colportage depuis le XV<sup>e</sup> siècle jusqu'à l'établissement de la Commission d'examen des livres du colportage* (Paris, Librairie d'Amyot, 1854).

<sup>17</sup> The starting-point for theoretical studies of popular literature in this tradition is Robert Mandrou's amazing *De la culture populaire aux XVII<sup>e</sup> et XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècles; la Bibliothèque bleue de Troyes* (Paris, 1964).

<sup>18</sup> Clark, pp. 157-160.

<sup>19</sup> Certeau exercised a profound influence on the development of history of the book studies over the last four decades; q.v., Roger Chartier, *On the Edge of the Cliff* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1996), pp. 39-50.

<sup>20</sup> On Warburg see E. H. Gombrich, "Aby Warburg: His Aims and Methods: An Anniversary Lecture," in *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, vol. 62, (1999), pp. 268-282; and Kurt Forster, "Aby Warburg: His Study of Ritual and Art on Two Continents," in *October*, vol. 77, (Summer, 1996), pp. 5-24.

<sup>21</sup> Ward, pp. 87-89ff.

the next decade Vannevar Bush reconceived human understanding as a feasible electronic encyclopedia in a short, popular article with the most profound consequences. These events, of course, by no means complete the complicated history of the changes in storage and distribution of knowledge in the last two centuries or even a history of *bricolage* in the arts. These notes figure in this account partly because they are the first concrete plans for a panopticon of formal knowledge—for its simultaneous and centralized, though de-spatialized, control, one of the central tropes of critical thought, not to mention of contemporary life itself; and partly because both the artistic and the technological practices share interest in ways and kinds of ordering knowledge. One of Michel Foucault's greatest contributions to modern thought is his exposition of the power of taxonomy and its moving history.<sup>22</sup> Certeau addressed both popular and official ways of knowing—de-formalized knowledge and “official knowledge”—in his endeavor to adjust the places of memory and personhood within structuralist and critical theory. In *The Practices of Everyday Life*, Certeau joined the questions of ordering knowledge, or *taxis*,<sup>23</sup> and operating knowledge, or *metis*,<sup>24</sup> including both “a semiotics of tactics” and “the tactical nature...of everyday practices.”<sup>25</sup>

**C.** Michel de Certeau was interested in those who wander, because they depart “the established order of the strong”<sup>26</sup> in order to find their own way, known only to themselves or to the persons they are closest to—as they judge that closeness, by circumstance of tribe or faith or serendipitous experience. Wandering is “an ageless art...the multimillennial archaeology of ruses,” kept in memories made at night or in a hush. In the face of the efforts of dominative strategies to repress them and then to obscure them, people practice and remember them. They are the more important part of life, the unofficial but inward part. Certeau thinks that out of this practice and memory the mystic can point us to:

...the mystic is seized by time as by that which erupts and transforms, which is

---

<sup>22</sup> Foucault was the first modern historian to look seriously at “regimes of description,” in his in his *Les mots et les choses* of 1966 (translated as *The Order of Things*, see esp. Foucault OT pp. 125-165) and *L'archéologie du savoir* of 1969.

<sup>23</sup> *PEL*, p. 40. (Certeau *PEL* is cited in these notes as “*PEL*”.)

<sup>24</sup> *PEL*, p. 39.

<sup>25</sup> *PEL*, p. 40.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

why time is for him *the question of the subject seized by his or her other, in a present that is the ongoing surprise of a birth and a death*. The endlessness of instants that are beginnings create, therefore, a history in which continuities lose their pertinence, just as institutions do. These events, which must be nothing but arrivals from an (impossible?) Eternity or a (postponed) end, continually contradict the kind of time produced by historiography. But to what degree can they insinuate another type of duration in to historiographic time?<sup>27</sup>

Certeau is in guileless sympathy with Foucault's critique of intellectual history, but he points to a way to replace what is deceitful and repressive that Foucault excluded<sup>28</sup> because he judged that the concept of the self, being based solely on "the history of an error we call truth,"<sup>29</sup> had to collapse along with any *philosophia perennis*. Certeau, on the other hand, tries to see the ways in which the self survives "time"—*i.e.*, "time" of this sort—as a subject of history itself, just as it has survived any other panoptic domination, including consumption, logic, and language. Elsewhere Certeau gives his most developed account of the manner in which Foucault's thought remains stuck within the triumphant panoptic system, as trapped by spatiality as others were trapped by teleological time.<sup>30</sup> This serves his long-standing purpose of historicizing the historian so totally that no history is sufficiently objective and universal as to undermine personhood.<sup>31</sup> Toward this end Certeau writes an epistemological discourse rather than an ontological one. Since the fault lies in the claim of liberated history to fundamental ontological ground, the remedy lies in looking epistemologically at how the historian knows his object, which Certeau in various works opposes to that of the mystic, or at least of the

---

<sup>27</sup> Certeau MF, p. 11 (emphasis is mine).

<sup>28</sup> I believe Foucault took a turn toward the individual in his late lectures published in English as *The Hermeneutics of the Subject* (New York: Macmillan, 2005).

<sup>29</sup> Foucault NGH, sec. 2.6. Schirato and Webb (whose paper concerns the section of *PEL* just prior to the sections considered in the present essay), pp. 96-99, have a good exposition of Certeau's critique of Foucault as endeavoring to "push the question" (Schirato and Webb, p. 97 so as to have "access to everything" (*PEL*, p. 63).

<sup>30</sup> Certeau H. ch. 12-13; cf. *PEL* ch. 4.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. Weymans, pp. 175-177. Weymans show Certeau's philosophy in *Possession at Lourdes*, in which he carefully show how the tramps and the oppressed—a possessed populace, at a specific time and place—makes all historical representation both more complex than the dominative strategy would have it be and, at the same time, more open to the future and to progress and to meaning than Foucault would have it. Weymans's article includes a good survey of the growth of Certeau scholarship.

mystic each of us (including historians) holds within and unawares.<sup>32</sup> But since standard skeptical epistemology is part of the ontological claim of the empirical method—to which Foucault always and everywhere holds—Certeau develops it in ways recognizable as rhetorical.<sup>33</sup> The “question of the self,” created by a person’s conflict with the possibility of non-existence, is also the key concept in some of Certeau’s affirmative positions. We find this as part of his account of the city in two of his essays. I should add that this point, though I use it as my key to these texts, by no means exhausts other themes in these two essays alone, among the most important of which is Certeau’s philosophy of language because it is in the end inseparable from the his mysticism.<sup>34</sup>

In his famous essay “Walking in the City”<sup>35</sup> Certeau himself wanders in the city. The entire essay is performative but not in any simple sense, because the text is a variety of types of locution. For example, his first act—descending from the World Trade Center into the city— is performative, in that Certeau does something new; but it is also illocutionary, in that it enunciates his intentions by requesting our consideration of three questions.<sup>36</sup> Certeau uses such complex rhetoric in order to override dialectic for the sake of developing, in company with the reader, “the question of the subject” in relation to himself and not to social *ratio* alone. This instantiation of himself at once empowers him to oppose the conditions of the possibility of what is outside himself, the city in all the effectiveness of its self-concept.<sup>37</sup> That self-concept is a *ratio* which for all its capturing of space causes us to forget the possibilities of space. But “spatial order organizes an ensemble of possibilities...and interdictions”<sup>38</sup> and nothing more. As a person the

---

<sup>32</sup> Reynolds and Fitzpatrick provide a length explanation of parts of the role of the irrational in Certeau. Siegel’s review of Certeau is a short and well-focused critique of this position.

<sup>33</sup> Certeau viewed hermeneutics as a form of rationalism, subject to his same historicizing critique and in need of the same emancipation. This pervades his view of semantics. In his essay on glossolalia, Certeau describes the phenomenon as “metalinguistic...in relation to the act of enunciation. It isolates speech from all the one says. In this theoretical vocal speech, speech can say itself.... In the face of the glossolalic chain, the hermeneutic work mobilizes its scientific apparatus. But in so doing, it unveils the belief that animates it.... Finally, because it (hermeneutic) believes in meaning, it is trapped into a semblance of language” (Certeau G, pp. 33, 34; cf. pp.; 40-42). Cf. Schirato and Webb, pp. 88-91. His approach has been called “rhetorical hermeneutics” (Hartnett, p. 290).

<sup>34</sup> See de Vries, pp. 443-447 *et passim*.

<sup>35</sup> *PEL*, pp. 91-110.

<sup>36</sup> *PEL*, p. 92.

<sup>37</sup> *PEL*, p. 94.

<sup>38</sup> *PEL*, p. 98.

walker greets the site of each footstep as a stranger, coming from non-existence. His walk performs a steady act of discriminations between where he or she is and is not, was and was not, and would or would not be present. The walker creates a new *taxis*, or order, even as he evades the strategic *taxis*. *Taxis* then can constitute something more than only restraint or submission. In this practice *taxis* is tactical. One re-orders by means of all the modes of relationship between self and other as between here and there. “All the modalities sing a part in a chorus.”<sup>39</sup> Tactical action touches space, reversing its oblivion under the cloud of *ratio*, but it is a rhetoric that is not fundamentally spatial, just as it is not fundamentally linguistic or dialectical. If it were locutionary language alone, it would be a “graphic trail” subject to space, and the walker could not wander. We bring “the semantic” with ourselves on our wander, working it into whatever we find.

Certeau further specifies how in fact neither language nor space trap the walker and how he liberates himself amidst them. Certeau names two great instruments that each person has in his or her *phasis*, or passing by, of places. The first is synecdoche, by which a person expands the meanings of objects and events; the other of the pairs is asyndeton, by which a person restricts their meanings. By synecdoche, we take parts of the whole for other parts. By asyndeton we take fragments from the whole. The first expands meaning, the second condenses it.<sup>40</sup> As rhetorical terms, they described modes of enunciation of new *taxis*. But Certeau uses both concepts also as metonyms: they describe something more than enunciation. Rhetoric itself describes something more than persuasion, something more intimate and more powerful. They “displace... disorder... fragment” that which the city imposes as a totality, “diverting it from its immobile order.”<sup>41</sup> But they refer to something further: they are gestures, when agglomerated in cities they are “forests of gestures.”<sup>42</sup> To what do they gesture?

Like myths or dreams, they can be oneiric because they point to something beyond the temporarily “rented” but very convincing identity that all spatial orders

---

<sup>39</sup> *PEL*, p. 99.

<sup>40</sup> Reynolds and Fitzpatrick, pp. 77-80, discuss these tropes at some length, as part of what they call Certeau’s “investigative-expansive” method—something rather like my reading tactics as *taxis*, but in quite different terms. On p. 76 they note that Certeau’s “practices” are the “critical distance” that individual persons use “to cut across the existing panoptic arrangement of space” (p. 76).

<sup>41</sup> *PEL*, pp. 101-2.

<sup>42</sup> *PEL*, p. 102.

present. According to Certeau, city walkers wander less toward the ordered objects of urban or intellectual space than toward “that which takes away what it urges them to believe in.” We take it away from ourselves, though its internal contradiction helps us, because we have authority greater than any it offers in three “symbolic mechanisms”: the believable, the memorable, and the primitive.<sup>43</sup> Thus persuasion is linked to time and memory: more than the loud clutter of voices in modern society, rhetoric is a dissent from the logic of the outward and the exterior. These three *topoi* can withstand *ratio*, or dialectic, because they themselves have content.<sup>44</sup> They have a kind of rationality and are subject to reason. The wandering self is not irrational or nihilistic. Rather, Certeau tells us, the wanderer, or the tramp (*clochard*) pushes his or her reasons back against those of dialectic and conflict reifying itself in physical space. The “rhetoric of walking,” like all persuasive discourses, even the wicked and destructive ones, collects an ensemble of constraints against its adversary. The question in the end is, which is more robust? This is “the question of the subject, seized by its other.” Just as Nietzsche said that either life must be at the service of history or history must be at the service of life, so Certeau asks whether the self ought to be its own subject or be subjected to material spatiality. He answers that we must conclude that the subject is more robust than space because it does survive, that its endurance over time signifies this resourcefulness, and that the *taxis* the subject creates can be, like its *topoi*, adequate to the circumstances of his or her life, if not even more powerful than matter. “Walking in the City” is not a meditation on urbanism alone. It begins when Certeau ceases panoptic observation and starts to exist as a subject linked by connections and disjunctions to the world he wanders in. Everything the subject does to address that world alters *taxis* of it according to the “relationship of oneself to oneself.”<sup>45</sup>

The wanderer—historian, tramp, mystic, possessed, or “ordinary” person—re-orders the world, never finally but always powerfully.<sup>46</sup> By observing the root of Certeau’s “tactics” in *taxis*, we see its connection to the fundamentals of modern and post-modern discourse and to rhetoric. It helps to stabilize “tactics” in discussing Certeau, because without it as the root there is a pervasive tendency to lighten up, or hollow out, Certeau’s “tactics” in academic discussion, viewing it as

---

<sup>43</sup> *PEL*, p. 105.

<sup>44</sup> See Keiff and Rahman, pp. 173-175.

<sup>45</sup> *PEL* p. 110.

<sup>46</sup> Certeau WH, pp. 73ff; and Certeau H, pp. 137-149.

superficial or limited if not trivial. Finally, *taxis* helps us to dig more deeply into Certeau's deeper purposes in writing about the city, toward his spiritual and ethical purposes.

A short and very beautiful essay on "Railway Navigation and Incarceration"<sup>47</sup> follows "Walking in the City." Certeau portrays himself as a person with freedom and power even though he is a passive passenger, for in any circumstances the mystic's illocutions have a power that the logic of space does not.<sup>48</sup> This meditation sustains the tactical power of the subject against space by describing a subject's persuasion as to his own identity when wholly immobilized against dialectic. Here Certeau represents dialectic as the roaring, speeding train; the subject is Certeau, who, seated in a compartment, is as stationary as the train is activated and productive through the transient landscape.

The windowglass and the iron (rail) line divide, on the one hand, the traveler's (the putative narrator's) interiority and, on the other, *the power of being*, constituted as an object without discourse, the strength of an exterior silence.<sup>49</sup>

The train dominates the world it traverses—the world of "passing cries and momentary noises." It "annihilates the points through which it passes." It immobilizes all things other than itself, being "the *primum mobile*, the solitary god" which is "responsible for all action."<sup>50</sup> Despite all this, the traveler still lounges, dreams, imagines, and remembers. The very power of the machine is the necessary and sufficient occasion for the birth of all that mute space, readily conquered by "the straight line" of an "iron rail," never can know. For all its dumb weight the great engine is a "transparent caesura."<sup>51</sup> Again Certeau points to the robust constraint that the subject can bring against the dialectic of the material world through the persuasion of one's self by one's self. "History begins again," he says, once the train stops and the passengers leave it.<sup>52</sup> Time renews us, rather than kills us. It

---

<sup>47</sup> *PEL*, pp. 111-114.

<sup>48</sup> Dosse, pp. 154-156.

<sup>49</sup> *PEL*, 112 (emphasis is mine).

<sup>50</sup> *PEL*, 113.

<sup>51</sup> *PEL*, 112.

<sup>52</sup> *PEL*, 114.

gives us the resource of memory, wherein the subject operates the twin tools of *taxis*, like a pair of concave and convex mirrors. The subject is an “object without discourse,” that is, without an imposed discourse, because “the power of being” is the power of a person to collect reasons and rhetorics from objects and experiences, snipping and tying them according to the order—the intactness, the integrity—of both *scriptum* and *voluntas* by which each subject answers “the question of the subject” facing the exterior other. “Walking in the City” and its contrapuntal partner “Railway Navigation and Incarceration” dig into subjects much deeper than spatiality. This is just the jumping-off point, as when Certeau “falls back” down from the top of the World Trade Center into the heart of the crowded world, like Icarus.<sup>53</sup> We mobilize space, he says: we who mobilize are the fundamental topic of his inquiry—the inquirers, the subjects, who, whether free to move or fixed like a butterfly pinned on a specimen board, actively vests themselves with the final decisions through the process of persuasion.

**D.** If spatiality is the world-product of the conflict of organizing ideas (or orders) among humans, it is as a result possible to say that objects (such as the objects of material culture studies) constitute, rather than simply reflect, the world. This is possible because on this view the world-product at every and all moments in time reflects the synchronous distribution of the persuasive force of our experiences and narratives of objects and events. This view regards time as being narratively forceful and subsumes it under spatiality, having dismissed intellectual and teleological time and even, to a degree, causal temporality as well. The difficulty in this position is that any realist view of spatiality soon loses resources in counter-weighting rhetoric to dialectic, and therefore becomes dialectic, which in turn became increasingly formal and, finally, oppressive. For what does it mean to say that spatiality or its objects “are constitutive of culture” rather than only reflective of it?—To move in this manner from the middle voice to the active voice? “Constitutive” must be taken as “doing the jobs (pertaining to constituting culture and, one supposes, subjectivity) of rhetorics of persuasion (being something like the assertoric in texts), in addition to or in tandem with their practical uses.” Also, it implies that persons have assertoric and pragmatic functions when they move or make in the world, which is no doubt the truth.

---

<sup>53</sup> PEL 92

At this point Certeau teaches that if we say that space and its objects constitute culture, having been socially produced, we can do so only because this understanding requires that the constituting agencies operate by dialectic, and that the more full of dialectic they become the emptier their rhetoric becomes. Dialectical devotes so much force to the preservation and expansion of the dominant logic, to strategy, that it must become an increasingly strict enforcer of the letter of the law. Certeau frequently describes the self-destructiveness of metastasized capitalism in these terms. Dialectic leaves out “the question of the subject”—that in which persons can re-order the world from their memories and according to their hopes. Certeau supports logic as regulative, not constitutive. This introduces a fully dimensional concept of time (ideal rather real). As to the memory, so heavily discounted as “historicism” in some corners of post-modernism, let us recall that since Aristotle it has been clear that all thinking reaches for *topos* as source, spring, or root, and therefore operates in a temporal order.<sup>54</sup> In Benjamin’s famous statement of childhood chronicle as archaeology, he sees his task as that of recovering memory (especially that of the infant, where Certeau also places the source of persuasive force<sup>55</sup>). With few exceptions, all the objects of actual archaeology were once discarded into the dirt as trash. So it is with what we have buried in memory. For both men, too, persuasion is oneiric; it no wonder also that both think of history as elegaic.<sup>56</sup>

As to the future, its importance for Certeau merely starts with his critical argument that historiography is bound by its own language and logic. If therefore “the past escapes final historical representation,”<sup>57</sup> the historian must therefore be a wanderer or a tramp. *A fortiori*, logic itself must be more tramp than tyrant. Suddenly, everyone faces one’s self in and through the other, everyone has a future waiting for *taxis*, and everyone is a sort of mystic. Each of us is in some measure the Wandering Jew, breaking into and through history in the lives of such figures as the mystic Jean-Joseph Surin (1660-1665), the subject of Certeau’s first book, or Jean Journet, the Fourierist prophet who fascinated Courbet and Benjamin and who traverses the history of these subjects in many ways. Against the severity of non-temporal formal logic, and against strict adherence to its letter and that of the

---

<sup>54</sup> Aristotle, “De Memoria et Reminiscentia,” in *Parva Naturalia* 451b-452a.

<sup>55</sup> *PEL*, p. 105.

<sup>56</sup> Certeau MF, p. 10.

<sup>57</sup> Certeau WH, p. 53

law, Certeau argues for the power of being: of that which pertains to subjects, or persons, being of the subject's birth and home and being in the memory. Persuasion gives content to logic, which otherwise loses it in the practice of life. Rhetoric gives robust countervailing substance to logic out of the robust substance the self generates of itself and for itself. Without this, on the grounds of spatiality alone, we are most vulnerable. As the work of Giorgio Agamben has shown, space can be the boundary that determines the question of existence—reason reduced to the tool of exclusion or inclusion and thereby of destruction and madness.

## *Bibliography of Works Consulted:*

- Aristotle, trans. W. A. Pickard-Cambridge. *Topica and De Sophisticis Elenchis*, in ed. David Ross, *The Works* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1968), vol. 1.
- , trans. J. I. Beare. *Parva Naturalia*, in ed. David Ross, *The Works* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1968), vol. 3.
- Benjamin, Walter, trans. Harry Zohn. *Illuminations*. New York: Schocken Books, 2007.
- (Certeau CP:)** Certeau, Michel de, trans. Tom Conley. *Culture in the Plural*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997.
- , trans. Catherine Porter, "The Gaze Nicholas of Cusa" in *Diacritics*, vol. 17, no. 3 (Autumn, 1987), pp. 2-38.
- (Certeau H:)** -----, trans. Brian Massumi. *Heterologies: Discourse on the Other*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986.
- (Certeau MF:)** -----, trans. Michael Smith. *The Mystic Fable*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992.
- , trans. Michael Smith. *The Possession at Loudon*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000.
- (Certeau PEL:)** -----, trans. Steven Rendall. *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984.
- , "Vocal Utopias: Glossolalias," in *Representations*, no. 56 (Special Issue: The New Erudition) (Autumn, 1996), pp. 29-47.
- (Certeau WH:)** -----, trans. Tom Conley. *The Writing of History*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1988.
- Chartier, Roger. *On the edge of the cliff: history, language, and practices*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997.
- Clark, T. J. *Image of the people: Gustave Courbet and the second French Republic, 1848-1851*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1982.
- Davis, Natalie Zemon, "The Quest of Michel de Certeau" in *New York Review of Books*, May 15, 2008.
- Dosse, Françoise, "Michel de Certeau et l'écriture de l'histoire," in *Vingtième Siècle: Revue d'histoire*, No. 78 (April-June, 2003), pp. 145-156.
- de Vries, Hent. "Anti-Babel: The 'Mystical Postulate' in Benjamin, de Certeau and Derrida," in *MLN*, vol. 107, no. 3, ("The German Issue") (Apr., 1992), pp. 441-477.
- Eden, Kathy. *Hermeneutics and the rhetorical tradition: chapters in the ancient legacy & its humanist reception*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997.
- Feenberg, Andrew. "Constructivism and Technology Critique: Replies to Critics," in *Inquiry*, volume 43, no. 2 (June, 2000), pp. 225 - 237.
- (Foucault NG&H:)** Foucault, Michael. "Nietzsche, Genealogy and History," in J. Richardson and B. Leiter ed., *Nietzsche* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 341-360.
- (Foucault Order:)** Foucault, Michael. *The order of things: an archaeology of the human sciences*. New York: Vintage Books, 1994.
- Friedland, Roger. (Review): "Space, Place, and Modernity: The Geographical Moment," in *Contemporary Sociology: A Journal of Reviews*, vol. 21, no. 1 (January, 1992), p. 11-15.
- Goetsch, James. *Vico's axioms: the geometry of the human world*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995.
- Gren, Martin. (Review:) "The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory," in *Geografiska Annaler, Series B: Human Geography*, vol. 73, no. 2 (1991), p. 145-148.

## Bibliography of Works Consulted:

- Hartnett, Stephen. "Michel de Certeau's Critical Historiography and the Rhetoric of Maps," in *Philosophy & Rhetoric*, vol. 31, no. 4 (1998), pp. 283-302.
- Highmore, Ben. *Everyday life and cultural theory: an introduction*. London: Routledge, 2002.
- Keiff, Laurent and Shahid Rahman, "La dialectique, entre logique et rhétorique," in *Revue de Métaphysique et Morale*, vol. 105, no. 2 (April-June, 2010), pp. 149-178.
- Merrifield, Andrew. (Review:) "The Extraordinary Voyages of Ed Soja: Inside the 'Trialectics of Spatiality'....," in *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, vol. 89, no. 2 (June, 1999), pp. 345-348.
- Mulder, Arjen, ed. *TransUrbanism*. Rotterdam: V2\_Publishing/NAi Publishing, 2002.
- (Museum of Art and Archaeology, University of Missouri at Columbia). *The Art of the July monarchy: France 1830 to 1848*. Columbia, Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 1990.
- Norris, Christopher. *Spinoza & the origins of modern critical theory*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Blackwell, 1991.
- Pomian, Krzysztof. *Collectors and curiosities: Paris and Venice 1500-1800*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Basil Blackwell, 1990.
- Reynolds, Bryan and Joseph Fitzpatrick. "The Transversality of Michel de Certeau: Foucault's Panoptic Discourse and the Cartographic Impulse," in *Diacritics*, vol. 29, no. 3 (Autumn, 1999), pp. 63-80.
- Rogoff, Irit. *Terra infirma: geography's visual culture*. New York: Routledge, 2000.
- Schirato, Tony and Jen Webb. "The Ethics and Economies of Inquiry: Certeau, Theory, and the Art of Practice," in *Diacritics*, vol. 29, no. 2 (Summer, 1999), pp. 86-99.
- Scott, Allen John and Edward W Soja, ed. *The City: Los Angeles and urban theory at the end of the twentieth century*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996.
- Seigel, Jerrold. (Review:) "Mysticism and Epistemology: The Historical and Cultural Theory of Michel de Certeau," in *History and Theory*, vol. 43, no. 3 (October, 2004), pp. 400-409.
- (Soja PG:) Soja, Edward W. *Postmodern geographies: the reassertion of space in critical social theory*. London, New York: Verso, 1989.
- (Soja PM:) ----- . *Postmetropolis: critical studies of cities and regions*. Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell, 2000.
- (Soja SSJ:) ----- . *Seeking spatial justice*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010.
- (Soja SSD:) ----- . "The Socio-Spatial Dialectic," in *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, vol. 70, no. 2 (June, 1980), pp. 207-225.
- (Soja TS:) ----- . *Thirdspace: journeys to Los Angeles and other real-and-imagined places*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Blackwell, 1996.
- Vico, Giambattista, trans. Thomas Begin and Harold Fisch. *The New Science*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988.
- Ward, Martha. "Art in the Age of Visual Culture: France in the 1930's," in Stephen Melville, ed., *The Lure of The Object*, (Williamstown, Massachusetts: Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, 2005), pp. 86-100.
- Weymans, Wim. "Michel de Certeau and the Limits of Historical Representation," in *History and Theory*, vol. 43, no. 2 (May, 2004), pp. 161-178.