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Feeling Things: Objects and Emotions through History

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Capturing Christ's Tears

La Sainte Larme in Medieval and Early Modern France

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Abstract and Keywords

This chapter investigates the historiography of the cult of the Holy Tear of Christ, *La Sainte Larme*, and explores the materiality and affective life of the relic. The apocryphal narrative tells that an angel caught the tears Christ shed on hearing about Lazarus' death and gave them to Mary Magdalene for safekeeping. Around 1040, Geoffrey Martel received the relic of the Holy Tear as a reward for his military efforts. Enshrined at the Abbey of La Trinité, Vendôme, France, the Holy Tear enjoyed a robust devotion during the Middle Ages, attracting pilgrims from all over Europe. The end point for *La Sainte Larme*'s fame is the French Revolution, when the relic disappears. Christ's Tear provides an exemplary case for emotion studies and material culture because it encapsulates religious piety *and* feeling, but, as an ephemeral bodily excretion, it presents interpretive challenges as an object.

Keywords: Sainte Larme, relic, Christ, Holy Tear of Christ, pilgrim, Lazarus, Abbey of La Trinité

Introduction

Of all of the relics associated with Jesus—which include the *sudarium* or veil of Veronica, the sacrificial blood, the crown of thorns, pieces of the true Cross, nails from the Cross, the pillar on which Christ was bound and scourged, Jesus' tunic, items used at the Last Supper, and the foreskin of the infant Jesus—the relic of *la Sainte Larme* or the 'Holy Tear' of Christ offers particular challenges, by its embodied and ephemeral nature, to emotions history and to our understanding of (material) things. The historiography of the Holy Tear, which first appeared in eleventh-century France, is still being written and is imbricated unsurprisingly in studies of medieval and early modern piety and faith.¹ Although a tear has a particular claim to being read as a product of emotion, or at least as a potent signifier for it, it does not have a strong claim to being a 'thing'. This chapter concentrates on tears and emotions through Thing Theory, a theory that grapples with the way material objects interact in and of themselves with living beings. Recent studies in the history of emotions have proliferated to such an extent that there is now a rich and varied archive of in-depth materials on the historiography of and literature on tears.² This analysis of the Holy Tear both employs—and sometimes necessarily departs from—these studies. The 'emotion' signalled by the word *larme* ('tear') and the properties of it as a 'thing' have not previously been explored together in the narrative of the Holy Tear.

(p.59) Liquid discharged from the tear ducts of the eyes would seem to be the most fleeting of relics. While all relics carry religious significance, those which purport to come from the actual body of Christ enjoy a rare high status. The Holy Tear is directly associated with the events of Christ's life. It is also a prefiguring of the Resurrection (since Lazarus lives again) and is therefore considered to be a first-class relic. The physical remains of a saint such as a bone or hair, a skull or a limb, for example, were also highly valued items. The clothing of a saint and a holy item used frequently by a saint were second-order relics, while anything that touched a first- or second-class relic became an associative relic. By contrast, a tear, short-lived through the natural chemical process of evaporation, could not be 'present' in the same manner as other Christological relics. Unlike the Holy Tear, another liquid relic of Christ, the *Saint Sang* (Holy Blood) left a residue or trace of its presence visible in desiccated brownish patches on

glass reliquaries that housed it.³ Nevertheless, Church authorities recognized the importance of Christ's tears as early as the fifth century, when Pope Leo discussed the two natures of Jesus depicted in John's Gospel and gave the example of Christ's tears for Lazarus (his humanity) and the miracle of Lazarus being raised from the dead (his divinity).⁴ The capture and stabilization of the Tear was a challenge for medieval semioticians, and it poses a new challenge for historians of medieval emotions interested in the way materiality itself 'captures' feeling.

An individual's tears may represent an internal emotional state, generated by thoughts and memories in the brain in complex feedback circuits of perception, understanding, and interpretation.⁵ They also bathe and soothe the eye in the presence of irritants.⁶ Tears also have a long history within theology—the gift of tears being a mandatory sign of compunction or felt piety.⁷ But when the tears of God are excreted by a human form they pose an interpretive puzzle. The body of Christ or 'God made man' is not the same as any body; Christ's body shares his divine nature. If Jesus was an all-knowing God, would he have had foreknowledge of the death and resurrection of Lazarus? Although Christ, like Lazarus, will die, he will rise up bodily whole into heaven, according to Christian doctrine. What, then, do Christ's tears do when shed in the presence of Mary and Martha? A partial answer may be found in examining the emotional reception of the Holy Tear.

The Holy Tear is an exemplary case within the history of emotions that shows that we cannot read the practice of emotion and the designation of 'things' uncritically **(p.60)** across temporalities. First, the chapter explores the early medieval origin stories about the Holy Tear for their emotional valence. Second, it demonstrates that early modern iterations of the Tear highlight its unique status as a religious and cultural icon in the French Wars of Religion and within French court circles. In another strand of the Tear's life, in an early eighteenth-century French rural community, its symbolic distribution as a 'thing' becomes even more focused. Embedded within social networks that are driven by religious imagination, the Tear is invoked in community prayer and processions for the most basic of utilitarian needs: rain to end drought. Third, I examine the heated debates in eighteenth-century France about the veracity of relics. In these debates,

the Holy Tear is once again the exemplary case, singled out by the eminent theologian Jean-Baptiste Thiers as a spectacular fraud. Benedictine Jean Mabillon, diplomatist and medieval historian, countered Thiers's claim, arguing that the historical tradition of the Holy Tear, and the emotions it has aimed to capture and provoke over time, confirm its reliquary status.⁸

Part I: Tears, Tales, Travels—From Bethany to Vendôme

The historical narrative of the Holy Tear of Vendôme begins around 1040 when the Byzantine emperor of Constantinople, Michael IV (the Paphlagonian) requested help in the Saracen wars in Sicily from Henry I of France. Henry sent Geoffrey 'Martel', comte d'Anjou et Vendôme, who was recompensed for his military efforts at the end of 1042 with two gifts: the arm of St George and the Holy Tear of Christ. The story of the Holy Tear derives from the account of Lazarus' death and resurrection in John 11:32-7, in which Jesus shed tears after seeing Mary Magdalene weep at the sight of her brother's empty grave: one of only two instances of Christ weeping in Scripture.⁹ Deeply troubled and moved, he visits the grave and performs the miracle of raising Lazarus from the dead. According to Adrien Pillon, at the moment the tears were shed, an angel caught them in a phial, which he gave to Mary Magdalene for safekeeping.¹⁰

When Geoffrey returned to France, he donated the Tear relic to the Benedictine Abbey of La Trinité at Vendôme; Geoffrey had commissioned this building in the 1030s after he and his wife Agnes witnessed three stars shoot in quick succession out of the sky and into a well outside the town: they chose this spot as the site of the monastery.¹¹ Here, Geoffrey instituted a shrine for the *Sainte Larme*, which **(p.61)** was affectionately titled in the local language, *Madame Sainte Larme*.¹² One of the stained glass windows of the abbey appears to depict Pierre d'Alençon as Geoffrey Martel offering the Tear to the abbey.¹³ Despite multiple competing accounts of and destinations for the Tear's arrival in France in the eleventh century, Vendôme's relic was the most famous, and the road through the city became one of six main pilgrimage pathways in Europe.¹⁴

The Tear relic was encapsulated in rock crystal and enclosed within four nested containers in a reliquary above the choir of the abbey. Conceptually fossilized in stone, it was here encased and captured as a camera captures a moving image. The significance of the Tear's crystal home should not be underestimated. Medieval theologians such as Rabanus Maurus (780-856) and Rupert de Deutz (c.1075-80-c.1129) believed quartz crystal possessed magical powers, but they also believed that the stone, in its glittering transparency, functioned as an allegorical sign because of its associations with the water of baptism, the ethereal nature of angels, and

the light of the resurrected body of Christ through his incarnation.¹⁵ Moreover, Rupert de Deutz wrote that the crystal originated from water, and was a form of ice.¹⁶ In the early monastic literature associated with the abbey, it was named *la pierre* ('the stone') in contrast to the fragile drop of water. The Holy Tear was trapped inside contrary matter, in a concrete item that contained something evaporative and left tracks but no lasting trace. The durability of the crystal gave the Tear a permanent home, and the faithful an enduring material object. With a leap of the imagination worshippers could envisage the Tear blended with the translucent stone and use that concrete object as an aide-memoire to contemplate the divine Tear's aqueous nature.¹⁷

In Jacques Sanson's *L'Histoire généalogique des comtes de Pontieu et maieurs d'Abbeville*, the Holy Tear was described as 'quelque chose surpassant la nature' ('a thing surpassing nature'). Unrecognizable to the human eye, the Tear could not **(p.62)** be described by human speech.¹⁸ In François de Belleforest's 1575 *Cosmographie*, the relic is described with awe:

un Ange recueillit ceste Larme d'un grand nombre qui ruisseloient des yeux du Sauveur, et createur de tout le monde, formant soudain un vase qui a dire vrai est de merveilleux artifice, sans rupture, soudure ny ouerture quelle que ce soit, et le dehors duquel est blanc, et aussi transparent que Christal, mais de dire de quelle matiere, il est fait, je croy que les plus experts lapidaires, & mineralistes y perdroyent leur latin, & la sainte Larme (qui toujours tremblote dedans ce petit vaisseau) est de couleur d'eau, et azuree.¹⁹

These two renditions of the properties of the Tear (its *res* and signification) show that it transcends both nature and the properties of natural tears. Its power is such that gemmologists or geologists are unable to understand it. In this sense, the Tear is beyond words, made of inestimable matter that confounds those who view it. Further, this is a thing made strange. The relic has no opening or closure, no beginning or end. It resembles water and is azure in colour. In Belleforest's example, however, the Tear gets close to the idea of, to use Jane Bennett's words, 'vibrant matter', or a living and almost interactive thing. One of the main characteristics of water is its ability to move or flow.²⁰ Belleforest writes that the Tear

tremblote—that it vibrates or ‘trembles’—within its crystal container. But trembling can also signify fear, which confers some inherent agency on the Tear within its luminous casket, and offers a sense of the divine awe which it was intended to provoke.

Adrien Pillon recounts the reception of another Holy Tear that arrived in France at approximately the same time as the Tear relic at Vendôme. The narrative states that the abbot, having received this precious gift from the hands of his lord, fell to his knees, adoring the divine relic with a profound humility. He kissed it and applied it to his eyes, which induced him to shed rushing tears. He passed the relic to other religious in the community to kiss and they all miraculously found themselves in tears at its touch.²¹ This appears to be the only extant account in which the Tear is openly said to have produced tears in its worshippers. These tears, though, are miraculous tears—of what precise emotion we do not know—brought forth by the relic. Counterintuitively, and overwhelmingly, the Holy Tear, the *veritable* **(p.63)** *Pleur [sic]*, (‘the genuine Tear[s] of Christ’) is employed for spiritual and physical benefits other than direct emotional expression.²² The *lacrima Christi*, a bodily trace of Jesus’ earthly presence, might be expected to concentrate on the emotions of loss that were generated when Christ surveyed Lazarus’ empty tomb. But instead it became renowned for its ability to cure ophthalmological disorders, especially blindness. Pillon lists the miracles attributed to the *Sainte Larme*, all of which concern ocular events: blindness, a thorn in the eye, a burnt face, a loss of one eye. In Bodleian MS Rawl. poet. 224, texts on Christ’s tear and Mary’s compassion are juxtaposed, which may suggest that Marian *compassio* was central to the cult of Christ’s own acts of weeping.²³ Further, several French churches, all claiming to house a reliquary in which the Holy Tear resided, became sites of judicial pilgrimage; that is, pilgrimages legally prescribed and undertaken as punishment for particular crimes, alongside spiritual pilgrimages.²⁴ The Tear’s intercessory role is portrayed in the release from prison of Louis de Bourbon, comte de Vendôme. Louis was captured at the Battle of Agincourt in 1415, and held prisoner in England. He attributed his escape, after thirteen years, to his prayers and a vow he made to the Holy Tear. He promised that on his return to France he would institute an annual ritual in which a condemned prisoner would be ceremonially liberated on the

Friday preceding Passion Sunday. Happily, for a few prisoners, Louis avoided being apprehended by guards, and is said to have rushed to Vendôme to give thanks to the Holy Tear for his deliverance through God's 'miséricorde'.²⁵ The Christological interpretation of the Tear strengthens the claim that Christ's tears were thought to show 'misericordia'—mercy or pity, rather than his or others' personal emotion.²⁶

Pillon is keen to position the Tear as the most precious treasure of the Church, which he does by aligning it with Christ's blood. He achieves this by pointing out that although the cross, the nails, the thorns, and so on have been sanctified by being touched by the body of Christ, the Tear had also been touched (reddened or empurpled) by divine blood, which was also part of Christ's sacred humanity. Pillon is unusual in providing a visceral or corporeal reference to the workings of the body **(p.64)** of Christ outside the Passion story, and he paints an intimate picture of tears flowing out of bodily places where blood flows within living human bodies.

The word 'thing' has come under much critical scrutiny in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. (How) is a tear a thing? A tear might be described as a transient thing. Tears are visible for a short time as a liquid suspension of chemicals in water which flow from the eyes, having been produced by the human body.²⁷ Jerome Neu has argued that a tear is 'an intellectual thing' because the tear of emotion comes from thought.²⁸ Neu's analysis attempts to undercut emotionality with neurocognitive studies where all motion leads from and to the brain. But a tear is not a thing as, for example, a chair is a thing. A chair is crafted or manufactured from other things by human beings. And yet the accounts above suggest the ways in which a reliquary tear *was* considered to be an object that might be captured, in stone, in order to remember it better. And remembering plays a crucial part in a personal history of tears. Tears are understood through personal experience of how bodies behave, through memories of kinaesthetic knowledge of the feel of tears on faces, and the emotions that accompany them. Embodied knowledge makes possible the ability to interpret tears as signifiers of and for emotion in ourselves and others.²⁹ This may be one explanation for the puzzling nature of the work that the relic of the Holy Tear performs for its worshippers. The Tear may be mnemonic of

Christ's suffering, but it is suffering that allows its adherents to suffer themselves no longer.

Part II: Court, *Curia*, and Classics

Over the centuries, the Holy Tear developed its own historiography. Yet the shape of historiographical writing on the Tear shows interesting peaks from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century, and for differing reasons. For instance, it has had a long association with French royalty. As early as the fifteenth century, Louis XI donated a silver lamp for the Tear at Vendôme and provided a letter of protection or exemption for the abbey.³⁰ In the sixteenth century, the Tear attracted special treatment during the Reformation, including Protestant rebuttal, and anti-papist rhetoric. It features on Calvin's list of relics as a model of the proliferation of irrational and exploitative Church practices. However, it was also important in the French Wars of Religion, where its inherent ambiguities were politically exploited to the benefit of royalty and the clergy. During the Huguenot crisis, the relic was saved by being smuggled to the monastery at Chelles, where the abbess was the sister of the duc de Vendôme, and one of the sisters of the king of Navarre resided. Under noble patronage the Tear was relocated to St Germain-des-Prés, closer to Paris. In total it was absent from Vendôme for thirteen years. As Alexia Noulin writes:

(p.65)

elle [the Tear] a connu un exil qui lui a été salvateur et a sans doute permis sa conservation. Cet exil a également rendu possible son culte dans la région parisienne et indirectement sa notoriété a fait que des lettrés ont mentionné cette relique, permettant ainsi de pouvoir l'étudier 450 ans plus tard.³¹

The Tear was on the move, and here we have no doubt that it was a thing around which strong emotions whirled.

An intriguing work, published as a set of sonnets extracted from various speeches about the relic, provides strong evidence for royal connections with the Holy Tear well into the seventeenth century.³² The work appropriates the Tear in two ways: for religious didacticism, and as a springboard for literary elaboration through Classical Greek, Roman, and early Church history. Although undated, the printer's illustration on the title page portrays identical heraldic elements (although with minute stylistic differences) as that printed on the title page of Guillaume du Peyrat's 1645 *L'Histoire ecclesiastique*

de la covr ov les antiqvitez, which was written under court patronage for Louis XIV.³³ The first of the three sonnets in this very slim volume describes a particularly affectionate display of physical devotion to the relic. The narrator not only adores the Holy Tear but he/she kisses it one hundred times:

Je te baise cent fois, d'une bouche amoureuse
Des yeux de ton Auteur, qui est vray homme &
Dieu
Je luy vien presenter, pour Sacrifice deu,
Mon cœur humilie, & mon ame pieuse.
Quand pour l'amour de toy, mon Sauveur, je
t'adore,
Je l'admire, et la baise, la rebaise encore,
N'est-ce point adorer un seul Dieu glorieux?³⁴

The narrator finishes the page requesting God's bounty illuminate his/her soul and grant the discernment needed to better apprehend spiritual truth.³⁵

(p.66) The second sonnet commences with a Latin epigraph drawn from Book 2 of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* on the story of Phaethon's death: 'nec minus Heliades fletus et, inania morti / munera, dant lacrimas, et caesae pectora palmis, / non auditurum miseras Phaethonta querellas / nocte dieque vocant adsternunturque sepulcro' (ll. 340-4).³⁶ The daughters of the Sun (Phaethon's sisters) lament their brother's death night and day. His fall causes them bitter sorrow and with Clymene (Phaethon's mother) they cry incessantly but in vain; the son/brother will not return. The narrator then turns to the Holy Tear and recalls how Lazarus, unlike Phaethon, was given life, his sight, and Heaven, a 'chose estrange et rare' ('strange and rare thing').

The final sonnet is from the early History of the Church, and recounts the tale of the cruel Emperor Maximinus who removed the right eye of Saint Paphnutius, due to his hatred for Christianity. Constantine, though, turns around this injustice by kissing the eye cavity and weeping. The Holy Tear is now described as a daughter of Heaven, and praised as a 'perle tresauthentique' [*sic*] ('authentic/true pearl'). The narrator prays that God/Christ, the tear's Author, will deign to illuminate his or her eyes, and mind, and return sight to the blind heretic and cure the spiritual blindness of Maximinus.

These short poems produce a thematic sense of the mastery of Christ's Holy Tear over tears, death, physical and spiritual blindness, and sorrow. The Holy Tear paradoxically brings joy and love, physical affection, and requires utter devotion and subjection. Through Ovid's and Paphnutius' tales the Tear is repositioned backwards in time in a genealogy that is both Classical and early Christian, centuries before its institution in eleventh-century France. The Tear narrative, in these crossover texts, crudely knits different generic conventions together, suggesting that it is a malleable cultural cipher that can be grafted on pre-Christian time. Viewed in this light, the relic is now a metaphorical 'thing' that can time-travel, wielding and working its comparative magic on early modern Christians through Graeco-Roman syncretism. The Tear divides the world into two: a world where Christian miracles do not exist (despite the mythological circuits of the Greek gods who can fly close to the sun, for example) and where Christianity, in the form of Constantine, grants mercy to bloodthirsty political regimes such as Maximinus' who despise the Christian message. The metaphorical implication is that the Tear is a material thing, which can be touched and kissed, but which also has miraculous powers. In another sense, the relic is now also a 'textual thing', as it cuts across different literary genres, within a web of courtly social networks that weave desire and history into religious didacticism.

Another manifestation of the Holy Tear's ability to confer identity and forge communal bonds is the important religious performance of devotional procession. **(p.67)** In 1719, the people of Vendôme and the parishes of the Vendômois requested permission from the mayor and civic authorities to stage a solemn procession to honour and parade the relic of the Holy Tear. The purpose of the procession was to implore the relic to move Christ to intervene in the severe drought in the region, which had lasted several months. Through prayer, the Tear was being asked to cause rain, to drench the earth in an act mimetic of the tears Christ had shed on hearing of the death of Lazarus. The ritual was an elaborate affair: forty-five Masses were offered, the procession lasted all day, and a new lengthy canticle which narrated the story of how the Tear came to be in the town of Vendôme was composed for the occasion.³⁷ This was sung to a secular tune, 'Du brave cavalier assis' ('Of the brave mounted cavalier'), which shows a change in the devotional practice that usually insisted on the singing

of hymns during such religious occasions. The foundational narrative was scripted to include all of the key components of the Tear's history at Vendôme in order to refresh communal memory and revivify devotion to the relic. But its temporalities included the here and now. The canticle described the ceremony that it was in the act of creating, singing of the actual procession, and adding another strand to the relic's potency some nearly 700 years after its arrival in France.

This processional congregation sought to induce a flow of tears in Christ himself, so much so that his mercy would send this agricultural community much-longed-for rain. The emotion of Christ is vacant in this instance. As in most other instances, such as ocular miracles, the primary miracle of the Tear here is functional; it induces an emotional response only indirectly. Consistently in the records the Tear does not seem to have been employed to induce tears in its worshippers, but rather, to increase Christ's tears, similar to those Mary Magdalene's exhortations and distress produced to induce him to produce another miracle.

Part III: Fakes, Frauds, and Faith

Some twenty years prior to the procession, the theologian and church historian Jean-Baptiste Thiers published his famous dissertation about the abuse of relics. Thiers's polemic targets the widespread practice of procuring, worshipping, and promoting false relics for profit throughout France, but he singles out in particular the relic practices of the Benedictine Order. After listing many cases of mistaken and fraudulently labelled relics, Thiers claims that the Holy Tear is a spectacular and extraordinary example of a relic that cannot be tied to its name. Quoting the authority of pope and Church authorities, Thiers cites Guibert de Nogent (c.1055–1154), who famously disparaged the practice of venerating relics.³⁸ Thiers **(p.68)** employs the scholastic *quodlibet* (a disputation method of question and answer used in the medieval university curriculum), challenging the Benedictines to a debate against the efficacy of the Tear. Could not the tear be one Jesus wept over Jerusalem, or at the Garden of Olives, on the Cross? Who told you an angel collected this tear in a flask and gave it to the Magdalene? He questions John's Gospel, commenting that the Apostle did not see an angel collect the tears; otherwise he would have recorded it.³⁹ Why did you conserve only a single tear? Thiers is particularly vexed by not knowing which tear was collected by the angel. He asks, 'Celle qui y est, est-elle la première, la seconde, la troisième, la pénultième, la dernière, ou quelque'autre de celles que Jésus-Christ versa sur la mort de son ami Lazare?' ('This one [tear] that is here; is it the first, the second, the third, the second-last, or the last or some other of those that Jesus Christ wept on the death of his friend Lazarus?')⁴⁰ He also interrogates the efficacy of the reliquary. Why is the Tear contained within two vases if it is miraculous? Is it not sufficient to hermetically seal the Tear in one vase? He completes his dissertation by hoping that wisdom, piety, and zeal will disabuse 'les simples de la fausse créance qu'ils ont de la Larme de Vendome' ('the simple folk of the false belief they have about the Tear of Vendome').⁴¹ Thiers's questioning had a strong basis in rationality but material facts were paramount in his trajectory. At the same time, his account has a quality of almost childlike literalness.

Jean Mabillon in his *Lettre d'un bénédictin* defended the Tear's authenticity by drawing on the revelation of past custom, ecclesiastical tradition, and the longevity of the cult.⁴² In

short, Mabillon claims that the Holy Tear is true because thousands of people have worshipped it, and have done so for centuries. It has not been denounced by consecutive popes and archbishops. Mabillon thinks it a temerity to even question such relics. He also chides Thiers for not examining the *Titres* or History.⁴³ He regards Thiers' dissertation as an attack generated by 'la passion violente'.⁴⁴ And he castigates Thiers by saying that one needs a just temperament to pronounce on so delicate a matter. There were ancient documents linking the Holy Tear to its eleventh-century origins, he claims, and because it once was housed in a magnificent reliquary, it must be genuine.⁴⁵

Mabillon was a pioneer and founder of scientifically based archival research methods through his *De re diplomatica*, but he was also hesitant to distinguish forged from genuine documents too rigorously, even allowing known forgeries to rest with genuine diplomas. He employed ancient letters and charters, classifying the various proofs under titles, such as 'Preuves extantes', and 'Preuves littéraires', to illustrate the authenticity of the relic in his reply to Thiers.⁴⁶ His refutation encompassed appeals to the past itself as a genuine authority. This was a deliberate curatorial policy in his work on medieval documents. It also explains how he might **(p.69)** be persuaded to defend a relic that is possibly fake through the same rationale. As one recent Mabillon commentator claims: 'he could even . . . allow his *affection* for his order to temper the severity of his approach, as in the matter of the antiquity of the abbey of St. Denis, and in the still more regrettable affair of the Holy Tear of Vendôme' (my emphasis).⁴⁷ By reputation, Mabillon was a man who privileged his concerns over his facts. In the seventeenth century, a letter between two English antiquaries scrutinized Mabillon's methods. Thomas Smith warned Humfrey Wanley that although Mabillon attempted to distinguish genuine and authentic charters from false ones, 'it might bee always remembred, that hee is biased too much by his education an[d] vow, and by *the love and concerne*, w[h]ich hee beares for the honour of his own order, and therefore not to bee trusted upon his bare word without the warrant of good reason and just authority' (my emphasis).⁴⁸ Mabillon, then, was able to reformulate the relic as possibly spurious but defensible due to the feeling he carried for it, and, as a Benedictine, for the traditions of the cult of the relic which had been instituted by his own Order at

La Trinité in Vendôme. Mabillon was circling around the idea that it did not matter whether the relic was real or fake, but that people's feelings could dictate whether or not they wanted the relic to be miraculous. He argued that this was sufficient evidence for its truth and on the level of blind faith, he was probably right.

The chronological end point for the Holy Tear's widespread fame is the French Revolution, when it disappeared both actually and, some hoped, incorrectly, symbolically. 'In the revolution we visited some of those holy tears, in some phials such as those at Vendôme', 'on trouva un grain de verre, qui figurait une goutte d'eau; dans d'autres on trouva rien' ('one found a grain of glass, which featured a drop of water; in others one found nothing').⁴⁹ In the early nineteenth century, the Tear attracted some sentimental and romantic writing. The nineteenth-century travel journal of Mary Boddington provides an example:

For the vial being carried yearly in procession on Good Friday, a prisoner expressly chosen as one whose case was 'piteux et rémissible' was appointed to follow it, bearing in his hand a lighted torch; which prisoner received free grace after the ceremonial, in commemoration of the deliverance of Louis de Bourbon, Comte de Vendôme, who being captured at the battle of Agincourt and incarcerated in the tower of London, escaped through his faith in the holy tear.

There is something so beautiful in this human tear, so full of hope to the weak and trembling, so consoling as a symbol of the link—even of affection, which may unite a divine nature to an earthly and erring one, that I have never read those two words, 'Jesus wept', without a swell of the heart.⁵⁰

(p.70) Boddington appears to equate the Tear with the sublime in this example. Another nineteenth-century writer, however, stated that the monks of the Holy Tear at Vendôme popularized 'a superstitious belief . . . that the crystal globe which enclosed a stone heart, and was hung up over the monument, was efficacious in maladies of the eyes. [T]he people came in great confidence to rub their eyes on this holy

relic.⁵¹ Practicality as well as beauty, it seems, is in the eye of the beholder.

Conclusion

The concept and the relic of the Holy Tear offer a conversation between two meanings inherent in the word 'feelings'. The first concerns 'feeling' that involves the sense of physical touch, and that quality both evokes and relies upon matter. The touching of relics was a high point of veneration at holy places. The worshippers' aim was to be as close as possible to the relic, and hence God's power, in the belief that miracles were possible through its intercessory powers.⁵² The quality of 'virtus' could work miracles through touch and be transferred from one substance to another by direct contact or by second-order touch. Christ's ability to heal through touch was a common theme in the New Testament, even in something as mundane as touching the hem of a garment. It was impossible to touch the Holy Tear itself so the stone, a rock crystal, was immersed in water, removed, and the water in which the stone had been immersed was then considered thaumaturgic because it had been in contact with the relic. The second meaning of 'feelings' concerns the emotions. What emotions create tears? What tears in—or from—others create emotions in ourselves?

On an etymological level, *une larme* is a noun, a 'thing'; *la larme* is a particular thing. The act of weeping stems from *pleurer*, to cry or shed tears. The *pleurants*, for example, are the ones who cry (act) but *la larme* is matter. Here it is tempting to draw upon Heidegger's binary of thing and object (with *la larme* as the thing and the Tear relic as the object), but Bruno Latour's critique of Heidegger suggests that the distinction between a thing and an object is not as clear as Heidegger would have us believe.⁵³ All things (in a logical extension of Latour's argument against this easy binary, there are no objects) are part of human endeavour, desire, communicative network, and/or social/political collaboration. The argument that all objects are things because they are embedded in social and / or political networks holds true when thinking about the work that the Holy Tear performs. Moreover, Latour makes the point that the more we become obsessed with finding the facts (**p.71**) about something, the more we are distanced from our object of study, and hence our 'concerns' (Latour's term) about that object of study. Although 'concerns' do not equate to emotions, there is an argument to be made that cognitive feelings overlap with the emotion field. As desires or drives towards knowledge, other than sealed-off

intellectual or factual knowledge (if there is such a thing), 'concerns' lean into emotions. Although the movable relic imprisoned in its reliquary becomes objectified, the impulse of its devotees is to get as near to it as possible, to touch it, as if being physically near the matter of the relic is enough.

The genius of the Tear relic is that it marries piety and emotion to produce *misericordia* or mercy; but this is also its undoing, because the Tear does not signify emotion per se. It is an empty emotion signifier. In its place is a 'thing', a material object created out of apocryphal stories, the magic of gems, textual palimpsests, and numinous belief. The beginning of the litany to the Holy Tear establishes that transmutation from emotion to 'thing as action or work' very clearly. The refrain to each of these lines is 'Grant us Mercy' ('Faites-nous Miséricorde').

Jésus, qui pleurez avec humilité,
Jésus, qui lavez le monde avec des Larmes,
Jésus, qui ressuscitez le monde avec des Larmes,
Jésus, qui éclairez les aveugles avec des Larmes,
Jésus, qui illuminez les entendements avec des
Larmes,
Jésus, qui nourrissez les volontés avec des
Larmes,
Jésus, qui nourrissez les esprits avec des Larmes,
Jésus, qui amolissez les esprits avec des Larmes,
Jésus, qui sanctifiez les corps avec des Larmes,
Jésus, qui rendez les âmes fécondes avec des
Larmes . . .⁵⁴

We need a language that allows us to widen the way we write or speak about the material world, whether or not in a religious context. Michel de Certeau has given us a way of speaking about everyday place as a practised space, and Monique Scheer argues that we can profitably use Bourdieuan concepts to extend our reading of emotions.⁵⁵ We want to and we do invest material objects with meaning, value, and feeling. The Holy Tear offers rich avenues for theorizing questions about the nature of things and feelings. However, it is also an exemplary case or model of how emotions, things, and the words used to describe them, are not universal.

Notes:

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⁽¹⁾ Kimberley-Joy Knight, 'Droplets of Heaven: Tear Relics in the High and Later Middle Ages', *The Mediaeval Journal* 6.2 (2016): 45–80.

⁽²⁾ Thomas Dixon, *Weeping Britannia: Portrait of a Nation in Tears* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), provides a comprehensive list of recent publications for further reading in this field at 280–96.

⁽³⁾ Caroline Walker Bynum, 'The Blood of Christ in the Later Middle Ages', *Church History* 71.4 (2002): 685–714; 685. From the twelfth century a quantity of the *Saint Sang* was cherished as a relic at the Benedictine Abbey of La Trinité at Fécamp in the Seine-Maritime region on the north border of France.

⁽⁴⁾ 'The Letters and Sermons of Leo the Great', trans. Charles Feltoe, in *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, XII (New York: Christian Literature Company, 1895), Letter XXVIII, iv, 41.

⁽⁵⁾ Jerome Neu, 'A Tear is an Intellectual Thing', *Representations* 19 (1967): 35–61; 35, claims that thought generates emotion tears.

⁽⁶⁾ L. Börje Löfgren, 'On Weeping', *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 47 (1966): 375–81; 375.

⁽⁷⁾ Pierre Adnès, 'Larmes', in *Dictionnaire de spiritualité ascétique et mystique: doctrine et histoire*, ed. M. Viller et al., IX, cols. 287–304 (Paris: Beauchesne, 1976); Piroska Nagy, *Le Don des larmes au Moyen Âge* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2000).

⁽⁸⁾ Jean-Baptiste Thiers, *Dissertation sur la Sainte Larme de Vendôme* (Paris: Pierre Esclassan, 1699) and *Réponse à la lettre du Père Mabillon, touchant la prétendue Sainte Larme de Vendôme* (Cologne: Héritiers de Corneille d'Egmond, 1700).

For the counter-claim, see Jean Mabillon, *Lettre d'un bénédictin à Monseigneur l'évesque de Blois, touchant le discernement des anciennes reliques, au sujet d'une dissertation de Mr Thiers, contre la Sainte Larme de Vendôme* (Paris: Pierre et Imbert de Bats, 1700).

⁽⁹⁾ The other is found in Luke 19:41, when Jesus wept over Jerusalem.

⁽¹⁰⁾ A. Pillon, *Histoire et thèse sur l'insigne relique du précieux sang dite de la sainte larme* (Paris, 1858), 2–9.

⁽¹¹⁾ Louis Halphen, and René Poupardin, *Chroniques des comtes d'Anjou et des seigneurs d'Amboise* (Paris, 1913), 151.

⁽¹²⁾ R. Crozet, 'Le Monument de la Sainte-Larme à la Trinité de Vendôme', *Bulletin de la société archéologique, scientifique et littéraire du Vendômois (BSASLV)* (1963): 17–27; 17.

⁽¹³⁾ Jean-Bernard de Vaivre, 'Une Représentation de Pierre d'Alençon sur les verrières de la Trinité de Vendôme (circa 1280)', *Bulletin Monumental* 140.4 (1982): 305–13.

⁽¹⁴⁾ By the thirteenth century, up to eight sites claimed to hold tears of Christ, including Allouagne (Pas-de-Calais), Thiers (Puy-de-Dôme), Chemillé, église St-Léonard (Maine-et-Loire), Fontcarmot, Saint-Maximin (Var), Orléans (St-Pierre-du-Puellier), and Selincourt.

⁽¹⁵⁾ PL 111–273, *De universo*, Bk. 17, ch. 9; cited in Cynthia Jean Hahn, *Strange Beauty: Issues in the Making and Meaning of Reliquaries, 400–c.1204* (Philadelphia, PA: Pennsylvania University Press, 2012), 216.

⁽¹⁶⁾ Stefania Gerevini, 'Christus crystallus: Rock Crystal, Theology and Materiality in the Medieval West', in *Matter of Faith: An Interdisciplinary Study of Relics and Relic Veneration in the Medieval Period*, ed. James Robinson and Lloyd de Beer with Anna Harnden (London: British Museum, 2014), 92–9.

(¹⁷) Crozet, 'Le Monument de la Sainte-Larme', 12. Much work has been conducted into pilgrimage sites and objects of veneration, and more recently pilgrimage as an economic venture. See especially Adrian R. Bell and Richard S. Dale, 'The Medieval Pilgrimage Business', *Enterprise and Society* 12 (2011): 601–27; 601; Fernand Bournon, 'Documents relatifs au pèlerinage de la Sainte-Larme de Vendôme 1574–1666', *BSASLV* (1885): 127–34; 128, for insights into church preparation that includes the sale of trinkets and candles to pilgrims visiting Vendôme.

(¹⁸) J. Sanson, *L'Histoire généalogique des comtes de Pontieu et maieurs d'Abbeville* (Paris: François Clovzier, 1657), 100.

(¹⁹) François de Belleforest, *La Cosmographie vniverselle de tovt le monde* (Paris: Nicolas Chesneau, 1575), 322. '[A]n Angel gathered this Tear from many that streamed from the eyes of the Saviour, and creator of all the world, forming suddenly a vase that to tell the truth is a marvelous artifice, without rupture, welding or any opening whatsoever; and the outside of which is white, and as transparent as Christal, but to say of what matter it is made, I believe that the most expert lapidaries and mineralists would have no idea, and the holy Tear (which ever trembles in this little vessel) is the colour of water, and of azure.' The spelling 'Christal' associates Christ with the transparent quartz crystal. The description of the Tear was written in verse in a fifteenth-century manuscript (Oxford, Bod. MS Rawl. poet. 224), and transcribed by Achille de Rochambeau in *Voyage à la Sainte-Larme de Vendôme* (Vendôme: Lemer cier, 1874), 89–96.

(²⁰) Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).

(²¹) Pillon, *Histoire*, 24, 10.

(²²) Jules Brosset, 'Les Orgues de l'abbaye de la très sainte trinité de Vendôme', *BSASLV* (1898): 194–217; 199, from a canticle to the *Sainte Larme*.

(²³) Oxford, Bod. MS Rawl. poet. 224, fol. 19^f. On this folio, prayers to the Virgin Mary conclude, and are followed by a Latin poem on the miracles connected with the Holy Tear.

(²⁴) See Katja Boertjes, 'Pilgrim Ampullae from Vendôme: Souvenirs from a Pilgrimage to the Holy Tear of Christ', in *Art and Architecture of Late Medieval Pilgrimage in Northern Europe and the British Isles*, ed. Sarah Blick and Rita Tekippe, vol. I (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 443–72; 448. Tax evasion and insulting a town clerk were the crimes in question.

(²⁵) Oxford, Bod. MS Rawl. poet. 224, fol. 107^r has a copy of the document that institutes the 'Procession du Vendredi du Lazare', from 1428 after Louis de Bourbon's vow. The catalogue entry gives the date of the copy as 24 April 1528. See also Rochambeau, *Voyage à la Sainte-Larme*, 45–8, and 64–9, for an *Acte Notarié qui consacre le voeu de Louis de Bourbon a la Sainte-Larme—1428*. See also Michel Simon, *Histoire de Vendôme et de ses environs*, II (Vendôme: Henrion Loiseau, 1834), 280–96, 'que si le Seigneur voulait, par sa miséricorde, le délivrer de sa prison' ('that if the Lord wished it, by his mercy, to deliver him [Louis] from his prison').

(²⁶) T. Koehler, 'Miséricorde', in *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité ascétique et mystique: doctrine et histoire*, ed. M. Viller et al. (Paris: Beauchesne, 1976), X, col. 1313.

(²⁷) Löfgren, 'On Weeping', 375–81.

(²⁸) Neu, 'A Tear is an Intellectual Thing', 35.

(²⁹) Guillemette Bolens, *The Style of Gesture: Embodiment and Cognition in Literary Narrative* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012), 1–2.

(³⁰) Rochambeau, *Voyage à la Sainte-Larme*, 47.

(³¹) Alexia Noulon, 'La Relique et ses tergiversations pendant les guerres de religion: la sainte Larme, sa dimension sacrée et l'enjeu du pouvoir', *BSASLV* (2012): 19–25; 25; C. Torchet, *Histoire de l'abbaye royale de Notre-Dame de Chelles*, vol. I (Paris: Retaux-Bray, 1889), 271. '[I]t has known an exile which has been its salvation and which without doubt has ensured its conservation. This exile has equally rendered its cult possible in the Parisian region and indirectly its notoriety has meant that men of letters have mentioned this relic, thus allowing it to be studied 450 years later.'

⁽³²⁾ M. Ph. G. Ad. J., *Sonnets, extraicts du discours de la Sainte larme plorée par nostre Seigneur, sur le Lazare mort, et par luy resuscité, laquelle se garde et visite en l'Église de la tressainte Trinité à Vendosme* (Paris: Petit-Pas, n.d.).

⁽³³⁾ Guillaume du Peyrat, *L'Histoire ecclesiastique de la covr ov les antiqvitez* . . . (Paris: Henry Sara, 1645), 171.

⁽³⁴⁾ M. Ph. G. Ad. J., *Sonnets*. 'I kiss you [relic] a hundred times, with an amorous mouth, / from the eyes of your Author [Christ], who is true man and God / I come to present to him, in due Sacrifice / my humbled heart and my pious soul. When for the love of you, my Saviour, I adore you, I admire it [the relic], and kiss it, and kiss it again, Is this not to adore one sole glorious God?'

⁽³⁵⁾ Rochambeau, *Voyage à la Sainte-Larme*. The last word in the last extant stanza, 'yeux', is followed by a comma so it is likely the rest of the sonnet was lost prior to Achille de Rochambeau's nineteenth-century collation, which gives a full stop in the same place, suggesting (perhaps incorrectly) that the work is complete.

⁽³⁶⁾ Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, ed. Frank Justus Miller and G. P. Goold, English trans. Frank Justus Miller (Cambridge, MA; Harvard University Press; London: Heinemann, 1977–84), Bk. ii, 82–4. 'The Heliades, her (Clymene's) daughters, join in her lamentation, and pour out their tears in useless tribute to the dead. With bruising hands beating their naked breasts, they call night and day upon their brother, who nevermore will hear their sad laments, and prostrate themselves upon his sepulchre.'

⁽³⁷⁾ BNF MS fonds latin 12700, fols. 320v–321r.

⁽³⁸⁾ Guibert de Nogent, 'Against the Monks of Saint-Medard who claim to have the Tooth of the Savior', in *Monodies and On the Relics of Saints: The Autobiography and a Manifesto of a French Monk from the Time of the Crusades*, Bk. 3, ed. and trans. Joseph McAlhany (New York: Penguin, 2011). The church of Sainte Médard claimed to own one of Christ's teeth, which enraged Guibert, and possibly Thiers.

⁽³⁹⁾ Thiers, *Dissertation*, 24.

⁽⁴⁰⁾ Thiers, *Dissertation*, 26.

⁽⁴¹⁾ Thiers, *Dissertation*, 26, 184.

⁽⁴²⁾ Mabillon, *Lettre d'un bénédictin*, 9.

⁽⁴³⁾ Mabillon, *Lettre d'un bénédictin*, 17.

⁽⁴⁴⁾ Mabillon, *Lettre d'un bénédictin*, 5.

⁽⁴⁵⁾ Mabillon, *Lettre d'un bénédictin*, 10.

⁽⁴⁶⁾ Mabillon, *Lettre d'un bénédictin*, 47, 59. The former consisted of the now lost reliquary and arcade of the Holy Tear, and the later, twelfth-century charters of endowments.

⁽⁴⁷⁾ David Knowles, *The Historian and Character and Other Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 234–5.

⁽⁴⁸⁾ BL MS Harley 3781 fol. 84^r, cited in Alfred Hiatt, 'Diplomatic Arts: Hickes against Mabillon in the Republic of Letters', *Journal of the History of Ideas* 70.3 (2009): 351–73; 365, n. 41.

⁽⁴⁹⁾ Jacques-Albin-Simon Collin de Plancy, *Dictionnaire critique des reliques et des images miraculeuses*, vol. II (Paris: Guien et Compagnie, 1821), 55–8; 58.

⁽⁵⁰⁾ Mary Boddington, *Sketches on the Pyrenees*, vol. II (London: Longman, 1837), 348–9.

⁽⁵¹⁾ Louise S. Costello, *A Pilgrimage to Auvergne, from Picardy to Le Velay* (London: Richard Bentley, 1842), 188.

⁽⁵²⁾ Anastasia Keshman, 'Touching of Relics', in *Encyclopedia of Medieval Pilgrimage* (Brill Online, 2016. <http://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/encyclopedia-of-medieval-pilgrimage/touching-of-relics-SIM_00153>, accessed 16 November 2015).

⁽⁵³⁾ Martin Heidegger, 'The Thing', in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Alfred Hofstadter (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), 161–84; 164; Bruno Latour, 'Why has Critique Run Out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern', *Critical Inquiry* 30 (2004): 225–48.

(⁵⁴) Rochambeau, *Voyage à la Sainte-Larme*, 87. 'Jesus, who weeps with humility, . . . who cleanses the world with Tears, . . . who revives the world with Tears, . . . who enlightens the blind with Tears, . . . who illuminates our understanding with Tears, . . . who feeds our will with Tears, . . . who feeds our spirits with Tears, . . . who soothes our spirits with Tears, . . . who sanctifies our bodies with Tears, . . . who makes souls ripe with Tears', etc. (my translation).

(⁵⁵) Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1984); Monique Scheer, 'Are Emotions a Kind of Practice (and Is That What Makes Them Have a History)? A Bourdieuan Approach to Understanding Emotion', *History and Theory* 51.2 (2012): 193–220.



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