

Wonder-Horror

Loudun in France is a small town near Poitiers built on a hill surrounded by wide plains.

“A cluster of belltowers surrounded by fields.”

It was built on an eminence, a hilly place with circular paths rounding the keeps.

The town played a part in the Religious Wars, favoring the Protestants in the end.

Last October I wandered on narrow streets and plazas, past the Gothic St. Pierre du Marche, Sainte Croix, once a Renaissance Church, the Palais de Justice, and many old fortifications. Each of these places were parts of one shocking story of madness and exorcism.

Most of the walls had been softened and sunk by war or peace.

I was following the ghost of Michel de Certeau.

We walked up a hill alongside a Roman wall.

The air was soft, warm, autumnal.

Men were machine-blowing leaves around.

Plane trees, elms and chestnuts.

Towers dotted the corners of walls, one with banners.

Then we came to the Crossroads of the Sorcerers

where the priests had come on their way to the Ursuline sisters

who then, themselves, walked down to the town for their public confessions.

Small in size for so many immured inside.

Chalk limestone and yellow.

Once the nuns and their novices wandered around inside, singing.

Not just here, but in several monasteries and convents in this small hill-town.

A soft mist covered the plains beyond.

We found pretty wildflowers growing amid the stones
including one that snapped shut when you touched a petal.

And then we went back down and visited the museum
where Certeau found much of his material for his book.

Here were the documents he needed and used, pictures for his study of these women
and some writing by their scapegoat, a voodoo doll under glass
studded with chicken feathers, and the heart of a black hen.

These effigies were leftovers from the exorcisms
that took place in the early 17th century.

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Certeau's ghost was concerned with spiritual struggle, deceit. About belief and unbelief.
Who can you trust? Who is telling the truth? In a plurality of ideologies and religions,
who can you believe will save you? This question haunts political and social acts as
much as it does the religious. It is certainly central to the gesture of welcome, and to
any threshold experience.

Whose speech is authentic speech?

As it turns out, the possessed nuns in Loudun did not believe their exorcists—priests
they already knew--enough to be saved by them. Instead they laughed at their rituals
and refused to be healed. This example of a failure of words to persuade and save was
one that signaled the end of a social contract.

Such a contract ended in the 20th century too. It was a different one--an outcome of war,
mass murder and brutal ideology but it has been signaled by a failure to believe in
shared values, spoken words.

Instead we seem to be fading, globally, into an anonymous mass of corporate or uprooted travelers who work the metaphysics of the internet. The idea of two strangers greeting each other with trust and transparency seems to belong only to the soup kitchen, or the liturgy where there are no demands or conditions.

In an ideal society, hosts and guests would be like that: so interchangeable there would be no need to name one or the other. In ancient images of greeting you see that the host and guest are engaged in a single dance that could not be performed alone. The bowing, the hands extended, the leaning heads....The dance of friendship is egalitarian and pliable. Respect is mutual. But above all, each body is free to come and go at will.

Why is welcome, then, such a loaded subject?

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In his story, "Guests of the Nation," the Irish writer Frank O'Connor wrote about British prisoners of war, under the IRA, who are welcomed into captivity, who become friends of the guards, and then are taken out and shot by their hosts.

A more recent version of this horror came up in the movie, "The Crying Game."

Both explore the way a welcome can signify capture and selection. In both, the invisible force of love hovers over all the characters' choices, but it is helpless to intervene.

It turns out that complete freedom is required for a guest to be a guest, because he or she must be able leave in order to continue being a guest rather than a hostage.

An unwelcome guest (one who won't leave) might be a bad memory, a drive or demon, advice that can't be forgotten, a piece of love that can't be annihilated when it no longer is wanted, a secret sharer, a nightmare. These are uninvited guests who gain control of

the mind.

Guests can be close friends who stop by for awhile.

But even they must know when it is time to leave so the host can be free of being a host.

An unspoken transaction must be broken, or a written one—even money paid for the privilege of being a guest—only so the bond can dissolve.

When the bond does not dissolve, the contract turns into possession, and the authorities are called in or the interloper eliminated.

If it is a ghost who won't leave, an exorcist is called in.

If it is a memory, a psychiatrist or a narcotic helps kill it.

But what happens to the unwanted guest or ghost?

Like the child in the fairy tale, *The Girl with the Silver Hands*, one can only hope that she will find her way through the forest to the threshold of a little house, where the words *All who dwell here are free*, are written.

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Quickly the story of possession is this: in this small town called Loudun, there was an outbreak of the Plague from which people became dreadfully ill, fled, or, more likely died. The Plague found its way into the several religious houses in this town, split between Huguenots and Catholics.

The streets reeked of sickness and the corridors indoors were awash with the specters of those who had died putrefied. The nuns and their child-students inside the walls tore through the halls, playing ghost-tricks on each other. The Plague drifted away, but in games like this its taste remained.

In this atmosphere one Ursuline nun after another began experiencing a take-over of her mind by so-called demons, each of whom she named and placed in a specific part of her body. It could have started as child's play: hearing ghosts, acting them out, doing voices, assigning names. In any case these forces grew large, took over and made her utter obscenities, heresies, and speak in tongues and masculine registers. The convent, seemingly immune to diabolic forces, had been infiltrated.

The uninvited and unwanted came in the diabolic cloak of invisibility, morphing through the bodies of others.

The demons made each sister whirl like a dervish, contort like a Hindu yogi into impossible positions, back arched supported only by her toes, and her eyes rolling back. Oddly these contortions were similar to those of Indian mystics, when in an ecstatic trance. In this case the women turned their fury on the clergy.

Certeau described the situation poetically:

“...a plurality of heads and hearts in an enigmatic relationship.

Even though the tongue is the manifestation of the inner movements, the head is deceiving in relation to the celestial, human, or bestial heads that cannot be seen.”

The nuns were young and ripe. Like a pack of Pinocchios half-wood, half-donkey, half-human. Each part of their anatomy was dangerously alive on its way to daily lessons.

Gales of laughter preceded them or they succumbed to the post-Plague ghouls and cried out in pain and foreign tongues.

The father-confessors from nearby monasteries came rushing along the winding roads to

hear the sisters' confessions and to note them down, to tap their bellies and thighs and peek down their throats, to attempt to rid them of their foreign agents. But the priests were unsuccessful at chasing away demons and instead became victims of the nuns' rebukes and abuse. Sexual innuendos were rife, and closer and closer to actual sexual experience, in front of each other and the priests. The mother superior and others then developed a fixation on one priest in particular, whom they accused of seduction and sorcery. He was a victim of selection, a victim of the embodied imagination, too welcome and too remote.

He was Father Urbain Grandier. His worldly name and good looks, his imperious manner and his belief that clerics should not be celibate, while he acted on this belief, made him the obvious target.

Certeau studied this scapegoat for some signs of credibility. After all, Grandier insisted over and over again, under excruciating grilling, that he was innocent.

But no matter what he said, or what he did before he said it, he was not believed.

One official document described Grandier in prison like this:

“Often he spoke favorably of God. We rebuked him, since on that same morning we were very certain that he was a magician, and on that basis, we knew very well that when he spoke of God favorably he meant to speak of the Devil, and when he detested the Devil he meant to detest God.”

Language had lost its sense, its credibility. Grandier was in a no-win situation, at the heart of a double bind. Words were the problem. A vocabulary had lost its truth value. No one believed what anyone else was saying.

Despite many attempts by his friends to exonerate Grandier of the charges leveled

against him, his attitude, the insinuations by the sisters, and in particular by the mother superior, Jeanne des Anges, he was burned at the stake in the public square. By this time there were people, including medical doctors, coming from everywhere to watch the nuns writhe and speak filth, interpret their words, and now to watch the public burning of the selected seducer and sorcerer.

Literally thousands came to watch this outdoor theater. Those Capuchins who had promised Grandier that they would strangle him before setting him alight, did not do him that favor, but broke their promise with flaming straws.

By now, we must imagine that Grandier was glad to escape the world.

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Soon after he died, a new exorcist was called in. This was Jean-Joseph Surin, a youngish Jesuit who was known to be a hypochondriac but kind and intelligent. He came with the specific purpose of ridding Jeanne des Anges of her devils, so that she could help liberate the other sisters from their demons and bring false accusations to an end. Already she admitted she had made a mistake about Urbain Grandier.

Surin accomplished the exorcism in a radical manner: he invited Jeanne's devils to enter into himself, he summoned them into his own body, in order to free her. He became their willing host. And subsequently he had to be locked up, raving and insane, for three years, during which time he jumped out a window, injuring himself permanently, and constantly resisting the impulse to do it again. He believed that God had thrown him out and he might as well do the same. He was in the grip of the satanic, having asked the demons too many times, Why is there evil in a world that God made?

Jeanne des Anges in fact was cured by Surin's act, and became a traveling speaker and healer. Now she would be diagnosed as "borderline". The other nuns quieted down and

returned to their prayerful lives. And finally Surin himself was saved by the mild encouragement of a priest who said it might just be possible that Jesus loved him. At that moment he believed, as Simone Weil did in her little prose poem “Prologue” that maybe, just maybe, he was still loved. The demons fled. And Father Surin went on to become very active as a writer and wrote letters to Jeanne until the day she died. He said, then, that she was the only person to whom he could speak the truth.

He was a man Certeau trusted: a suffering, neurotic outsider priest who asked the same questions Certeau would ask during his investigations in Loudun. Hallucinogens in mushrooms? Or worse yet, were they performing, just for the fun of it?

Certeau saw the event as marking a change in consciousness:

“Devils and angels enter the human world as the cosmology that placed them in a celestial hierarchy begins to crumble.

Conversely, men become angels or devils. The boundaries blur.”

It is like a gnostic vision of entities falling from outer space, hurled and burning. Once winged, now armed with feet and legs and only the tiniest possibility of transcendence, the new human is born. Or is it a demon?

The quarrels between church and state, and between Huguenot and Catholic at that time, heralded the beginning of the modern period. It was the fall of symbolic authority as people had known it. King and Bishop became ludicrous to the populations who had once willingly submitted to them and their accounting systems.

And now we had a swarm of individuated beings.

Certeau wrote in a footnote to his illustrations: Instead of the assigned hierarchies that had kept people in their places, now “ a figure of power emerges: man. Child of the world.”

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For Certeau the past (like that image of heavenly entities) has the deformed features of science fiction. The past wears the cast-offs of the future that we inhabit and vice versa. What are these withered textiles and charts lying around, these sketches of half-made moderns, these stories of their habits and myths?

A slight feeling of disgust at his subject pervades his writing about it. Because who, after all, would not feel revulsion in the face of human actions through time? We know too much how evil we have been, and how rude to our potential in belittling, burning, and lynching those who are human too. Certeau's scholarship forms itself around a central emotion: wonder-horror.

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Creatures of science fiction are like ancestral projections of partial people moving across the screen of our imaginations. You might recognize an eye or a fingernail, a kind of helmet or a movement like that of a crab. But these ancestors of ours inhabited the planet and populated it with artifacts that still shape our views, especially of them. The examination of the past quickly becomes an aghast question: Who are these strangers?

The word is the root of alienation. Lies. Or as Certeau says: “The tongue tells the secret of multiple, hidden faces.”

Certeau's two books, *The Mystic Fable* and *The Possession at Loudun*, are the ones where issues of belief become for Certeau the only important ones. Experience of the One--God--also called the Truth, and the subsequent problem of describing authentically (to others) this experience—became his central interest and problem. How can you identify the authenticity of a religious experience? Through words, or through gestures?

Because Certeau was a poetic writer, he might have held an inquisition in which he asked another poet:

Do you believe what you just said?

Or was it said just for effect?

Who were you trying to please?

Much of his writing seems driven by the loss of his own certainties: belief in the institutional church, belief in the ability to express the truth of things through language, and belief in others. It is as if he had suffered a terrible disappointment and was devoting his life to deciding if it was a misreading of circumstances, or if he had been duped. Many poets produce words in order to claw at their syntax and sound for echoes of an original, first voice. This is one way the borderline between the supernatural and the natural is explored

It is a relief when someone speaks direct from the heart or through a familiar rite. This may account for the insistent and porn-ish use of torture to extract from someone a few words that can be believed. If they are spoken, however, they are often disbelieved because the torturer is confused by his own demonic theater.

When Certeau came upon the story of the possession at Loudun, he found a version of

some personal trauma that was perfectly contained. Almost everyone involved was lost and behaved dishonestly.

The Ursuline nuns of Loudun, usually dissected in terms of erotomania, for Certeau were indicators of a new age. In this piece of history he found two things: the democratization of religious experience; and the faith of his own childhood in Grandier's words and behavior. Certeau is often a convoluted writer, with a complex poetics that subverts his subject rather than upholding it. But when he was writing about Grandier's courage, and his dependence on the liturgy to get him through his agony, Certeau's prose became clear, his pleasure in it transparent. In some strange way, it was as if the subject of the book—whom to believe—was enacted in Certeau's relationship to his own writing. One believes the person who speaks clearly, from the heart. He returns to the liturgy to find it.

What this means to the subject of this seminar is that a shift in the social contract—the arrival of the new and the strange—is often accompanied by a breakdown in vocabulary. A chaos of verbal misunderstanding. Suspicion at what is being said. Torture in order to induce words that can be believed, rather than a conversation without restraints. It can be accompanied by demonic rage, babble, a hard heart.

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In the Loudun spectacle, we see the nuns invaded by unwelcome demons, a priest who embraces them and carries them away, and the way everyone's sanity is restored by the liturgy or random encounters with kindness. For Certeau the salvation of the world rests with those who have the courage to welcome demons as the only way of understanding them—and this can be read in one word which he favored, “open”, being “open” to the world and experience. And also with those who wander outside the gates, those who

survive by not being seen, by not being subjected to the perils of welcome. The worst thing for them is to be identified, to be noticed or selected. Welcome in this case can stand in for being caught. Then there are those, like Grandier, who only in their humiliation and time of rejection, become fully human.

The outsider-figure emerges again and again in Certeau's writings, under different names, as one generally despised or ignored, but joyful; as one for whom knowing oneself is the same as knowing God.

I think this perception sets Certeau apart from his contemporary theorists, and accounts for some of the subterfuges he uses in his sentences. His sentences become overly complex, even contradictory. This may be the fault of the translator. But I can't help wondering if he is faltering in his rhetoric because it is not the one that he yearns to use: that of the storyteller, the theologian or the poet.

The other person in Loudun whom Certeau could recognize was Father Surin who wrote lyric poetry that Certeau admired. Here is a short section of one of his poems that resonates with Certeau's own credo; indeed he asked it to be read aloud at his funeral in Paris.

I want to run through the world
and live the life of a lost child.

I now have the spirit of a wanderer
After giving away all my goods.

It's the same thing to me, whether I live or die.

All that I ask is for love

To remain with me.