

PDF hosted at the Radboud Repository of the Radboud University Nijmegen

The following full text is a preprint version which may differ from the publisher's version.

For additional information about this publication click this link.

<http://hdl.handle.net/2066/190918>

Please be advised that this information was generated on 2018-06-21 and may be subject to change.

We all know Michel de Certeau as a traveller through the grand and rugged landscape of early modern mystical literature, who sometimes roams the streets of Paris or New York. The historian Certeau, carrying in his luggage the tools of several disciplines, appears to see himself as a guide, showing his readers like fellow-travellers what is worth seeing. He allows them the time to look for themselves, to build their own experiences, and to establish their own relations to the environment in which they find themselves. In the melancholy of the 16th and 17th century mystics, we, readers of *La fable mystique*, get to know something about ourselves but not in the straightforward way that our path is clear. We must always keep searching ourselves.

Certeau's work seems like the journal of a traveller who enters an unknown city and slowly proceeds through it to acquaint himself with the way the districts, streets, and squares are interconnected. His famous walk through New York in *L'invention du quotidien* starts off on the 110th floor of the World Trade Center and then continues through the network of streets. It develops into an image of Michel de Certeau's own concept of theory.

La fable mystique is a travel account of someone who has joined the 16th and 17th century mystics and has tried to feel their pain and their longings. As a

traveller, he is not a native in the land of mysticism but he guides us around, showing us the regions that may also be inaccessible to him but that he knows a lot about. We join Labadie's journey for a while, but eventually Labadie disappears from view, leaving nothing but traces in the sand, as with Empedocles before him. And when you read his studies on May 1968 in *La prise de la parole*, you just sense how the author is sitting at his window in Paris, sees the students unfold their paroles, and tries to understand what they are doing. He is involved in the events, but not part of them.

Thanks to Luce Giard we now have the second volume of *La fable mystique*, and it seems we can now understand the traveller Michel de Certeau even better and how he travels through this landscape with all the methods and questions he brings to it. But we also get to know the landscape even better, showing us how the land of mysticism is no longer our country but whose remnants are dispersed like boulders through our own landscape, causing some to stumble.

The most striking and the most elaborate chapter in the second volume of *La fable mystique* is devoted to Nicolaus Cusanus (1401-1464). Parts of the text had already been published in various journals, but it is only now that we can

see the full extent of Certeau's intensive study of Cusanus, the great discovery of his late years. What is remarkable is that a study on the 16th and 17th century should be dealing with a 15th century figure in such a prominent chapter. What is it, in Certeau's view, that Cusanus teaches us about mysticism in the Modern Period, and what does the chapter about Cusanus tell us about Certeau's interpretation of mysticism?

In the chapter about Cusanus, Certeau's aims are of a quite different level from his examination of Labadie. **Jean de Labadie speelde in het religieuze leven van de 17de eeuw een belangrijke rol. Aanvankelijk jezuiet, verliet hij al snel de orde om wereldlijk geestelijke te worden. Later werd hij evenwel aanhanger van Port Royal om weer later Calvinist te worden – uiteindelijk eindigde zijn tocht, zoals Certeau het zo mooi zegt, als *Labadist*, met een kleine kring volgelingen.** For Certeau, Labadie was the nomad who travels from place to place, the mystic who never stops wandering, and who, living in the awareness that what he is looking for is lacking, knows with every place and every object that he finds: *this is not it*. It is the description of a soul that is looking for a body, a pursuit that will only be terminated by 'a grave in a garden in Altona'. Having got to this point, Certeau must acknowledge that Labadie's nomadic journey escapes any theoretical attempt to understand and explain it. 'Theory

has to let Labadie go, let him continue on his way.' He remains elusive to the theoretician, and nothing remains except the sandals and the traces in the sand, like Empedocles before him. The inner experience remains hidden for the theoretician of spirituality, just like the ultimate purpose of longing remained hidden for Labadie within the earthly relations.

How different is Certeau's description of Cusanus. Cusanus appears not only as a traveller, wandering through Europe up to Constantinople, but also as someone who clearly responds theoretically to the crisis that the paradigm of the mystical body is going through. Certeau is fascinated, it seems, by the way in which Cusanus's life, the relation between theory and practice, is itself constantly changing.

Certeau closely follows Cusanus on his journeys and describes the spheres of influence he encounters, the people he meets, the friends he makes, such as the Benedictine monks of Tegernsee, but also how he makes political and intellectual enemies. Certeau does not limit himself to a representation of Cusanus's arguments or the substance of his thoughts, nor does he provide a purely external historical reconstruction of the travels of this commoner who made it all the way up to being a Cardinal and to the Pope's entourage. No,

Certeau closely follows Cusanus and, like a geographer, describes the natural and intellectual landscapes Cusanus must have seen and that are reflected in his small treatises, usually occasional writings to friends or supporters. Social geography is also there. Cusanus's thoughts and acts were certainly influenced by his being a commoner, which enabled him to rise up in the Church hierarchy.

Certeau follows Cusanus on his restless journey, loses track of him sometimes, and then, reassured, finds him back in a completely different place.

Occasionally we the readers are confused about whether this restlessness belongs to Certeau or to Cusanus, a bit of both, we suspect. In this essay, Certeau uses all means that are at his disposal after such a long career in research. We recognize the wide helicopter views, but also the stationary and moving cameras on the ground that spot Cusanus in the distance and watch him travel past. The way in which Certeau describes Cusanus is not unlike the *homme aux semelles de vent*, as Paul Verlaine wrote about his friend and traveller Arthur Rimbaud.

Certeau, for example, follows Cusanus on his journey through the Low Countries and has him meet the great painters of the 15th century, who reflect

the infinite in their naturalist scenes. He even follows Cusanus to Constantinople, where he meets the great Byzantine scholars of the day. He is a passenger on the ship that brings Cusanus back to Europe and witnesses the moment, off the coast of Greece, when he sees the light of the *docta ignorantia*. He follows him crisscrossing the German Empire, and gets a little closer when Cusanus is a bishop in Brixen, surrounded by the high Alps. And when the older Cusanus is looking for peace and quiet and his travels have turned into walks through Rome: then, too, Certeau keeps an eye on him, not like a stalking voyeur, but rather like one of a band of friends that get together every week.

In this way, Cusanus's restless journey has a completely different character than the restlessness of longing that is driving Labadie and that is also shown by Cusanus. With Labadie, we get to see little of the landscapes and we see less heavy equipment used to take different perspectives than we do in Cusanus's journeys. This is not to say that the pace in the Cusanus essay is lower, quite the opposite, in fact, but it is less out of breath than with Labadie, about whom Certeau says that he cannot follow him at the end and has to let him go. In the scenographic description of Cusanus's travels, Certeau uses several perspectives. The pace is even higher than in the description of

Labadie, but it is a less monotonous sequence: perspectives change, now close up, now a long way off, with Cusanus sometimes looking over our shoulder, sometimes in profile, but never staring us in the face. More so than in all Certeau's other travel stories, the change of camera angles makes this almost a three-dimensional narrative, in which the reader becomes a fellow-traveller who never loses sight of Cusanus.

Certeau, the thinker who writes travel stories, really comes into his own in the way he stage-manages Cusanus, not in the least because, in his writings, Cusanus himself also proves to have a great sensibility for the value of travel for the way we think and view the world.

Certeau situates the core of Cusanus's travels in the land in between the rivers Rhine and Danube, where two major rivalling schools of mystical theology clashed head on in those days. And this also helps to clarify why Certeau, without providing an explanation, returns to the 15th century in his portrayal of the 16th and 17th centuries. Cusanus found himself in the eye of a storm that broke out over the role of the intellect in the mystical meeting with God, focusing on the question whether reason has any role to play in meeting God. This battle was fought between the Rhine and the Danube, between the

Carthusians of Aggsbach and the Benedictines of Tegernsee. The former party, on the left bank of the Danube, rejected reason as a path to God in favour of mystical sensation; the latter party, on the right bank of the Danube, were of a different opinion: the Benedictine monks of the abbeys of Melk and Tegernsee were fully convinced that reason had a central role to play.

It is in the middle of this battle that we see the appearance of the treatise that takes pride of place in Certeau's essay: *De visione Dei*, written in 1453 for the benefit of the Tegernsee monks. By way of an intriguing experiment of thought, this book shows that not knowing and its chasms and crevices are part and parcel of the process of knowing and thinking. Certeau describes the experiment that Cusanus submits his readers to. Something needs to be *done*, and then you will see God. This, Certeau believes, is a gesture that is characteristic of the spiritual leader and that is elaborated into a truly theatrical dramatization by Cusanus. The monks are asked by the author to walk to and fro before a portrait, whose gaze keeps following each of them separately wherever they go. Certeau describes this experiment in detail. He particularly focuses on the monk who initially believes that he must be the central figure because the portrait's gaze is turned on him, until his fellow brother *tells* him that he has the exact same experience. Certeau describes this

moment as the suspension of one's own perspective. This is the moment when the viewer understands that all he is actually seeing is his own perspective.

De visione Dei is a spiritual exercise and a scientific experiment at the same time, pushing the boundaries of seeing and thinking. Certeau sees the countless exchanges of looks amongst the monks themselves but also the great change of perspective between the finite and the infinite, and he sees it developing into a labyrinth of perspectival changes, looking to and fro. In these perspectival changes, the unattainable divine gaze becomes visible through the permanent ruptures, through the interruption of the perspective itself.

Cusanus differs from Labadie in discovering that every gaze is finite and only confirms one's own perspective. For Cusanus, this does not evolve into an endless nomadic journey in which the one perspective is exchanged for another. Certeau focuses on the joy Cusanus experiences when he is fascinated by the sudden change of perspective itself. The change of perspective itself opens up a space that is bigger than one's own perspective. This is the joy of discovering that one precisely does *not* control the infinite number of perspectives. In Certeau's view, this experience of a sudden and unexpected change of perspective is Cusanus's version of what, in mystical literature, is the classic miracle: it is another perspective opening up in one's own way of

looking.

Slowly but surely it will be clear why Certeau is so intrigued by Cusanus and gives him such a prominent place in his representation of modern mysticism. During his restless journeys, Cusanus has been the privileged witness of the rediscovery and the further systematization of the central perspective of Alberti, which he alludes to and treats in a playful-critical way. Certeau, following Cusanus from close up, sees how the cardinal knows about the geometrical order of the world. But in the experiment with the gaze, he also sees the opening up of another space that remains hidden with Alberti and in the dominant modern rationality. Precisely because Cusanus takes into account the auditory communication of his fellow brother before the portrait and because he is alert to the possibility of sudden changes of perspectives, he also sees the boundaries of geometric space. These boundaries always presuppose a fixed point that is outside the image, a painting's vanishing point, which actually also points at the possibility of an infinite number of other possible projections, without it being humanly possible to see all of these at the same time.

Certeau even shows enthusiasm when he tells his readers that Cusanus had

seen possibilities here that were ignored in the centuries that came after him. Only Leibniz had grasped to some extent what the cardinal was after. For Certeau, then, Cusanus is a *topological* thinker, wondering all the time what one's standpoint actually is and knowing, moreover, that, in an infinite universe, every point is a centre and so there is no centre. Certeau calls this kind of thinking topological because Cusanus is also aware that the very idea that the number of centres is infinite can only be thought from the position of a concrete centre. To say that 'there is no centre', therefore, actually side-steps what Cusanus intends to say. In this rupture between the finite and the infinite, there appears what Certeau calls a dialogical space, in which, taking one standpoint, one knows that another standpoint is possible, without ever being able to take this other standpoint.

What we see at work here is Cusanus's experience as a travelling diplomat: on all those journeys, Cusanus must have had the experience that reality looks different from every different standpoint. His life was characterized by a virtually desperate search for convergence between standpoints. But concrete practice also showed him that, even for a mind as philosophically and speculatively trained as his, it was impossible to take a standpoint above all standpoints, especially with respect to the important things in life. As an

experienced politician, Cusanus is aware that, in a genuine conflict, everyone is right in one way or another. Awareness of what Certeau calls the *topological* difference makes it possible to enter into a conversation, just like the monks before the portrait can share their experiences. And so, Certeau observes with almost hymnal spirit, this is about a *geometrical liturgy* which recognizes the position of the other with the means of modern rationality: controlling geometric reason. Deze formulering wijst er volgens mij op dat Certeau in Cusanus iemand ziet die de uitdaging van de seculariserende Moderne Tijd begrijpt, maar deze juist positief in een nieuwe synthese probeert te begrijpen. Voor Certeau gaat Cusanus voorbij de melancholie van de mystici, zoals Labadie, die alleen maar het verlies van het goddelijke cultiveren.

If it is true that Certeau's multidimensional approach makes him appear to be closer to Cusanus than to Labadie, whom he 'has to let go', this is not only due to the fact that this is a later text. The play with dimensions and perspectives is also a feature of Cusanus's own texts; Cusanus the diplomat grasped the political dimension of this fragmentation. It seems that Certeau's reading of Cusanus takes him a step further than he did in the first part of *La fable mystique*. This is not only about traces of the *corpus mysticum* that are still present in homesickness. There is an alternative model that is already

glimmering through in Cusanus. Certeau himself calls this a topological model, pushing the play with standpoints and perspectives to its limits. The unity of the *corpus mysticum* is not restored in this play, but it does open up the possibility of uniting sensory perception and thought in the creative act of acting.

It would appear that Certeau recognized many of his own intuitions in this 15th century text. Particularly his notion of the return of what has been repressed, informed by psychoanalysis, gains a dynamic all of its own in Cusanus's free thinking. The invisible is operative in seeing; the unknowable is active in knowing; and what is beyond hearing is heard in hearing. **Dit klinkt abstract, maar het gaat er om dat er in onze ervaringen iets meespeelt wat zich aan die ervaring onttrekt, een schaduw die meegaat, waar we nooit geheel vat op krijgen.** Certeau underlines Cusanus's fascination with ruptures in seeing and hearing, and also in knowing and thinking. He shows how these ruptures play a role in all possible kinds of experiencing and thinking. At those points at which thinking or seeing break down, Cusanus sees changes of perspective that show us how the invisible is present in seeing, or how the unthinkable affects thinking.

This play of standpoints is only perceptible to someone who has done a lot of travelling himself. The theoretician can only be a traveller carrying a set of theoretical instruments to serve as a kind of map, but he can never survey the whole in a panoptic sense. What was most prominent in Labadie was his ceaseless searching and the melancholy that came with it. What is most prominent in Cusanus is that it is precisely the living character of one's own static forms **die statisch dreigen te worden** is found in the restlessness of searching. Labadie and Cusanus are two ends of a single continuum. Within the framework of *La fable mystique*, they are two tableaux that show how the modern mystical discourse is permanently preoccupied with the absent presence of God, with the experience that God is *truly* absent. The description of Labadie is a horizontal description of a road that is interrupted only by death, like a series of numbers that stops but never truly stops. The description of Cusanus concerns the tension between this horizontal line and the ceaseless interruptions that point at the absent Divine. And this is where we will find the perspectives that point beyond melancholy and longing. These will bring us closer to the stubborn consumers and walkers in town but also to the resistance of Christian basic communities in Brazil, who cultivate the weakness of the faith.