

A NEW LOOK AT TWO INCOMPATIBLE VIEWS

ARTHUR LOTH: *La Photographie du Saint Suaire de Turin: Authenticité du Suaire, Documents Nouveaux et Concluants*. Oudin, Paris.

On page 7 of his *Étude Critique sur l'Origine du S^t Suaire de LireyChambéry-Turin*, the Canon Ulysse Chevalier writes: "... a layman of Paris entered the lists, relying on an argument drawn from the art of photography, that seemed to him indisputable". The layman was Arthur Loth, laureate of the French Institute, member of the Academy of Inscriptions and Belles-Lettres, whose book, *Le Portrait de Notre Seigneur Jesus Christ d'apres le Saint Suaire de Turin* (1900), had just appeared. Photographic evidence proposed by a mere layman could not long detain the great scholar, nor induce him to consider its challenge. But he sent a copy of Loth's book to Hippolyte Chopin, asking his judgment on the photographic question of the Shroud. Chopin was a friend for whom photography "held no secrets". In a letter of five dense pages, dated 20 May 1900, Chopin's dizzy juggling of positive-negative is a photographer's nightmare. Chevalier perhaps was so confused by his friend's pretentious muddle that he could honestly say, in 1902, that in photography he had no competence. At least he was quite satisfied with Chopin's conclusion: that, contrary to Loth's assertions, photography proved nothing,¹ and that it would be useless to bother about such absurd reasoning.

Chevalier died in 1923 at the age of 82. Early in 1899, scarcely a year after Pia's photographs, Chevalier published — in Chambéry, of all places — his first article against the Shroud. In the four years from 1899 until 1903, when his booklet predicted the Probable End of the Controversy (*Le Suaire de Turin; fin probable de la controverse*), Chevalier published nearly twenty times: articles, reviews, responses to critics, besides his *Étude critique...*, and other titles such as: *The Holy Shroud and its defenders*; and the *New Testament; and Christ; its Origins; its History; Unpublished Documents*; at least two 'Encores'....

In 1902 Chevalier announced that he had found a XIVth century document with the confession of the painter; that it would soon be published. And a calumny was invented, complete with dialogue, involving Humbert II, king of Italy, and "a personage bearing one of the noblest names in France". The nobleman referred to, the Prince de Bauffremont, answered the fabrication with a categorical denial.

Also in 1902, Chopin solved the photographic enigma in *Le saint Suaire photographie a l'envers* (The Holy Shroud Photographed on the Backside). He revealed that the Shroud had been painted in several

colors but the nuns of Chambéry "inadvertently" sewed the cloth wrong side out. This, he said, explained everything. Simple. The painted image, inadvertently covered up by the nuns, showed through the linen and was therefore photographed "by transparency". The unchivalrous Chevalier was quick to seize the concept. The August 1902 issue of *la Justice social* ran his story under the self-same title. "Nobody", he wrote autocratically, "has seen the right side, covered with a lining since 1534...."

Chopin had proved his theory by triumphantly confusing the left hand of the Image with its right and reading all the wounds contrariwise. Three years later, the Lierre copy, newly discovered, showed a figure that was right/left as it is on the Shroud, and no mistake for on it were two readable inscriptions plus a date prior to the nuns' mending. (See *Spectrum* #29, Sept. 1986.)

In his 50-page article, "Autour des origines du Suaire de Turin, avec documents inédits", datelined Romans, 9 January 1903, Chevalier wrote that the reigning Pope, Leo XIII, had appointed a secret commission to examine the question of the authenticity of the Shroud, and the commission's conclusion was the *non sustinetur*. The secret inquiry and its conclusion, Chevalier affirmed, was revealed to him by "a very good source". The paper was published in *Mémoires de l'Académie des Sciences, Belles-Lettres et Arts de Lyon*. On 15 January 1903, it appeared in *l'Université catholique de Lyon*. When the same allegations were reprinted in *la Justice social*, a rather better source issued an official denial of the story: there was no commission, no examination, no *non sustinetur*. In his "Probable End to the Controversy", the erudite antagonist had predicted his exit from the polemical scene, for silence was clamped upon him.²

The photographic revelation of a Piemontese relic that had caused far less stir than many another local cult object, in the first decade of this century fissured the scientific community of post-Revolution France. Paris was the center of seething activity: Delage, Terquem, de Malijay, Vignon, Colson and many others, including de Mely who had asserted that the image was stamped on by wooden blocks, then later acknowledged his mistake and joined the forces of believers. The Academies, the Universities, gave audience to the discussions; the Bibliothèque Nationale was obliged to proclaim its complete neutrality. Many were those who argued against the Shroud's authenticity; their names are now for the most part forgotten. Such is the fate awaiting opponents of our own day.

In this ambience of fervid inquiry, Arthur Loth "entered the lists", as Chevalier would have it, well-armed and strong in the conviction of the photographic evidence on the one hand, and a firm grasp of his opponents' objections on the other. In 133 pages, *La Photographie du Saint Suaire de Turin* addresses every accusation brought against Pia's photographs, against Pia himself, and photography as a valid scientific tool.

A problem of great religious and scientific interest, Loth begins,

has been posed,³ demanding scientific explanations. And these will be found only by study of the intrinsic characteristics imprinted on the Shroud itself. Since the Shroud itself is not available for study, he argues, the photos can take the place of the Object.

Chopin was not the only "expert" trying to prove that Pia's photos were not obtained "in the normal way". They had been falsified; by overexposure, or by transparency, or some sort of trickery, or the prints had been retouched. At Loth's request, Secondo Pia wrote a formal account of his 28 May 1898 operations, a letter, signed and dated 29 June 1907, that corresponds perfectly to the details recorded in the Notarial Report, reproduced in the Appendix. And as a visual demonstration of the sincerity of Pia's results, Loth provides reproductions of the photographer's test photo showing the altar, the angels holding the frame in which the Shroud was fitted, as well as the negative and positive reproductions of a photo taken by Sanna Solaro on the same occasion.

The antagonists of authenticity then claimed that the painted image became negative by reversing itself, as happened to Cimabue's fresco in Assisi.

To demonstrate that there is no paint on the Cloth, Loth quotes Vignon's observations concerning the bands of darker threads which pass, for example, across the small of the back, where no image is imprinted. He quotes the descriptions of persons who had handled the Shroud, their impressions of its silky suppleness and the near-invisibility of the Image, their testimony that there is not, and could never have been, any paint on the Shroud. Painting techniques are touched upon, as well as Dürer's tempera Veronicas. Delage is cited: "Why would this forger [of the XIVth century] have gone to so many pains to create a beauty no one could see?"

So if this is not a painting, it must be a natural imprint. But how can a corpse reproduce its features on a cloth? "If we do not want to see the Shroud image as the effect of divine action — which would be the simplest solution — then we must ask science for an explanation."

Besides Vignon's theory of chemical/physical action, one heard of radio-activity; impressions at a distance; photo fulguration. Three cases of natural image phenomena are reported: on the coffin-pillow of a young woman who died after a long illness, her profile was imprinted in pale rose, and indeed preserved for years by her family. A missionary of Trinidad died of yellow fever; the silhouette of his whole body was imprinted on his bedsheet. The body of a martyred priest, exhumed after five months, was still intact; his face was distinctly imprinted on the inside of the coffin lid. Examples that bring to mind the Liverpool Mattress of 1988.

Loth favors Vignon's theory based on the "geometrical law of direct projection through distance, giving the images a character of mathematical precision."

In Paris, M. de Mely, a partisan of Chevalier, on 3 February 1905,

informed the Academy of Inscriptions and Belles-Lettres that he had discovered a photograph, in the possession of a highly placed ecclesiastic of Turin, that condemned the official 1898 photographs. It showed the image on the Shroud to be a positive, proving incontestably that it was a painting. Chevalier, vindicated at last, came out with *Le Suaire de Turin, fin de la controverse* (The Shroud of Turin; End of the Controversy, 11 February 1905). Investigation into the matter revealed that the ecclesiastical photograph was a commercial print of the official negative.

Having scraped the bottom of their barrel for objections to the Shroud, the adversaries were about to give up when one of them discovered, on reading Rabelais (*Gargantua*, chapt. xxvii), that the Lirey Shroud no longer existed. It burned up in the 1532 fire. The shroud at Turin was a replacement. Here at last was textual witness, in which Chevalier was competent; but the photographic argument would not go away.

Arthur Loth's book, *La Photographie...* was probably first published in 1905 or 1906, as he says that the Canon Thiery's booklet on the Lierre shroud has just appeared; *vient d'être publié*. Thiery's book, *Une copie du Suaire de Turin*, came out in 1905. 1907, the year of Secondo Pia's letter to Loth, seems hanging in midair; too late for Thiery's "just published" of 1905 and too early for Thiery's 1909 edition, which Loth cites. That there were at least two editions of *La Photographie...* is obvious from references made to some photo reproductions which are not included in the copy I have.

What cannot fail to impress a reader of 1992 is Loth's compass of sindonic information. He examines early history: John Damascene, Brailion, Nicephore Callistus, Robert de Clari, Garnier de Trainel, Agnes de Vostizia, all were known to him, as were the shrouds of Besançon, Lierre, Silos, Enxobregas....

A formidable objection held that neither in the New Testament nor in Patrology is there any reference to a figured Shroud. Loth explains why that was so. For example, what John and Peter found in the tomb was a folded Shroud. "They had no reason whatever to open it out." They saw, and they believed. And they left. One of them carried the Linens away, for when Mary Magdeleine returned, she saw only Angels in the sepulchre. Even when, one day, the burial sheet was unfolded, the image and bloodstains were so natural, considering the death and burial, that evangelists would have seen no reason to mention them. What we now call a "negative imprint" was in no way the equivalent of a "portrait". The bloodstains with their serum halos were proof the body had not been washed. How many other stained and bloodied burial sheets had they seen, how many more the martyrs would leave behind! The veils of Antinoë, recently discovered, served as excellent archeological examples of naturally produced images.

Warned by Christ of the imminent catastrophe, that fell, in fact, in A.D. 70, the church of Jerusalem fled to safer cities, carrying with

them the relics of the Passion; in the dispersion all trace of them eventually was lost. The silence of the New Testament and of Patrology, Loth declares, proves nothing.

St. John's careful description of the burial wrapping of Lazarus is compared with the unclear terminology of the cloths used in Jesus' hasty and provisional burial: Loth offers an exegesis of John's passage that does honor to his scholarship.

Time, technical progress and the research following the 1978 examination have confirmed much of what Loth and his contemporaries wrote about the Shroud. In ninety years of wide-ranging scholarly and scientific peregrinations, the amount of new data has not destroyed the fundamentals of their research.

Only the flimsy banner of Ulysse Chevalier is still, now and again, desperately flaunted. Loth had entered the Canon's castellated realm of documents where he applied his "absurd logic" to the *Memorandum* of Pierre d'Arcis. It is strange, he muses, that d'Arcis knew of the confessing painter only by hearsay; that the report of Henri de Poitier's investigation was not in the archives of Troyes cathedral; and that, even though it was the key evidence, Pierre d'Arcis, an accomplished lawyer, neglected to cite the supposed document. But even stranger was the fact that in all the ensuing litigation, going on for years, never once was there question of the investigation, the confession of the painter, nor indeed of the authenticity of the disputed Object. As for the statements of Geoffroy II and Marguerite, there is no contradiction because *conquis* was a medieval term meaning received, obtained, acquired. Furthermore, in Latin, representation does not mean "copy" but "image, portrait"; and a correct reading would give "figure or image".

Of what value, the author asks, are documents, of what import the fragments of history, in confrontation with the veracity and realism of these photographs? On the Shroud — and by proxy, its photographic positive and negative — are the answers to all our questions, scientific and religious.

NOTES

1. The frenzied contortions of many "experts" to exorcise the photographic evidence make us wonder if, seeing, they refused to see. Strange that as early as the Christmas number of 1898, a technical magazine, *The Photogram*, had no question whatever about the authenticity of the Object so recently photographed by Secondo Pia. In an article entitled "Photographic Miracles: The Holy Shroud of Turin", *The Photogram* incorporates material borrowed from *L'Univers* (Paris) and London's *Tablet*. A short description of the Shroud is followed by a moving account of the appearance of the Image; the wounds, the marks of the nails, not in the palms but "at the joint of the thumb"; the twisted stains across the loins that "served, perhaps, to bind the Divine Victim to the pillar of the flagellation". And "...the countenance, truly divine, striking in its beauty and sweetness, its majesty and love...."

Fortunate were the subscribers to *The Photogram*, for a Special Reprint, responding to a very great demand, included a large half-tone, an actual-size reproduction of the print issued by Turin's Committee of the Exposition of Sacred Art. With, of course, the Committee's permission and guarantee of genuineness.

2. Documents and correspondence from the Vatican Secret Archives refuting Chevalier's *faux pas* are amply presented by Don Luigi Fossati, S.D.B., in an article published in *Sindon* #2, March 1960, pp. 8-15.

3. Only in France were these first ten years of the twentieth century so deeply troubled by the Shroud. The turbulence was by no means a surface phenomenon but stirred from benthic depths of the nation's soul, regurgitating the passions of the Revolution and all its unpacified aftermath. The immediate circumstances against which the Shroud polemics played were punctualized by the 1901 preliminary steps toward the separation of Church and State, promulgated on 9 December 1905. To what extent the political undercurrent may have disturbed scholarly equanimity in this case that utterly shattered the classic philosophical debate between science and religion would make a very interesting study.

* * *

Paul Vignon's first book, *Le Linceul du Christ; Étude Scientifique*, appeared in May of 1902 and rapidly went into a second edition. An English translation, *The Shroud of Christ*, came out the same year and was reviewed by R. Meldola for the 15 January 1903 issue of *Nature* (double-column pages 241-243). Meldola opens with a caveat that sets the tone for his entire critique. Read the first three paragraphs:

Whether the relic described, figured and discussed in this handsomely got up volume is the veritable shroud which enwrapped the body of Christ is a question which need not be seriously considered in the columns of a scientific publication. Dr. Vignon seems to have convinced himself that the relic is genuine, and his object in publishing this work is (presumably) to convince his readers, or at any rate to place before them the evidence on which his conclusions are based. So far as the antiquarian evidence goes, it will suffice to remind readers of *Nature* that during the recent controversy — which appears to have been the last of a series of controversies concerning the authenticity of the relic in question — Father Herbert Thurston, S.J., communicated a letter to the *Times* of April 28, from which we make a few extracts:

"The Abbé Ulysse Chevalier claims to have proved to demonstration that the linen winding-sheet exhibited at Turin is a spurious relic manufactured in the fourteenth century, and, as the writer believes, with fraudulent intent.

"We are not, of course, in any way bound to believe that those responsible for the subsequent veneration of this alleged relic

have been guilty of conscious fraud. It may even in the first instance have been fabricated without intent to deceive.... Just as in the case of so many facsimiles of the Holy Vails [Veronicas], what was in the first instance a mere copy for devotional purposes has come to figure as an original, the wish, no doubt, being father to the thought, but probably without any deliberate insincerity."

Only two of the seven chapters, Meldola continues, are of interest to readers of this scientific journal: Chapter VI, dealing with Vignon's scientific evidence, and Chapter VII, wherein Vignon "puts forth" an explanation of the Image. A brief and correct description of the Shroud stumbles, at the end, with the observation that the photographs also show marks caused by "rents, stains, burns, pieces clipped out.... We fail to see the importance of the overelaborated details of [Vignon's] description ... scientifically these marks appear to us to have no value whatever". Of course, in 1903, how could Meldola have guessed the information these marks might enclose?

One of the opposition's favorite arguments reproached defenders with drawing conclusions without having seen the Shroud itself; an argument that cuts both ways. But Meldola, who understands the process of photographic reversal and appreciates the validity of study from photographs, is willing to meet Vignon half-way. He concedes that since Vignon's photos were derived from Pia's original plates, they are probably clearer and with more detail than the heliographic reproductions that illustrate his review.

Nonetheless, "The simplest, the most obvious and the only straightforward answer to how the image was produced is that it is a time-worn painting...."

Quite competently addressing the scientific aspects of the vaporographic theory, Meldola finds Vignon's evidence unsubstantial, his conclusions therefore unacceptable. Like Maurice Berthelot, he wants his pound of flesh drained of its life-blood. Throughout, the reviewer is politely sarcastic, courteously condescending.

Looking back, we will not too harshly judge those impoverished observers who failed to recognize the revelation, ejected like a lightning bolt out of Secondo Pia's camera to shock a self-complacent and unsuspecting society. Their presence in the past provides a pallid backdrop for men like Vignon, Loth, Delage, Malijay, who stood serene under the thunderous criticism and continued to maintain, in the words of Henri Terquem, another agnostic: "We sought the truth, whatever it might be; until proof to the contrary, we think we have found it, as far as it is humanly and scientifically possible to affirm". (*L'Authenticite du Linceul de Turin*, Paris, 1902).