The Index of the Absent Wound     
(Monograph on a Stain)*

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Almost Nothing to See

It is a large piece of linen serge, covered with stains. Lined with red silk (one side is therefore covered over), it has been carefully rolled up and placed in a silver reliquary. The reliquary itself is locked behind a metal grating within a monumental altar that stands beneath Guarini's soaring black marble dome in Turin. None of the sheet (lenzuolo) itself, therefore, is visible. One kneels before a photographic negative, as it were, enshrined in the altar and illuminated from within.

Sometimes—though very rarely—it is carried in a procession, an ostentation of the object, in person, if we can call it that. But even then nothing can be seen. All the faithful express the same dissatisfaction: “. . . I was disappointed: non si vede niente (you can’t see anything) everyone was saying. We tried. . . .”1 But the dissatisfaction and the attempt to see constitute something. In fact, almost nothing was visible. “We tried to see something else,” the spectator goes on to say, “and little by little we could see.”2 Almost nothing was visible, that is to say: already something other than nothing was visible in that almost. One actually saw, then, something else, simply in the looking forward to it or the desiring of it.

But the modalities of the desire to see are extremely refined. The little-by-little of this “discovery” itself takes on the form of a dizzying spiral that is both precise, as dialectic, and overwhelming, as unending baptism of sight. Following it to its source raises the very question of the advent of the visible. And that involves an entire constellation of ideas, conventions, and phantasms, which I will deal with here only partially, from the point of view of a single stain.

* This text is a summary of a paper presented at Urbino in July 1983 at the colloquium “Rhetoric of the Body,” in response to the well-developed arguments of Louis Marin on Nicole and the Veronica question.

1. Pierre Vignon, reply to M. Donnadieu, in L’Université catholique, XL, no. 7 (1902), p. 368.

2. Ibid.
Ostentation (Enrie, 1931).
Let us recall that the historic impetus that rendered the shroud of Turin visible—or more precisely, figurative—is found in the history of photography. When Secondo Pia immersed in the chemical bath his last attempt to produce a clear photograph of the holy shroud—his earlier attempts had all been underexposed—this is what happened: there in the dark room, the moment the negative image took form (the inaugural glimpse), a face looked out at Pia from the bottom of the tray. A face he had never before seen on the shroud. A face that was, he said, unexpected. And seeing it he almost fainted. The event took place during the night of the 28th to the 29th of May, 1894.

It was after this “amazing” occurrence (just as the negative coalesced) that the pattern of stains on the shroud of Turin took on a recognizable form. The photographic negative revealed what one had never hoped to see on the shroud itself. As the photographic “evidence” objectified an aspect of the shroud, it became proof of a miracle. Not only did it sanction an unprecedented sort of expository value for this relic heretofore hidden from view, it reestablished the aura of the shroud, investing the object itself with a counterpart to its semiotic status. The holy shroud became the negative imprint of the body of Christ, its luminous index miraculously produced and miraculously inverted in the very act of resurrection, henceforth to be conceived of in photographic terms.

The stain we are concerned with here remains, with others, outside the confines of this splendid hermeneutical elaboration, since it cannot be explained by the theory of a negative flash of light, achiropoiete, that would reconstitute the actual appearance of the Christly body. It doesn’t seem to lend itself to being raised up (in the sense of the dialectical Aufhebung) into something figurative; it seems to defy comprehension as a recognizable image. It says nothing about the economy of its support (which would at least establish the hypothesis of a luminous-negative index). It seems to exist only in terms of its tonal variations, only as an effect of its support. Yet the tonal variations of the fabric have no precise limits, sequence, or articulation. It seems to exist, therefore, only as the uncertain effect of something as undifferentiated background. Between the spatium (the background in question) and the pure surface, this stain reveals itself only in the precarious opening of the becoming visible; it is deployed only as a closing of signification, a closing to signification. It says nothing. It doesn’t seem made to be understood (whereas a figure, a recognized image, a facial ap-

3. I use the term impetus rather than origin because it concerns the universalizing moment of this making visible. Before the camera was passionately focused on the shroud of Turin and the train of its hermeneutic or polemical effects (the thousands of articles written on the topic since 1898), few authors devoted themselves to the study of a relic that had been exceedingly discreet and stingy in its allocation of miracles. They include: Pingone (1581), Paleotto (1598), Chifflet (1624), Capré (1662).
5. The reader is referred to my study, “Le négatif et al relève de figuraibilité—Note sur un drap photographié,” forthcoming.
pearance always point to or at least carry the promise of meaning). It seems to
arise from pure contingency. It tells nothing in itself about its origin. Would
segmenting or scanning it give it meaning? Yet it appears to be outside the
bounds of scansion or any sort of narrativity. It is only a chain of nonmimetic,
chance occurrences, neither imperceptible nor yet perceptible as figures.

*The stain (Vignon, 1938).*
The Indexical Presupposition, Retracement

What we need is a concept of figurative Aufhebung. We would have to consider the dichotomy of its field and its means, and how they deploy a dialectical mimesis as initiation of absolute knowledge; how it attempts to transform sensible space⁶ and to begin a movement (Hegel would have said automovement) in the direction of certitude, figural certitude. An absolute seeing that would transcend the scansion of seeing and of knowing; an absolutely reflexive representation. Confronted with its formless stains, interpreters of the shroud imagined such a transformation, which photography would actually accomplish. A phantasm associating Christ's passion with the medium of photography would hallucinate such a transformation (with all the beauty, rigor, and insane precision the term implies).

We have to look at this stain again, but this time with the "foresight" of such figural certainty in mind, or its "phantasm," its phantasie in the Hegelian sense; for Hegel considered Phantasie an Aufhebung, and spoke of the movement of truth as a delirium of absolute translucidity.⁷

But first it must be stated that in that very place where figuration abolishes itself—as in this stain—it also generates itself. This, in a way, amounts to setting forth a transcendental phenomenology of the visible, which would describe with regard to this stain, appearance (phainesthai, which, however, has the same root as phantasie in the element signifying light) as the very process of disfiguration; it would describe how this stain came not to possess a figurative aspect. That requires in any case inventing a structure of substitutions, returns, and representations: a structure of retracement. Retrace, in other words, tell, retell a story, but also trace a line over it, a line that, let's say, will make the original trace "represent a subject for other traces," those traditional narratives known as the gospels.

The prodigality (sophism) of hermeneutics consists therefore in laying this trace over a story which it does not in any way represent. If this constitutes an aporia, then it must be noted that a hermeneutic enterprise is able to override any semiotic aporia that threatens to impede the automovement of its figural certainty. This movement has its premise in the hypothesis declared earlier (it is a ravishing hypothesis in any case), that there, just where figuration effaces itself, it generates itself as well. But the unlooked-for corollary, the supplement, would be the following: the effacement of all figuration in this trace is itself the guarantee of a link, of authenticity; if there is no figuration it is because contact

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has taken place. The noniconic, nonmimetic nature of this stain guarantees its *indexical value*. I might add that the word *authenticity* is common to the vocabulary used by Peirce to describe the index⁸ and to the cultural discourse of theologians concerning relics (the stain itself is like a micro-session—and no less important for that—in the great authenticating process focused on the shroud of Turin, a process that never ends).

The absence of figuration therefore serves as proof of existence. Contact having occurred, figuration would appear false. And the signifying opaqueness itself reinforces the *it was* of an object (in the Peircian sense, we know that an index does not cease to be an index when the interpretant fails to account for it, whereas the existence of its referential object—the illness related to a symptom, for example—is semiotically essential⁹). Every figure has its origin where it is effaced, if that place of origin is a place of contact.

But that also means that an *act* is thereby—though no less originarily—set in motion. Peirce defines the symptom as a paradigm of the index, because the symptom locates on a semiotic plane an illness in the process of acting¹⁰—a *drama*, that is, an action fraught with consequences; in Greek there is a word for murder and a word for ritual. Figuration is effaced just where drama provides its index; this means, in its fullest sense, that the more fully drama is freighted with consequence, the greater, and more beautiful, will be the splotch, the disfiguration, the stain.

For in fact we are dealing here with crime, blood, and ritual. Figural certitude takes the decisive step of seeing substance in this brownish stain. Henceforth it will see a bloodstain. Thus is established the existence of a sheet of linen as a shroud.

The third stage of the argument: If all physical contact calls to mind the act that establishes it (in an indexical relationship), every act calls forth as well, and imperatively, the proper name of the *actor*: he who left some of his blood on this linen sheet (Peirce also considers the proper name to be a paradigm of the index, because it is associated with an absolutely specific subject; he says, however, that the proper name is also a “legisign,” because it is a sign that legalizes its relationship to the subject; it is there precisely as an imperative; elsewhere Peirce writes that “if an index could be translated into sentence form, that sentence would be in the imperative or exclamatory mood, as in *Look over there!* or *Watch out!*”).¹¹ Now since we are dealing with him in whose Name the shroud is placed in the reliquary altar, and with the drama of his Passion, such as it is found written for all eternity in the books of the gospels, the imperative takes

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⁹ Ibid., 2:304.

¹⁰ Ibid., 8:119.

¹¹ Ibid., 3:361.
on another meaning, that of dogma. As for the index, it acquires an added dimension, as a prescription to a treasure-trove of symbols. If there is any paralogism it is to be found here: the index reduced to the symbolic imperative of a story in which the possibility of a theology of the resurrection of the body must—semantically speaking—play a part. The disappointing tenor of this line of thought is felt at once, for it consists of "affirming" the indexicality of a visible sign for the sole purpose of making it shine forth as a beacon of symbolic law.

Elaboration of Detail

It is necessary, in spite of everything, to subject this contingent stain to law (concatenation), a passage to discreet order—a division. A discernment, a word whose root, cernere, contains the three signifying vectors “sifting,” “seeing,” and “deciding,” which is exactly what is involved here.

Decidedly, then, let us look at this stain once again; let us draw close to it again, to discern, to define an order of detail and articulation. Yet this stain is, in its physical conditions as in its perceptual effects, inseparable from the texture of its support. Looking closely at a stain on the shroud of Turin results unfortunately in a total loss of perspective. The weave “eats up” all effect of outline, and even tonal distinction. An intimate knowledge of this stained fabric is therefore an obstacle to discernment; because it gives priority to the materiality of the fabric, it compromises the hermeneutical process.

This is undoubtedly, in one sense, an aspect of the epistemic nature of detail. Detail, Bachelard recalled, is anti- and ante-categorical. In order to describe a detail, "you have to judge material disturbances beneath the surface. And then, conclusions fluctuate. The first conclusion [from a distance] was correct; it was qualitative, it developed in the discontinuity of numerous predicates. . . . [Detail] is richness, but also uncertainty. Along with its subtle nuances occur profoundly irrational disturbances. . . . At the level of detail, Thought and Reality appear to be set adrift from one another so that as Reality is distanced from the scale at which our thinking normally takes place, it loses its solidity in a certain way, its constancy, its substance. Finally, Reality and Thought are engulfed in the same nothingness."12 It should be noted in passing that interpretation (Deutung), in the Freudian sense, is established in the contemplation of this very uncertainty of detail (uncertainty thought of henceforth in terms of an attempt at overspecification); this doesn’t in the slightest set it in opposition to a hermeneutic enterprise that functions only “en masse.”13

But this "voracious burst" of detail seen at too close a range has a place in

The fabric (Vignon, 1938).

the phenomenology of visible discernment. From among many possible sources, we could cite Ernst Bloch's *Experimentum mundi*, which develops the theme of the closely considered surface as a "contamination" of the space and a blinding hold on the eye. *Proximity* is with all justification thought of as an *obstacle*, an obscurantist view, an alienating immediacy. I would like to call it the effect of *surface* (to distinguish it from *ground*, which can be apprehended in its parts; to suggest also its anguished, even catastrophic, terror-striken nature, as a space become wall, wall become sky, sky become hole, intimate dizziness). Now, since obstacles are there to be surmounted, we ought to sense the inevitable appeal of *Aufhebung*. Bloch calls it mediation, elevation, negation, ostentation, rotation by seeing. And this is how, he says, a figure will "appear" or "reappear." He calls this process finally an *elaboration*.14 And that alone tells us that the problem

of detail does not have its source only in the problematic of pure perception. The problem here is not one of a *Gestalttheorie*, in as much as, according to Merleau-Ponty’s critique, *Gestalttheorie* uses a concept of “form” as pure cause or something “real,” given.  

It is a question rather of considering the appearance of figuration or recognizable form as a process of *elaborated distancing*. Distancing creates visibility, in as much as it involves elaboration.

I think it is necessary to understand this word in its Freudian sense as elaboration or working through (*Verarbeitung, Bearbeitung*); an associative process that presupposes its object, rendering it suitable to support a fantasy. Case in point: a fantasy of the Christly body, filigreed in discernment, on the sheet, a (double) “silhouette.” We may get some understanding of this presupposition and of this elaborated distancing from Paul Vignon, one of the principal interpreters of the holy shroud, in a passage where he attests to the appearance of a recognizable image on the stained fabric: “Close up, *in place of the images*, he [he is referring to himself] hardly saw anything except formless spots, similar to mildew or rust stains, which several persons also reported seeing. From a distance however. . . , all these stains blended together and harmoniously arranged themselves so as to constitute the two images *which since then have become well known*. . .”

Now to return to the close-up view, this time with figural certainty provisioned (previsioned) well in advance. Vignon provides this detailed view of the fabric: “One area beneath the left hand . . . at first seemed void of any impression. . . . By looking from rather far away, you could make out shadowy impressions caused by the first phalanges of the index finger and the middle finger of the right hand, which extend on the diagonal from the upper right to the lower left.”

The Dramaturgical Deduction: The Wound

“Getting near involves playing at getting farther away. The game of far and near is the game of distance,” writes Maurice Blanchot. Elaboration makes the detour possible. The detour involves distancing. It calls forth its own *return*; it invokes the story of something rising up from “the depths of time,” something that fills up a period of waiting. Something unique and far away, however near it may be. In this game of near and far, therefore, there is an effect of *aura*, in-

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16. Vignon, reply to Donnadieu, p. 370. I have italicized the words that seem to designate the presupposition of knowledge in the illusion of its afterthought.
volved in the surface of the photograph itself (the shroud of Turin reproduced on film realizes the delicious paradox of glorifying its cultural value). There is finally, in this game of near and far, the ubiquitous presence of the Christly body, which is in the shroud, there without being there, doubly absent, as dead body and body brought back to life, and present in the terrible signs of its Passion. So it is that the power of narrative is grafted eternally to seeing.

This is possible precisely because the elaborated distancing of view locates the shroud on a \textit{screen}. It aims to orthogonalize the indexical vector, to make it projective. If the bloodstain is both the index of a contact and the vector of a projection, then anything is possible.

And the first thing possible for this trace is its tracing, in the sense of \textit{trace drawing}. For it becomes possible actually to draw the unfigurable, to plot it, in as much as it appears to be projectable. By reducing background to surface we are led to believe that we are actually seeing everything in its smallest detail. The detour of a “transfer drawing” provides the context therefore for some very precise captions: “P: orifice, half filled with flesh from wound made when nail removed. 1: path where blood first flowed from hand and quickly dried. 2: last blood, diluted by serum, along same line. S: serum from wound after blood had dried.”\textsuperscript{20}

\textsuperscript{20} Vignon, \textit{Le Saint Suaire}, p. 3.
From this sort of "photographic" detail, the tracing can easily be seen as a "photograph" of a scene. As a dramatic event. The unfigurability of this stain will therefore be the index not only of a contact, not only of a substance (blood), but of a "living" wound which interpreters of the shroud have agreed is that of the left hand of Christ, believed to be placed on the right side, at the level of the groin, at the time of burial.

This absent wound will therefore set the stage, by the simple expedient of the tracing of a stain, for the excruciatingly precise scenario of the insertion and removal of the nail, the opening and partial closing of the flesh. A paradigm perhaps of any originating event. This will unquestionably have benefited from the incalculable power of having preestablished a sense of figurability, understood as a means of staging—a translation suggested by Lacan for what is generally called the consideration of representability, which Freud refers to as \( \text{R"u} \text{cksicht auf Darstellbarkeit}\). This is where the field I referred to as \( \text{figurative Aufhebung}\) has its fantastmatic extension, in thoughts expressed as images or, as Freud says, as pseudothoughts; in substituting for logic pure relationships of formal contiguity; in the play of displacements of plastic intensity, in their ability to focus and fascinate (referred to here as the "center of the hole," marked \( P - P \) as in \text{plaie [wound]}, \( P \) as in \text{profondeur [depth]}—on Vignon's diagram; enchanting the view as long as one takes care to imagine \text{more}, to the bottom of the hole, the very "bottom" of the body of Jesus); finally, in its ability to use "concrete words," according to Freud, as "links" in a chain\(^{21}\) (the word \text{serum}, for example, which re-engages the visibility of the stain in its entirety).

The appeal to \( \text{R"u} \text{cksicht auf Darstellbarkeit}\) of course presupposes its extension to \( \text{R"u} \text{cksicht auf Verstandlichkeit}\), a "coming to grips with intelligibility" (what is also known as secondary elaboration), which, Freud writes, draws figurability out from a dream, from the side of fantasy, which redisplaces the visual intensities, limits them or uses them—he says—as a means of "rebuilding a facade," of subsuming the intense image, even the scene, into \text{scenario}.\(^{22}\) Into coherence, narrative logic.

Our \( \text{figurative Aufhebung}\) functions therefore on the one hand as the "regressive attraction" of a memory (here, a visual phantasm of the Passion as related in the gospels) in the light of its reappearance, its restaging (essentially this is how Freud establishes his definition of coming to grips with figurability\(^{23}\)); on the other hand, it is an operation dialectalized by the "dramaturgical deduction" of a secondary elaboration. But it is not "secondary" in the sense of appearing after the fact, for this elaboration is inscribed at the very outset of this entire operation.

And this operation is constructed so as never to stop. Because it is \text{Aufhebung}

itself. It will henceforth account for all stains and all traces. It will determine a system of traces that will tell the history of the shroud itself, and of its accidents (water stains, for example, or scorch marks from fires that it miraculously escaped); a system of traces of the blood of the Passion, blood that the commentators call “living,” and “dead”—deposited on the shroud during the process of burial; and even a system of traces of the partial obliteration of traces, that is, a system that can account for the “white” areas. Thus Paul Vignon saw, beneath “our” stain, “under the left hand (the one with the wound), an organic liquid that stained the sheet with pale, irregularly shaped, circular marks. This liquid partially redissolved the imprint—as it was being formed—of the fingers of the left hand, washing before it the already brownish-colored substance.”

In fact, this operation is made to stop only at the moment of grace when not only status, substance, and act would be characterized from every trace and even every absence of trace, but even the exact reference to every passage in the gospel concerning the way of the cross, the death, and the resurrection of Christ. It is the entire Passion which, imagined, must be called up (both in the reference point and in the sense of Aufhebung) from the holy shroud. “Geometry” and “experimental science” will be the means employed by this will to an absolute vision.

Abject Proof

A fantasy of referentiality sustains this entire will to see. Actually, to re-see. The hermeneutic of the holy shroud lodges its power of verification in the “reality” (in fact, in the photographic visibility of a stained piece of cloth) of the gospel text. This is why it demands an experimental verification of its own semiotic hypotheses.

The problem arises then concerning "our" stain and its localization, that is, its exact position on the "body-assumed-visible" beyond the fabric (the body of Christ). This stain, we are told, is the blood of the crucified hands. The problem is to find out where exactly the nails made their entry. Pierre Barbet, a surgeon at the Hôpital Saint Joseph in Paris, wrote a work in 1935 entitled Les cinq plaies du Christ, étude anatomique et expérimentale, in which he frankly stated that his purpose was to "find out where the nails had been driven through; what I did was to reconstruct the crucifixion and then X-rayed and dissected the parts." Attempting to prove that Jesus had been crucified from the wrists rather than the palms, he experimented nailing the arms of corpses to a cross by the palms; when he pulled on them, the wound always tore open and the limb would fall to the ground. And then: "After amputating an arm I quickly took an 8-millimeter-square nail, like those used for the crucifixion, which I had shortened to a 5-centimeter length for easier X-raying. With the hand lying flat, face up against the plank, I placed the point of the nail in the middle of the wrist joint, and, holding it straight up, hit it with a large hammer, carefully driving it in straight, and then hard like an executioner." Since the result was conclusive — it "held" — Barbet claimed he "held" proof that it was indeed from the wrist (the Destot opening, in fact) that crucifixion took place. He produced X-rays and diagrams in support of this proof.

We have seen how the figurative elaboration of the stain on the shroud of Turin essentially required a denial of the materiality of its support (in that it necessitated its idealization as screen). But here with Barbet's act there is a denial of the very surface, since it attempts to explore the fabric as a thickness ca-

27. Ibid., p. 11. Author's emphasis.
28. Ibid., p. 15.
pable of being the object of surgery; it digs into the surface as one would penetrate a body. Photographic elevation of the X-rayed stain of a wound produced by piercing.

The locale of our stain is now clearly identified, in terms of the sort of ground that subsumes it: the divine proportions of the Christly body. In addition, the formulation of the ground makes it possible to organize the scattered stains into a system; to plot a "geometric figure" that will correlate each stain to each dramatic event of bodily contact, that is, to each "monad" of its suffering—finally to each moment in the Passion of Christ. Elevation of a locus of points into quasi-medico-legal narrative terms. In this way we can arrive at the total number of lashes received in the flagellation (although the number varies, depending on the source, from 90 to 121). From this "geometry" we will attempt to make an inference as to the posture of the brutally beaten body, of the body crucified, of the body entombed. We will add a supporting cast of characters having the "right" proportions (deduced from the shroud itself) to reconstruct every ritualized moment of the Passion. And in addition to a ground plan, there will be a staging. Proof garnered from the scene for experimental verification. But the staging possesses a logic of its own, and so from a simple stained sheet

29. That the body of the holy shroud is not only the body of a "real" Christ, but also the ideal one of religious iconography, is another bridge cast out over the abyss in studies by Vignon, Le Saint Suaire, pp. 115–192; I. Wilson, Le Suaire de Turin, linceul du Christ?, trans. Albeck, Albin Michel, Paris, 1978, pp. 128–165; L. Ferri, La Sindone vista da uno scultore, La Parola, Rome, 1978, passim.
the entire story of the gospel will be told, and what the gospels don’t tell as well: the saliva of the last utterance, the shackle on the left foot of Christ on the Way of the Cross, its precise appearance, etc.\textsuperscript{30} It is not for nothing that the shroud of Turin is dubbed the \textit{fifth gospel}.

Our stain will therefore have proven itself susceptible to "geometrization." And this "geometry" will not only facilitate certain postural inferences (position of the nails in the hand, shape and size of the cross), but perhaps will identify something at the source of this entire agonizing fantasy: the very rhythm of Christ’s mortal expiration. Interestingly enough, Monsignor Ricci, one of the principle contemporary "sindonologists," uses the term \textit{axonometry} to describe the reconstitution of the spasm. His analysis also provides the principle of formal emergence of the stain, attempting, as it does, to demonstrate why the stain has the appearance that it does, or rather, how it came to have such an appearance, at a given moment of the Passion.

One might perhaps think we have come full circle here. But no. This is movement made never to stop. Pierre Barbet gives a last and abject proof at the conclusion of his work; “one more for good measure,” although you sense that in addition to its retrospective function there is also a foundational function: “I apologize for including these last two photographs, which even I think are hideous and blasphemous. . . . I found some human tatter in the Anatomy cloak-

room, perfectly fresh and supple”;\textsuperscript{31} and he actually crucified it, according to his theory of crucifixion. The photographic visibility of a pure effect of the weave of the fabric was finally transformed into the pure and abject effect of the “real” thing (a “real” person crucified). This is what I was referring to as a fantasy of referentiality.

This abject part of the proof at least signifies that what is called the dramaturgical “deduction” is not a deduction, and not even an induction (in the Aristotelian sense of inductive syllogism). It is really something more like an abduction. This is what Aristotle calls a syllogism whose major premise is evident (it is evident that if there are stains on the shroud of Turin they are the index of something), but whose minor premise is only likely (probable); the probability of the conclusion, therefore, is only as great as that of the minor premise.\textsuperscript{32} For Peirce, an abduction is any sort of reasoning whose conclusion is only probable. In the rhetoric of proof generated from the shroud of Turin, the minor premise would consist of the stage of simulation, of the probability of the reconstruction of the drama of the Passion. The probability of the minor premise is that abduction would therefore be pure \textit{scenic verisimilitude}: a pure resemblance. And

\textsuperscript{31} Barbet, \textit{Les cinq plaies du Christ}, p. 43.
we see what an abject effect it has, this "too highly detailed"—that is, perverse—restaging of an event.

I will cite one last sindonological avatar, Father Côme, whose thesis is defended in *La Sindone e la Scienza*, a small work published by the author, which was presented at a congress in Turin in October 1978. According to his theory there is on the shroud an ultimate detail, which is waiting to be seen, underneath the stain we have been dealing with: "In order to fold the hands of the victim over the pubic region, which conceals the sexual organs, it would have been necessary to draw the arms back along the body and bend the elbows in spite of the advanced rigidity of rigor mortis and the effect of tetanus due to crucifixion. The persons who first prepared the body for burial were therefore concerned to conceal something they thought should not be seen." No one had ever seen what it was, because, Côme writes, no one had dared to look that closely. He tells us what it is: "the most atrocious detail of the Passion of Christ." This something is Christ's sperm. This reflex response is documented in medical accounts of crucifixions and hangings: "the ultimate spasm of erection and ejaculation of the crucified," of which there is, he continues, "on the holy shroud, within view, the means of direct verification, if one only wishes to avail oneself of it. . . ."

*Baptism by Sight*

The historic value of this theory is unimportant. It is no less exemplary, however, for all its eccentricity.

On the one hand, it effects a passage to the limit of what I referred to as a fantasy of referentiality, the very one contained in the indexical presupposition relating to the stains on the holy shroud, and "elevated" into what could be called "the game of greatest naturalism." Now there is nothing more "naturalistic" than detail as it functions in fantasy (Freud stresses this in regard to screen memories). It is interesting that all this hermeneutical analysis of stains—non-iconic signifiers, pure effects of support or tonality—tends to define, in fact, a new art of iconic devotion (in every sense of the term). Most sindonological studies include illustrations of drawings or models that purport to represent the real Christ crucified (in its iconographic sense). Verisimilitude regarding the Passion—an act of torture—cannot logically operate within an economy of abjection; these new icons are remarkable rather for the baroque obscenity of the wound and, in particular, its secretion.

Yet it is also true that this excessive naturalism (which has its paradoxical

source in the historicist and positivist criticism of religion contemporary with the implementation of photography) is entirely contained within a theological order. Côme offers his hypothesis as a veritable télos of faith, because it carries compassion to the level of atrocity, that is, he believes, “to the limit of total truth.”

Télos of the eucharistic communion; the drops of divine sperm being the “innumerable sacred fragments of our communion.”

Télos, finally, of the incarnation; Jesus rendering the forfeiture of his death absolute in extremity. This also has its logical confirmation. The “ultimate detail,” writes Côme, “finally allows us to feel we are looking at a complete portrait.”

It is in fact the picture that is complete. The indefinite retracing of the index actually permits its own reversal, its iconic and symbolic elevation. It is like a baptism of sight that the hermeneutic of the holy shroud demands in the sense that as in baptism, "by receiving the imprint (to antitupon: the index) of the Holy Spirit, everything is accomplished in you as image (eikonikos: as icon), because you are the images (eikones) of Christ."40

In summary then there was a piece of stained linen. A determination was reached as to its nature: it was blood. Through the fact of contact, the act was described and the actor identified. And his death recreated. Bloodstains made it possible to imagine the meaning and the drama of Christ's Passion.

Lest we forget: the blood itself may only be a product of the imagination. To continue the logic of the index, the experimental fantasy and love of verification, we should perhaps wonder whether it really is blood at all. The infallible method of peroxydation (used in legal medicine to test even invisible stains or very old stains) reveals nothing, nothing at all.41 To this day there is no known blood to be found on the holy shroud.

It goes without saying that in this logic of an indexical assertion, whose aim is to be overwhelmed by the iconic and symbolic dimensions, this does not really constitute an objection to "authenticity" (to divinity). For the index of the glorious body is not an index. It is an achiropoiete icon; the blood-substance will in all cases be transformed by a luminous vector, and in all cases the contact, implied by the trace, will be transformed by a vector of virgin passage (crossing a surface without touching it: the birth of Christ, Pentecost, and his resurrection, all from the linen shroud). An argument found in Saint Thomas Aquinas could, I believe, be used to characterize this hermeneutical question (and in a certain way, theologically speaking, it rescues it) regarding the substance of our stain. Is it or is it not the blood of Christ? Thomas would say that the blood of Christ is in its entirety elsewhere: although blood is a humor, and therefore susceptible to corruption, the blood of Christ is not tainted by original sin; it is wholly revived and glorified. There is a problem, however: "Certain churches preserve as a relic a small amount of Christ's blood. His body is therefore not revived in the integrity of all its parts." Solution: "As for the blood that certain churches preserve as a relic, it did not flow from the side of Christ, but miraculously, they say, from an image of Christ (imagine Christi) that someone had struck."42 It is therefore imag(inary) blood. And no less miraculous for that.

42. Thomas Aquinas, Summa, III, Qu. 54. Art. 3.