



The Je-Ne-Sais-Quoi in Early Modern Europe: Encounters with a Certain Something

Richard Scholar

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What is the *je-ne-sais-quoi*, if it is indeed something at all, and how can it be put into words? In addressing these questions, Richard Scholar offers the first full-length study of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* and its fortunes in early modern Europe. He examines the expression's rise and fall as a noun and as a topic of philosophical and literary debate, its cluster of meanings, and the scattered traces of its "pre-history." Placing major writers of the period such as Montaigne, Shakespeare, Descartes, Corneille, and Pascal alongside some of their lesser-known contemporaries, Scholar argues that the *je-ne-sais-quoi* serves above all to trace a series of first-person encounters with a certain something as difficult to explain as its effects are intense, and which can be expressed only by being expressed differently. He shows how the *je-ne-sais-quoi* comes to express that certain something in the early modern period, and suggests that it remains capable of doing so today.

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