



Veils (Cultural Memory in the Present)

Hélène Cixous, Jacques Derrida

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Something of a historical event, this book combines loosely "autobiographical" texts by two of the most influential French intellectuals of our time. "Savoir," by Hélène Cixous, is a brief but densely layered account of her experience of recovered sight after a lifetime of severe myopia, an experience that ends with the unexpected turn of grieving for what is lost. Her literary inventiveness mines the coincidence in French between the two verbs *savoir* (to know) and *voir* (to see). Jacques Derrida's "A Silkworm of One's Own" complexly muses on a host of autobiographical, philosophical, and religious motifs—including his varied responses to "Savoir." The two texts are accompanied by six beautiful and evocative drawings that play on the theme of drapery over portions of the body.

Veils suspends sexual difference between two homonyms: *la voile* (sail) and *le voile* (veil). A whole history of sexual difference is enveloped, sometimes dissimulated here—in the folds of sails and veils and in the turns, journeys, and returns of their metaphors and metonymies.

However foreign to each other they may appear, however autonomous they may be, the two texts participate in a common genre: autobiography, confession, memoirs. The future also enters in: by opening to each other, the two discourses confide what is about to happen, the *imminence* of an event lacking any common measure with them or with anything else, an operation that restores sight and plunges into mourning the knowledge of the previous night, a "verdict" whose threatening secret remains out of reach by our knowledge.

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Lucille Grant:

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