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## THE VEIL OF ISLAM

**T**he *veil and the sign*—around the stormy association of these words a debate has been raging for six years, which has assumed an unprecedented dimension.<sup>1</sup> One should note, first, the breadth and extent of the arguments that have mobilized the great number of participants over a long time, given rise to profuse written and audiovisual productions, implicated state institutions, been the cause of legal actions and judicial writs (tribunals, councils of State, ministerial decrees). In returning to the archive of these events, one can only be struck by the multiple domains of discourse that have been appealed to: law, politics, ethics, religion, language. With a little distance, one immediately notices the glaring disproportion between the fact itself—a handful of young women implicated here and there in certain secondary schools, with numbers reaching a little over a hundred or so in the entire country—and the theoretical, polemical, and explanatory reactions it triggered. *Between the veil and the sign*, something like a semiological construction site of the foundations was immediately opened.

Of course, a construction site of this sort doesn't just spring up anytime, and *a propos* of anything at all. The stakes would have had to have been significant for such a mutually intense deployment. But if we parse through the debate to find out just what is at stake, what we find is the impossibility of identifying any one stake in particular. Such a tangle of reasons and themes running over into one another, each one as important as the last, have been put forward, all of which go to the very core of the principles, values, and indeed the identity of the political system. A statement by the Minister of Education powerfully sums up just what is being brought into question: "the face of France." And, to indicate that this was no grandiloquent expression tossed out by chance, he specifies: "I am a believer, who of course respects other believers. But we must demonstrate that we are also believers in the Rights of Man, in France, and in the Republic. It's just too bad if this sounds a bit solemn and seems unfashionable."<sup>2</sup> The veil and the face of France: the whole (*tous*) is in question. Beyond the position of a politician who is eager to justify his proscriptive

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<sup>1</sup> Originally published in French as "Le voile d'islam," in *Cahiers Intersignes, La virilité en Islam* 11-12 (1998): 59-73. Translated with kind permission.

<sup>2</sup> Francois Bayrou: "According to whether we defend our ideal or renounce the face of France, in ten, twenty years, the place of Islam, that of the Muslim woman, will not be the same," interview in *Liberation*, 10 October (1994).

decision by invoking his belief, one can recognize the reach of the threatening shadow of the veil throughout the entire debate in the two key notions that are invariably invoked: integralism and integration. The first designates the evil that works through the veil, and the second, the good the veil calls into question, viz.: the political fiction of entering the common body of the nation. Literally, these words boil down to the integrity of a system that is being called into question by the integrity of an other. Why should the veil put the whole into question? Why is the veil a "panic question," as Blanchot puts it?

It is not insignificant that the debate should have crystallized around the sign and its ostentatious nature. Ostentation is *an excess in the way of making visible* (Littré), an excess that causes a disorder that French law wants to proscribe. But, as is well-known, the Council of State has never regarded a sign as ostentatious in itself. For the very essence of the sign is to show (*montrer*), and excess is decided not on the basis of the sign itself, but of the subject who shows with his hand and, let us say, with the play of his hand. This evokes the Western problematic of the sign and of *monstration*, of the hand as what is proper to man and that renders him capable of salutation and of monstrosity. It is important to remember that the Islamic tradition opposes the hand (called *Fatma*) to the eye: while excess is thought as essential to the latter, the hand symbolizes the ethical organ *par excellence*, capable, or not, of withstanding the eye in its excessiveness. Now, the debate has always revolved around this question: at what point does a sign show too much? Is the case the same with it the cross, the star of David, the *kippa*? Or is it the veil that is an excessively monstrating sign? Without seeming to be explicitly aimed at the veil, though it is clear that it had the veil in its sights all along, the Ministerial decree chose to consider the veil as religious sign that is ostentatious in itself.

From the Islamic theological perspective that prescribes it, the veil is not a sign. It is something through which the feminine body is partially or totally occulted because this body would otherwise indicate too much (*ferait trop signe*). Put differently, what religion finds ostentatious is the body of woman. The veil, conversely, is the anti-sign itself. From the beginning, the debate has veered in the wrong direction in treating the veil as a religious sign similar to signs such as the crucifix (is it not rather a symbol?), whose counterpart in Islam is the calligraphy of the name of God, and more specifically, the Qur'an. In effect, for a Muslim, the Qur'an is the only treasury of signs, for the name of the founding components (*ayât*) of this text, with which everyone is invited to identify themselves, is the following: "Be Qur'an." Such is the word of the prophet. The signs of Muslim identity are textual. It would be clear even from a cursory examination that the veil does not belong to this line of interpretation. It belongs, instead, to a theological logic, that of a real *grasping* (*mainmise*) of the body of the woman in order to bring her to reason. But why get sucked into such a long dispute about signs, one that led a philosopher to label the Minister of Education "a semiological censor"?<sup>3</sup>

Of course, the veil can be taken as a symbol, as it is for the mystics, or as a simulacrum, as it is in Arabic aesthetics and erotics. Or, again, it can be taken as a

<sup>3</sup> Jean-Jacques Delfour, "Francois Bayrou, semiological censor," *Liberation*, 20 October (1994): 7.

theologico-political emblem in the Islamist attempt to *re-veil* women. This is not without dangers for the veil's theological essence. In any event, there is no presence of the veil as sign in the semiological corpus of Islam, because the veil is always on the side of overflowing, of obscurity, of a real blinding that negates the body in its immediate presence to sight, not in order to deny it in its totality or to absent it as such, but in order to render it present through this negation. The veil is barred or under erasure. This is undoubtedly why every dictionary of Arabic begins with this simple definition for the word *hijâb*, the canonical term designating the veil: the forbidden, or "*everything that forbids something*."<sup>4</sup> Veiling is thus the operation of the negation of the body of a woman. Through this operation, woman is elevated into a forbidden or sacred thing, that is to say, into an ideality which at the same time preserves a sensible existence. A *sensible ideality*: that would be the appropriate expression for a classical definition of the nature of the sign itself as a unity of the materiality of the signifier and the abstraction of the signified. The veil is thus not a sign, but that which makes the woman into a sign. It shields her body, which emits a multiplicity of signs, in order to envelop it as a unique sign. Veiling is a theological operation which enfolds woman in order to make her one semiologically. It is a question of a logic of interposition that will cease the monstration of woman and of woman as swarming monster of signs. In this sense, it effects a *de-monstration* of how a woman becomes an obscure sign.

In the debate in which we have ourselves participated, the sign was thus not what one believed it to be. The problem is not the veil as sign, but as prohibition. It would be more accurate to speak, henceforth, of an *inter-seen* (*intervue*), in order to highlight the question of a *sight of interposition* (*une vue d'interposition*), akin to the notion of a speaking of interposition (*dire d'interposition*) at play in the concept of the forbidden. *The veil inter-sees* (*intervoit*) *the woman*. The sight of interposition is this sight that, in seizing the woman as a monstrating being who monstrates too much of herself, turns her into a de-monstration. The demonstration of woman is the abstraction of her body which consecrates it, which establishes it as a spiritual truth. The veil is nothing less than the creation of a spiritual/mental view of woman that attaches itself to her very body. It springs from a double function of the thing and the cause, the thing that interposes itself in order to cause an Other('s) view of her: *it is an eye-veil*.

When one of the veiled students wrote in a letter to the editor: "*As a believer, it is quite simply a question of modesty vis-à-vis God, which is important in my religion . . .*"<sup>5</sup> This "question of modesty vis-à-vis God," is important, and it demands that we explain it (the sentence at least): what is the feeling of shame women experience in relation to God? Why should they be *more* ashamed than men vis-à-vis the transcendent? Why should a veil be sufficient to avert the sight of God, when his eye is supposed to be all-seeing? We will understand nothing of this declaration of faith if we just see the veil as a thing thrown over the body. We have to allow the dimension

<sup>4</sup> See the lexical encyclopedia of Ibn Mandur, *Lisân Al'arb*, Beyrouth, Dar Lisân Al-arab edition, I, article *hajaba*, p. 567. In Jurjâni: "*Al-hajib, l'interdit selon la langue*," *le livre des définitions* (Beyrouth, 1977) 82.

<sup>5</sup> Asma Gmati, Parisian 5th year student, *Liberation*, 18 November (1994).

of the inter-seen to intervene as a cause and introduce an Other('s) view of woman that defuses her as object of the look. The veil establishes a corporeal contact with this vision: hence the woman as demonstration of the Other. And *homo theologicus*' sight wants to be an eye in the eye of God, a sight of his sight, to see woman through her demonstration. "*Man is to God as the pupil is to the eye*," wrote Ibn Arabî.<sup>6</sup> There is an etymological justification for the expression: in Arabic, "pupil" literally means "man in the eye" (*insân al-'ayn*). Here the mystic grasps the function that most intimately resides in the subject of theology: as a seeing quintessence, as the pupil of God's eye. But if so, why should it be necessary to institute the veil as the Other('s) view of woman, screening the look, opposing the organ to itself? If man was God's visual orifice, by which detour would one come to blind him at the place of woman, that is to say, to make woman the *stain* between God and man? What, therefore, is the mystery of this separation by which the prevention of prohibition interferes with the pupil and its eye. Would woman thus be the castration of the man of God? The point of God's blindness to man? Strange questions to put to theology but, to be honest, they are inherent to it, or at least invaginated in it. In a sense, the mystique is only the invagination of theology.

The foregoing elements can be recovered from Judaic and Christian theologies. According to Saint Paul, for example, "a woman ought to have a veil on her head, because of the angels." Saint Paul interprets this "because of the angels" with respect to which woman is elevated as a sign of power and liberty.<sup>7</sup> In terms of the previous developments, one can at least understand the source of this power of the veiled woman: the eye that gazes upon her from above demonstrates her.

In the Islamic tradition, there is a scene likely to put us on the edge of our seats: the spectacle of the angels' cause, a scene where the veil intervenes for the first time in the founding narrative of Islam. The episode, recounted by every biographer of Muhammad, takes place before the beginning of the revelation, during the terrifying period of the premises, when the future prophet, doubting his reason, turned to his wife:

That evening, leaving the mountain, Muhammad went to Khadija and said: O Khadija, I believe I am going mad.—Why, she asked? Because, he said, I see in myself the signs of the possessed: when I walk along the road, I hear voices from each stone and each hill; and, in the night, I dream of an immense being in front of me, a being whose head touches the sky and whose feet touch the earth; I do not know it and it approaches me in order to take me [. . .]. Khadija said to him: tell me if you see something of that kind [. . .]. One day, finding himself with Khadija in his house, Muhammad said: O Khadija, this being appears to me, I see it. Khadija approached Muhammad, sat down, took him on her breast and said: do you still see it?—Yes, he said. Then Khadija

<sup>6</sup> Ibn Arabî, *les Gemmes de la sagesse* (Fuṣûs al-hikam), French translation as *la Sagesse des prophetes*, by T. Burckhardt (Albin Michel, 1974) 27.

<sup>7</sup> Annie Jaubert, "Les femmes dans l'écriture," supplement to *Vie chrétienne* 219 (1979): 40-57.

uncovered her head and her hair and said:—Do you see it now? No, said Muhammad. Khadija said: Rejoice, it is not a demon but an angel.<sup>8</sup>

It is self-evident that the question of the historical reality of this scene is of little consequence. What is significant is that it is presented in the main narrative and that it borrows from the language of primal scenes to manifest, to make visible, to create belief in the *demonstration of woman*. What does it propose? That in Islam the history of truth begins with the unveiling of a woman. And it also begins as an assault on an angel's modesty (*pudeur*). These two affirmations are the heads and tails of the same coin, that of the theological fabric dissimulating the body of the woman and projecting onto her the vision from above. Everything here rests on the final act and its affirmation, namely: that when the woman uncovers herself, the angel hides. For the angel, who vanishes from the visual field of the prophet at the moment of the unveiling, only disappears because, as angel, he is not supposed to be capable of tolerating the seductive vision of Khadija's hair; had it been a demon, it would have held its own in its confrontation with the unveiled woman. Given that it concerns the angel who transmits the true speech of the Qur'an (the archangel Gabriel), the woman's demonstration reveals itself as simultaneously a demonstration of truth and an attack on this truth in the very act of demonstrating it. The angel who flees is the truth that hides from the unveiling of the woman, but this hiding of truth is the verification of truth.

The situation of woman's seems originally bound to the condition of "not seeing," upon which belief itself is founded. Whereas woman believes what she does not see, man does not believe what he sees. He must thus pass through her in order to believe. This last proposition seems to break from the phallocentrism characteristic of the theological construction. Is it the ruse or rather the contradiction that mines it from the inside that she reveals? In any event, what we will henceforth call *the scene of the demonstration* (which has no name in the Islamic tradition) inevitably leads towards the conclusion that, in order to believe in God, man must pass through the woman's belief, and that she possesses a knowledge of the truth that precedes and exceeds the knowledge of the founder himself. She thus founds the truth of the founder. She founds it on a lack of sight, with regard to a visionary excess of the male prophet. Woman, by her lack, makes the truth of being emerge that creates lack. *She is the truth and the lack of truth, in between which lies the veil.*

It is appropriate at this level to connect up the preceding developments where, between the man-pupil and its Divine eye, woman appeared as the locus of a *stain* and this element of the scene where the woman's "do not look" offers itself as the very foundation of belief, from which two consequences arise. It is at the level of *the stain* that the demonstration of truth takes place. However, if man enjoys the vision, to the point of being shocked, one cannot content oneself with defining woman's situation as a privation of this vision, but as the *jouissance* of the stain, the affirmation of a power that detaches/de-stains (*dé-tache*) and muddies (*entache*) the truth.

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<sup>8</sup> Tabarî, *Muhammad, sceau des prophètes* (Paris: Sindbad, 1980) 65-66. There are a number of versions of this scene, but all retain this same structure.

One should pay special attention to the gesture of unveiling that only obtains its value from a verification insofar as the woman, through her body, creates the difference between the angel and the demon, the truth and the lie. The veiled woman has her site as intermediary between two messengers (the angel for the prophet and the prophet for men). She is the intermediary between intermediaries. Now, this *inter* between two *inters* presumes a traversal that Khadija realizes through an operation of interpretation. To the man terrorized by his vision, unable to judge the nature of what haunts him, she opposes an interpretation through acts that flush out its truth. Her interpretation is as resolute as it is resolving. She knows, she believes, she reveals. She reveals the revelation. From that moment, the unveiling of woman appeared as a movement that brings about a decision concerning the truth of being in the undecided subjectivity of man. She gives him certitude of the internal Other that he is not able to recognize by himself. Man is inhabited by the Other but does not recognize it. Without the woman's unveiling, thus without the veil, he would remain *undecided* (*in-decis*); he would live doubting God. The woman gives him the gift of a decisive judgment. What would he be, therefore, without the veiled woman? He would know the truth (of castration) of which he is the bearer. Such, in their extreme consequences, are the suppositions contained in this scene. Theology confers the status of a life-raft onto the woman's veiling-unveiling, man's access to God's *identification* as if, through the woman's corporeal difference, he could seize the body of the difference that haunts him. In short, it is through the stain that the pupil knows the eye whose orifice it is. What is announced at this level is the possibility of seizing the knowledge that allows the *stain-woman* to be the condition of representation, inasmuch as the object of the excess of vision passes through a failure of vision, in order to return under the form of a re-presentation.

But if man only accedes to the certitude of the Other by passing through woman, does not this entire theological construction amount to saying that man's narcissism is more problematic than woman's? Woman presents herself as already *knowing* the truth of the Other, as already being blindly led by him, whereas man must pass through the feminine operation of veiling-unveiling in order to *re-cognize* the sign in himself, and thus to gain certitude of this Other. The veiling of woman would be a disposition against the narcissistic stupidity of man (Nietzsche said that the spiritual fatum is our greatest idiocy): the veil as *circumcisio obscura* of man?

According to Islamic historiography, Khadija is the first to believe in the prophet. The first Muslim was a woman. The demonstration was hymenian. Or again, if you wish, woman is the hymen of faith. Through her, man enters the certitude of his God. This is undoubtedly why the tradition relates that, after this episode, Muhammad said to Khadija: "*the angel sends you his salutations.*" But it is impossible not to notice the change of position here: that (through) which he believes becomes that which believes in him. Woman is thus the origin twice over: the origin of belief and belief in the origin. She is on the side of the origin and of its result. Woman turns. *Veiled, unveiled, reveiled*: these are the three sequences of theology's feminine operation. Veiled originally, unveiled for the demonstration of the originary truth, then re-veiled by the order of belief in this truth of origin; for the instituted

truth aspires to reconstitute the hymen from the tearing it has undergone. Woman is turned.

Such is, in effect, the path that will progressively lead to the massive imposition of prohibition that is the veil in Islam. From the man doubting his reason, to the instituter of theological reason, the angel's salutation transforms into an inconceivably suspicious mistrust. Belief in the woman, at the base of the demonstration of truth, becomes inverted as a dangerous machination of disbelief by which she appears as a being who "*lacks reason and religion*" (Hadith), as a gender "*whose deception is immense*" (Qur'an, 12: 28). Of course, the possibility of such a return was already contained in the scene, since the demonstration was obtained by a monstration (unveiling), and the identity of the angel was verified by an assault on his modesty. Her intermediary site between the intermediaries gives woman an abyssal identity, capable of playing with identities and their principles (a recurrent theme of the *Thousand and One Nights*). But one also sees why, in this system, there is no need to burn the witch—and there are no stakes in the history of Islam—because here the lie and the capacity for reversal that theology attributes to being of woman remains complicit with the truth of the Other, which she retains with the veil that suspends them both *vis-à-vis* one another in the intimacy of the mystery. The veil or the fire? This alternative is not just a hypothesis about a distant past. Isn't one of the slogans of the contemporary Islamist campaign to re-veil women: "the veil or hell"? Woman, obscure or lit.

We cannot go into the underlying reasons for the change in the Prophet Muhammad in any detail here. Of course, one notes that, following the death of Khadija, when he is in fifties, he becomes polygamous, *a lover of women, perfume and prayer* (Hadith). To believe in woman (who believes him) and to love women, the total extent of the change is inscribed between these two propositions. In brief, let us say they correspond to the passage from a position of feminine identification to receive the Other, to the phallic posture congruent with the political institution of the city of God. It is here that the veil drops down and the hymen reconstitutes itself.

The theater of theological prohibition begins when the veil drops. Its complex machinery, several cogs of which we will come to explore, is frequently brought in support of powerful interpretations as these are caught up in the obscure dramas of bodies, of their lives and their deaths. In the case of Islam, the scenario is well-known and the episodes of woman's obscuration, or of her erasure, are too visible for one not to perceive that their divinity is their humanity, that their force is their fragility. They correspond, point for point, to problems of desire of Muhammad the man during the last fifteen years of his life, a period entirely bound up with the construction of the Islamic city. This might appear simplistic but it can be verified in all cases—each time the man-prophet encounters a conflict of desire, or finds himself in an impasse of *jouissance*, God provides him with a legislative Qur'anic solution. The first act performs the story of Aïcha, his favorite wife who separated herself from the caravan one night during an outing to search in the desert for a lost necklace and was followed by one named Safwân. She will be accused of adultery, for Safwân was a good-looking man and, according to witnesses, she had had a relationship with him in the past. The prophet will endure several months of

agonizing doubt . . . but he loves Aïcha. When the verses clearing her and delivering her from suspicion fall, it is the theological curtain that is beginning its inexorable descent. It is evident, then, that the veil is not only the article of cloth thrown over the body of woman, but the organizing hand of an order that is rigorously laid-out between the subject of desire as a seeing subject and the political institution of the city. Veiling turns out to be a powerful system for structuring the body of *jouissance* in the space, time and relations between people. In the Aïcha affair, in this same sura of the Brightness, the public and private will be delimited. Entrance to the house will be subject to authorization at the moment of the three prayers, which require one to strip to perform one's ablutions (dawn, midday, evening); the people to whom women can show "*the exterior of their finery*" will be strictly determined by their relation of kinship. The chief principle of prohibition begins with appearance: the prohibition of the veil concords with the prohibition of incest. This will become clear with the second scandalous affair in the first Muslim community. One day, entering without permission and unnoticed in the house of his adopted son Zayd, the prophet surprises the latter's spouse, who is lightly dressed. He is rattled, captivated by the vision of this woman who it was said was very beautiful. Aware of the prophet's desire and God's intention, Zayd divorces his wife, who immediately goes to the prophet, who is living in the fear and torment of his desire. What then? God not only authorizes their marriage but has the angels celebrate it. This unique case of celestial celebration in Islam will, however, be the prophet's final marriage. In the same movement in which the sura (the Clans, 30: 3) gifts him the wife of the other, it forbids him from taking any others: "It is not allowed to you to take women afterwards [. . .] though their beauty be pleasing to you" (5: 52). At the same moment, adoption is forbidden as an anti-Islamic practice. Zayd was not Muhammad's son: "Muhammad is not the father of any of your men" (5: 40). Having dismissed, by this genealogical maneuver, any grievances (5: 38) against the prophet, the law then strikes at the root of the risk and universalizes the veiling restriction: "O Prophet! say to your wives and your daughters and the women of the believers that they let down upon them their over-garments (*voiles*); this will be more proper, that they may be known, and thus they will not be given trouble" (5: 59).

The entire stakes of the veil as structure might be recapitulated from these two Qur'anic fragments: "though their beauty be pleasing to you" and "let down upon them their over-garments (*voiles*)."<sup>1</sup> Insofar as women are pleasing to men, and can lead them even to commit incest, the prohibition of the veil finds its rationale in checking one of the gravest threats human desire in its extreme poses to the social order. The statement presupposes, of course, an incrimination of the woman, of her beauty or her monstration; but it contains no less a passive position of the man-pupil, who in some way would be incapable of mastering his focus. He "lets down upon them," for lack of letting down upon himself. Man would thus not be in a position to diaphragm his vision with regard to woman. Such an uncontrollable visual orifice is penetrable by the monstrations of the feminine thing, which possesses and subjugates him to the point of making him forget his law. Here, perhaps, something like the need for theological representation permits itself to approach, insofar as representation would come to rectify a diaphragmatic failure in man's visual sense.



Veiled, unveiled, reveiled: these three sequences, which we have previously isolated as constitutive of theology's feminine operation, are the same movements that institute the sovereignty of the representational diaphragmatic, at the very place where man's vision is in excess of his receptivity. This closing of the edges of the veil over women (this is the literal Qur'anic expression) is the eye of representation that replaces the eye of perception and thus contracts man's focus of woman as objective reality in order to filter the illuminated scene of the truth of the real, thereby securing institutionalized obscurity. But are these movements not the same as the night of the world into which men tumble in their fall from paradise? Let us return to Islam's version of this: in the beginning, a veil of light separated Adam and Eve from the sight of their sex; when they transgressed God's command and ate of the forbidden fruit, the veil of light lifted and they discovered their nudity, whence the imposition of clothes to hide it (S. VII). The three movements—veiling, unveiling, revealing—thus correspond to three times of theological representation: the light that blinds, the obscurity that enables one to see, the screen that shields one from the seen object.

If one was to follow the terms of theological reason, after the fall men and women were equal in the night of the world. Something would thus have arisen that altered this equality, to the point where man needed to have recourse to the supplement of the veil to release him from woman's ravishing. What therefore happened? One can deduce from the Islamic narrative that it is the man's appeal for a verification from the woman that turns everything upside down. In front of the woman, man's question is not: "Who am I?" but "What do I see"? Man's appeal in his visual distress creates the event of woman as the proof of truth. And woman, as proof of truth, is truth and the challenge to truth, is its confirmation and simultaneously its flight, is the identity *en abîme* and the turning of the return. It is woman, finally, who does not have something that is proper to her, since what is proper to her would be the power to discriminate between the proper and the improper. What is proper to woman is to be in retreat of the proper, is to be properly undecidable. One might conclude that it is here that the trap closes around the theological hand, leading it to the despairing solution of the veil. *And what if it was here that the cause of man's ravishing lay, in this retreat of the proper, in that which would appear as the properly undecidable truth on the part of woman? And what if the extremity of men's desire was to want to enjoy this place where the truth and the non-truth communicate with each other?* To want THE truth turns out to be incestuous, since the desire for the whole truth contains also the desire for the non-truth which the truth essentially contains. Theological representation thus proposes to deliver us from this ravishment, it intercedes for us, dilates our pupils for us, overcome in the invisible by God, and subjugated in the visible by woman. To us men, it assigns a salutary task: the task of truth or the veiling of woman.



This gives a different aspect to the affair of the veil. The problem is no longer posed in terms of signs but of the prohibition of the referent of these signs. The *prohibition*

does not limit itself to an interdiction that forbids. Rather, it stems from an apparatus (*dispositif*) of truth that digs deep roots of the drives so as to install a legality of *jouissance* on the surface, the imperative of which is a *jouissance* of legality. Once young women find themselves in a space vanquished by the political unworking of God, and once they reactivate the theological imperatives, we are in the presence of a conflict between two prohibitions and the two beliefs that underpin them, both of which are necessarily beliefs in a certain posture, of woman and of truth. They are represented here by the girl who defends her “*modesty vis-a-vis God*” and by the minister who sets this in opposition to “*the face of France*.” At least, of a certain face of France, which is associated with its belief in the Rights of Man. The girl believes in the de-monstration of woman. Which means that in the unconscious of her system, she is represented by the *monster*. This is what we find throughout the imaginary of ancient civilizations under the figure of the Sphinx, for example, as it is staged in the Oedipus myth. Arabo-Islamic culture abounds in these enigmatic and dangerous sphinxes, constantly placed in the masculine hero’s initiating path. The theological solution, as we have seen, is to impose on him the prohibition of the veil as a prohibition of feminine monstration, which is simultaneously a de-monstration by the sight of the Other. But the minister believes that de-monstration is monstration (the veil as ostentatious sign), and thus forbids it. *In so doing, he prohibits the girl’s prohibition*. The quarrel about signs was a diversion from this act. And in creating a sign among signs, one disrobes the veil behind the curtain of religious semiotics, to avoid confronting the terrifying question of *the prohibition of the other’s prohibition*.

But what precisely is the posture of the woman that the minister’s belief is defending, in prohibiting the prohibition of the other woman? Is it a monster (*monstre*) that has the right to monstrate its signs? Or rather a being that would be essentially demonstrated, because no longer subject to legislation by any prohibition of the veil? But what is a woman according this belief? One must return to the body of reference, that is to say, to the text of the Rights of Man. We know that the textuality of these rights is more extensive than the declaration of the same name. But some principles are stated there and, on the point in question, it is clear that woman is a man, man as *anthropos*, or a singularity-type of the species. Sexual difference is not only not an essential trait of this textuality, but is, precisely, one of the discriminations this textuality wants to erase. What counts here is humanity in its difference from other animal species. The man of these rights is neither a man nor a woman, but the *singular identity of their identity and of their difference*. At this level, the originary scission of sex has no currency, which is to say that, essentially, in this universe of reference the question of truth does not depend on the difference between the sexes. In principle, this system wants the truth of sexual difference to become something like a religious truth, a private affair.

We can now understand in what way the question of the veil’s manifestation is a panic question. Girls in veils would not be wearing religious signs but introducing the highest bet for a system at war with another: its apparatus (*dispositif*) for producing truth. The identarian myths of a modern West and a traditionalist Islam, everywhere at war with each other, have thus been brought to raise their bets. This war is not the ancient confrontation of two beliefs in the same truth, such as the

crusades that still haunt our memories, but the war of two truths that criss-cross. If, with the Rushdie affair, the war of truth has taken place through *fiction*, because it dwelled on the textual field of the origin, with the veil it is the entire apparatus (*dispositif*) of prohibition around woman that has been shaken up. It is not by chance that *fiction* and *woman* are what is at stake in the most important conflict between belief and of identity in the world today. For together, by the one and the other, *it is the truth of the body and the body of truth*, as determinants of *the limits of the proper* of a system, a person, or a community, that is *put into question*. It thus concerns the most imperial motive for thinking relations in the world, between worlds. Such is the question of prohibiting the prohibition of the other.

Abyssal question. There is no other without the prohibition that makes him other to himself and to the other. Prohibition is the institution of the other. To prohibit this prohibition is to prohibit it as other. From this perspective, there is no doubt that *dis-institution* is one of the forms of human destruction. There are numerous indications of the increase in this mode of destruction in the history of the world. The identarian movements which are cropping up everywhere are the most telling symptom of this. They are the signs of a generalized global anxiety in the face of the question of prohibition. We must not, however, understand this anxiety in moralizing terms, as a relaxation of morals, etc. This anxiety derives from our sense of being placed in front of something like an ineluctable commitment, that of the imposition of a universality of rights for all humanity and of the creation of an institution for global legislation. There is no place here to go into the details of the formation of this project in the West, of its multiple versions, all of which gravitate around the idea of a humanity prescribed to the community by a universal prohibition and a universality of prohibitions. This project is found today in military, economic, political, scientific, humanitarian discourses. It is a daily fact.

What characterizes these discourses, with the terror and hope that carry or inspire, is that they regard the law as technique and prohibition as order. This thought thus eludes the essential question of prohibition, namely, that it founds itself on an interposition, underpinned (implicitly) by an apparatus (*dispositif*) of truth. What would be the universal speech that would come to interpose itself for all of humanity? In which language would it be articulated, from which place among places could it be spoken? The universal prohibition would presume a position of INTER between every *inter* of human communities, incarnated by an absolute femininity, a Woman-world that would have no identity and would thwart all identities in order to dispense with the difference between truth and non-truth for all: a mother of humanity after the fact (*après coup*) whose language would be maternal at the interior of all languages.

It is important to combat the servitude or the injustice which produces the prohibition of the other, but there is no place for the *enunciation* of the prohibition that would annul the prohibition of the other. There is no *interposing* universal, because there is no master of language. There are only the speeches of interposition. But the identarian myth of the modern West is pegged to this idea to produce the prohibition of prohibitions, to become thus the difference of differences, consequently to rejoin the absolute femininity of the species. The freedom it promotes is radical in

its aim, in going towards this destiny, where truth in conformity with this freedom would rejoin their identity that would be: woman.

The final pages of *Triste Tropiques*, by Claude Levi-Strauss, are doubtless the most limpid utterance of the identitarian mytheme of the West on this subject:

Now I can see, beyond Islam, to India, but it is the India of Buddha, before Mohammed. For me as a European, and because I am a European, Mohammed intervenes with uncouth clumsiness, between our thought and Indian doctrines that are very close to it, in such a way as to prevent East and West joining hands, as they might well have done, in harmonious collaboration.

If the West traces its internal tensions back to their source, it will see that Islam, by coming between Buddhism and Christianity, Islamized us at the time when the West, by taking part in the crusades, was involved in opposing it and therefore came to resemble it, instead of undergoing—had Islam never come into being—a slow process of osmosis with Buddhism, which would have Christianized us still further, and would have made us all the more Christian in that we would have gone back to Christianity itself. It was then that the West lost the opportunity of remaining female.<sup>9</sup>

What the West encounters through Islam is the *interposition*, the stone in its path, that keeps it from realizing its female identarian destiny. The cry of the mythologizing mythology is wrenching: it laments the West that can no longer rejoin its Eastern pole nor close the circle of identity of identity and difference. The other as bad luck, as diversion, as male cutting the female from herself: the anthropological myth of the West thus sees Islam as its veil. Are we thus at the epoch of the unveiling of the West?

### Further Reading

In the background of this work on Islam are a number of readings of European thought, among which I would like to cite the following:

On the question of woman and the visual: Jacques Derrida, *Spurs: Nietzsche's Styles/Éperons: Les Styles de Nietzsche*, trans. Barbara Harlow (University of Chicago Press, 1979); Sigmund Freud, "Female Sexuality" (1931), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XXI (1927-1931)*, trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth, 1961) 221-244; Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*, trans. Marion Faber, Intro. Robert C. Holub (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); *Twilight of the Idols: or How to Philosophize with a Hammer*, trans. Duncan Large (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); *The Gay Science*, trans. Thomas Common (Cambridge: Cambridge University

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<sup>9</sup> Claude Levi-Strauss, *Tristes Tropiques*, trans. John Weightman and Doreen Weightman, (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1992) 408-9.

Press, 2001); Jacques Lacan, *On Feminine Sexuality, the Limits of Love and Knowledge: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XX, Encore*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: Norton, 1991); "On the Gaze as *Objet Petit a*," in *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis; The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XI*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Norton, 1998).

On the question of the prohibition: P. Legendre, *Les Enfants du texte* (Paris: Fayard); *Dieu au miroir* (Paris: Fayard).

On the sign and the hand: Jacques Derrida, "La main de Heidegger," in *Psyche: Invention de l'autre* (Paris: Galilee, 1987) 415-51.

On the question of truth: Martin Heidegger, *The Essence of Truth: On Plato's Cave Allegory and Theaetetus*, trans. Ted Sadler (London: Continuum, 2005).

I take the liberty of referring the reader to two texts of my own on the questions approached here: "La femme immémoriale" *Cahiers Intersignes* 6-7 (1993), and on the Rushdie affair: *Une fiction troublante: de l'origine en partage* (La Tour d'Aigues: Editions de l'Aube, 1994).