

ETHICS AND AESTHETICS IN EUROPEAN MODERNIST LITERATURE

From the Sublime to the Uncanny

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CHAPTER I

Border crossings in Kant

I CRITIQUE OF JUDGMENT

If Hegel is the thinker of overcomings and supersession whereby dialectical negation erases the boundaries between inside and outside, self and other in the synthetic unity of consciousness, Kant is the tracer of borders and limits, the thought-surveyor par excellence. Not only was Kant's critical enterprise a careful navigation between the extremes of empiricism and abstract metaphysical speculation in which clear limits were set for the capacities of human reason, but each of his three Critiques is characterized by the establishing of defining boundary-lines between it and the two others, such that cognition, morality, and aesthetic taste occupy, or seem to occupy, clearly delimited separate spheres.

Within Kant's system there is a very precise architectonics of interaction, an elaborate scaffolding of the "faculties" which, according to the treatise they happen to occupy, assume a dominant or subservient role. The three Critiques are "about" three different areas of human capability, and in this sense, up to a point, can be read as self-enclosed texts. The temptation to do so has long been a staple of Kant criticism, since, until relatively recently, scholarly consensus had it that the first and most massive of these volumes to appear, the *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781), was by far the most important of the three – that the other two might be viewed, despite their considerable intrinsic merit, as secondary or ancillary.¹ Yet it is apparent that Kant intended the three works to be a system, and that this intellectual goal of his was achieved once he found a way to integrate the Third Critique with the first two.

That it was, in fact, difficult for Kant to effect such an integration is of no small importance in the history of philosophy and of aesthetics as a branch thereof. Somehow the domain of the aesthetic (conceived of as the territory within which judgments of taste, *Geschmacksurteile*, are elicited) is problematic, its expanse difficult to measure with assurance.

For Kant, given the structure and terms of his system, the problem could be summed up in the following way: whereas in the first two Critiques one faculty held sway and “legislated” over another, subordinate faculty, in the *Critique of Judgment* (1790) there is no one faculty that dominates. This is because the attitude of aesthetic disinterest can only uphold itself in what might be called an initial suspension of all established categories – a suspension that presupposes the freeplay of the faculties among themselves. Gilles Deleuze puts it this way:

The three Critiques present a complete system of permutations. In the first place the faculties are defined according to the relationships of representation in general (knowing [*Critique of Pure Reason*], desiring [*Critique of Practical Reason*], feeling [*Critique of Judgment*]). In the second place they are defined as sources of representations (imagination, understanding, reason). When we consider any faculty in the first sense, a faculty in the second sense is called on to legislate over objects and to distribute their *specific* tasks to the other faculties: thus understanding legislates in the faculty of knowledge [in the *Critique of Pure Reason*] and reason legislates in the faculty of desire [in the *Critique of Practical Reason*]. It is true that in the *Critique of Judgment* the imagination does not take on a legislative function on its own account. But it frees itself, so that all the faculties together enter into a free accord. Thus the first two Critiques set out a relationship between the faculties which is determined by one of them; the last Critique uncovers a deeper free and indeterminate accord of the faculties as the condition of the possibility of every determinate relationship. (*Kant's Critical Philosophy*, 68)

Just as Kant reversed the commonly accepted way of thinking about cognition (for him, we should think of objects as conforming to our modes of knowing rather than the other way around),² so Deleuze is inverting the usual way of reading the three Critiques as a philosophical unity. He is proposing that the *Critique of Judgment*, far from being a work that is merely rich and complex but, finally, not susceptible of integration into the critical system, is in fact the cornerstone, the “condition of possibility” of that very system. Without the Third Critique, the other two certainly would have constituted admirable argumentative structures on their own, but *the structure of the structure*, so to speak, would have remained blind to itself. The *Critique of Judgment*, in Deleuze’s view, would be the work by which the system comes to know itself as system; the aesthetic would no longer be relegated to secondary or tertiary status, but would be that subterranean province that underlies the others, and, in the very indeterminacy of its freeplay, opens up the possibility of lawful relations, both theoretical and practical.

From an historical point of view, the *Critique of Judgment*, published in 1790, not only closes off Kant's system as the end toward which Enlightenment thought had always tended, but also, in Deleuze's interpretation, inaugurates Romanticism. In the preface to *Kant's Critical Philosophy*, Deleuze finds that the free and unregulated play of the faculties among themselves, "where each goes to its own limit and nevertheless shows the possibility of some sort of harmony with the others," represents nothing less than "the foundation of Romanticism" (xi–xii). He does not mean, in the context of French literature, the sentimental Romanticism of Lamartine, Musset and the early Hugo, but rather the revolutionary poetics of Arthur Rimbaud, whose evocation of "the disorder of all the senses" (*le désordre de tous les sens*) pushes Romanticism to its extreme limits and ushers in the movements of French Symbolism and European Modernism. The idea, then, is that whereas the first two Critiques position Kant as the grand synthesizer of the *Aufklärung*, the *Critique of Judgment* is a work of open boundaries whose complexity and polysemic possibilities make it a modern work.

What is intriguing, however, and of essential importance to any reader who wishes to respect the guidelines Kant himself traces between and among the three critical works, is the fact that the Third Critique also functions as an intermediary, as a bridge-text between the *Critique of Pure Reason* and the *Critique of Practical Reason* (1788), in that its primary agent, reflective judgment, is, in Kant's words, "the mediating link between understanding and reason" (introduction to the *Critique of Judgment*, 16).³ More precisely, the faculty of judgment is capable of bringing about a "transition from the pure cognitive power, i.e., from the domain of the concepts of nature, to the domain of the concept of freedom, just as in its logical use it makes possible the transition from understanding to reason" (CJ 18). According to this formulation, aesthetics is not the endpoint of the system, but rather its articulating *middle*, its mediating drive, that which might be, or should be, capable of overcoming "the great gulf [*die große Kluft*] that separates the supersensible from appearances" (CJ 35; KU 33). The faculty of judgment is such a bridge because it, and it alone, furnishes the concept of the finality of nature, a teleological structure within which aesthetics as such occupies its appropriate place:

It is judgment that presupposes [the final purpose of nature] a priori, and without regard to the practical, [so that] this power provides us with the concept that mediates between the concepts of nature and the concept of freedom [*gibt den vermittelnden Begriff zwischen den Naturbegriffen und dem Freiheitsbegriffe*]: the concept of a *purposiveness* of nature [*einer Zweckmäßigkeit der Natur*], which makes possible

the transition from pure theoretical to pure practical lawfulness, from lawfulness in terms of nature to the final purpose set by the concept of freedom [*von der Gesetzmäßigkeit nach der ersten zum Endzwecke nach dem letzten*]. For it is through this concept that we cognize the possibility of the final purpose [*die Möglichkeit des Endzwecks*], which can be actualized only in nature and in accordance with its laws. (*CJ* 36–37; *KU* 34)

In the original German text, Kant's argument is woven around a play on the word *Zweck* – goal or purpose. We are reminded that *Gesetzmäßigkeit*, or the lawfulness of nature, is the domain of the First Critique. *Zweckmäßigkeit*, or the purposiveness of nature, is developed in the Third Critique as a “bridge” toward the *Endzweck* of the Second Critique, the final purpose of man, which can only emerge in the supersensible territory of the law, of the “ought” which traces the boundaries of the province of morality and exercises its rule in accord with our freedom. In this scheme, which Kant elaborates carefully but quite confidently in the final section of his introduction to the *Critique of Judgment*, it is manifest that, in some fundamental sense, the aesthetic as such points toward the ethical, that the ethical stands as the *Endzweck* of the aesthetic. In this precise sense, then, the endpoint of the Kantian system is its middle, the *Critique of Practical Reason*, the place in which the moral law instantiates itself. As we proceed now to an analysis of the points of intersection between the Second and Third Critiques, it is important to keep in mind the double position of the aesthetic in Kant: it is, through the free and unregulated play of the faculties it allows, the limit toward which the Kantian system pushes and exhausts itself; and it is also, in its mediation between pure and practical reason, the passageway through which the ethical makes its appearance, shines forth.

There are three paragraphs in the *Critique of Judgment* which deal quite explicitly with the modality of the relationship between the beautiful or the sublime, on the one hand, and the ethical, on the other. They occur after the initial section, entitled the “Analytic of the Beautiful,” in which judgments of taste per se are discussed and the domain of the beautiful is assigned its boundaries. They are: “On the Modality of a Judgment upon the Sublime in Nature” (par. 29); “On Intellectual Interest in the Beautiful” (par. 42); and “On Beauty as the Symbol of Morality” (par. 59). The first two of these paragraphs occur within the section called the “Analytic of the Sublime,” and the third, which is the penultimate paragraph of the “Critique of Aesthetic Judgment,” concludes the “Dialectic of Aesthetic Judgment.” I think it is best to

begin with paragraph 59, since it encapsulates the previous remarks Kant has made on the relation of the aesthetic to the moral or ethical (the domain of *Sittlichkeit*). It is both the clearest and the most complicated statement Kant makes in his writings about this relation.

On a first reading, paragraph 59 seems clear enough in that its argument leads toward a ringing assertion which defines the beautiful as “symbol of the morally good”:

Now I maintain that the beautiful is the symbol of the morally good [*das Schöne ist das Symbol des Sittlich-guten*]; and only because we refer the beautiful to the morally good (we all do so naturally and require all others also to do so, as a duty [*Pflicht*]), does our liking for it include a claim to everyone else’s assent [*Beistimmung*], while the mind is also conscious of being ennobled [*sich . . . einer gewissen Veredlung und Erhebung . . . bewußt ist*], by this [reference], above a mere receptivity for pleasure derived from sense impressions, and it assesses the value of other people too on the basis of [their having] a similar maxim in their power of judgment. The morally good is the *intelligible* that taste has in view [*worauf . . . der Geschmack hinaussieht*], as I indicated in the preceding section; for it is with this intelligible that even our higher cognitive powers harmonize [*zusammenstimmen*], and without this intelligible contradictions [*lauter Widersprüche*] would continually arise from the contrast between the nature of these powers and the claims that taste makes. (*CJ* 228–29; *KU* 213)

The passage as a whole is characterized by two primary images: that of the harmonizing of voices (*Beistimmung*, *zusammenstimmen*) as opposed to the dissonance of contradiction (*lauter Widersprüche*); and that of the ennobling elevation beyond the senses in the direction of the intelligible (*Veredlung*, *Erhebung*, and the expression *worauf . . . der Geschmack hinaussieht*). The notion of a harmonizing accord among the faculties confirms the position of the *Critique of Judgment* as endpoint of the critical enterprise, whereas the image of ennobling elevation places the aesthetic in a mediating role, defining it as that which *points beyond itself* toward the supersensible domain of the ethical. It would appear, in this strong declarative moment, that Kant wishes to grant to the aesthetic both a final and a mediating function, and that the interplay of imagery he uses here constitutes a stylistics of synthesis – in the image of a resolved harmony of elevation, where horizontal and vertical planes join each other in a logically arduous but rhetorically effective merger. Thus the superficial clarity of the declarative statement hides a complex rhetorical weave, in which the reader discovers Immanuel Kant as stylist, whose words function not merely as the transparent conveyors of a philosophical argument, but also as elements in a tropological discourse.⁴ Such a passage does

not simply “point beyond” the aesthetic in the direction of the moral; it points toward itself as text.

This involutedness serves to complicate considerably the overt message of the passage, which, in asserting that the beautiful tends toward the moral in “symbolizing” it, brings the text dangerously close to the frontier at which the beautiful effaces itself *in favor of* the moral, at which there is a moralization of the aesthetic. Kant’s style, his poetics of harmonization and elevation, in which the ethical *becomes beautiful* in its “noble” loftiness, performs the opposite: namely, a rhetorically subtle aestheticization of the moral. In other words, Kant anticipatorily but only momentarily succumbs to the temptation to which Schiller will yield massively, perhaps completely: that of bringing together the aesthetic and the ethical in a dialectical play whereby “moral beauty” as such occupies the final, synthetic moment.⁵

It is not a coincidence, I think, that the declarative and somewhat emphatic passage I have just discussed exceeds, by its rhetorical complexity, the straightforward assertion it (also) makes. Preceding this excerpt in the earlier part of paragraph 59 is a development on the notion of symbolization per se in Kant’s own technical terminology (we learn that symbolism is, along with schematism, one of the two types of what Kant calls *hypotyposis*), whose cryptic qualities have engendered reams of critical commentary. The central problem for an understanding of paragraph 59 as a whole lies in the problem of indirect language and, specifically, *analogy*. In differentiating between schemata and symbols, Kant writes:

Hence, all intuitions supplied for a priori concepts are either *schemata* or *symbols*. Schemata contain direct, symbols indirect, exhibitions of the concept [*indirekte Darstellungen des Begriffs*]. Schematic exhibition is demonstrative. Symbolic exhibition uses an analogy . . . Thus a monarchy ruled according to its own constitutional laws would be presented as an animate body [*durch einen beseelten Körper*], but a monarchy ruled by an individual absolute will would be presented as a mere machine (such as a hand mill); but in either case the presentation is only *symbolic*. For though there is no similarity between a despotic state and a hand mill, there certainly is one between the rules by which we reflect on the two and on how they operate [*ihre Kausalität*]. This function [of judgment] [*Dies Geschäft*] has not been analyzed much so far, even though it very much deserves fuller investigation; but this is not the place to pursue it. (CJ 227; KU 212)

An analysis of this passage may be helpful in shedding light on the critical debate surrounding the formula “the beautiful is the symbol of the morally good.” Kant specialists from both the Continental and

the Anglo-American tradition divide rather neatly into two camps: the “weak analogy” group, which finds in the comparison between the beautiful and the morally good a tenuous, inessential linkage;⁶ and the “strong analogy” contingent, which considers that the comparison functions as a solid bridging device.⁷ Underlying these critical divergences is a certain belief or non-belief in the capacity of the *analogon* to evoke its intended referent, of the image to translate its concept with clarity, as well as a trust or distrust in the epistemological possibilities of such a translational movement (*Übertragung*, or metaphorical transport, is the word Kant uses in par. 59, *CJ* 228; *KU* 213). Before one can ask the question “Is there a strong analogy *or* a weak analogy between the beautiful and the morally good,” one needs to ask “What is an analogy?” Are analogies, in and of themselves, weak or strong? Are they capable, in their assigned role, of presenting the concept adequately, convincingly?

Perhaps the best way to undertake such an inquiry is to begin with Kant’s own examples in this passage: the monarchical state as represented by a living body; and a despotic state as symbolized by a “mere machine” such as a hand mill. If the analogy is to function effectively, the representational images must conjure up, presumably without ambiguity or confusion, the concepts to which they refer: should they not succeed in doing so, they must be viewed as failed or improperly symbolizing symbols. Kant concedes that “there is no similarity between a despotic state and a hand mill,” but he says, in a remarkably obscure statement, that “there certainly is one between the rules by which we reflect on the two and on how they operate.” What are these rules? Where do they come from? Are they universal for all sentient beings? Is logic itself, and even that most slippery form of “logic,” the rhetoric of analogy, a rule-bound domain? Kant not only does not answer these questions, but concludes the above passage with the brutal disclaimer: “this is not the place to pursue [this matter].” One wonders: what *better* place than precisely here, when so much is at stake? For the beautiful to be the symbol of the morally good, it is necessary that analogy as such function well and not be suspect in its structure or constitution. One is tempted to wonder if Kant was convinced by the validity of his own examples – and exemplarity, it goes without saying, is central to all philosophical discourse, since the example must stand in a relation of metaphorical synecdoche to that which it exemplifies, i.e., no part of it can exceed the bounds of the whole to which it belongs.

The basis or ground (one can speak of analogies only by using metaphorical language) of Kant’s comparison, and of his comparative

analogies, is the superiority of a monarchical state governed by laws over a despotic state ruled by one person's absolute (and therefore arbitrary) will. How can this concept of superiority in the territory of politics be represented in an image or images? Kant chooses an "animate body" for the law-based monarchy and a hand mill for the despotic system presumably because an animate body will be recognized by all readers of Kant's text as superior to (i.e., *nobler than*) a hand mill, and because a functioning that is merely mechanical and simply serves as a means toward a culinary end does not evoke the same kind of dignity as that of a living body (in the German, *ein beseelter Körper* – literally, a "soul-infused" body). Leaving aside for the moment that the analogy can only work given a traditional humanistic framework (once one undermines the "dignity of man," one can have surrealist imagery, in which a hand mill and a "soul-infused body" might appear as equally uncanny "objects"), it is necessary to remark that Kant's analogy works best when *we already know both terms of the analogical relation*. Unlike the poet, who only gives the reader an image, from which that reader must discover the represented concept, Kant gives us both sides of the *symbolon*, thereby de-activating the process of interpretation. Kant's analogy is, in fact, a logical illustration in the form of an image, not an image whose analogical structure invites disclosure in an interpretive reading.⁸ His conclusion – that "this function [of judgment] [*dies Geschäft*]" has not been analyzed much so far" – is, unfortunately, not just a general admission concerning the incomplete state of scholarship in the field of rhetoric, but an implicit admission of his own failure to confront directly and examine thoroughly the figural dimension of discourse, including that of philosophical exposition.

Kant retreats in the face of the aesthetic as *indirect discourse*. Indirection, which Kant himself says is the essential characteristic of the symbol, is also that which poses the greatest threat to his own critical enterprise, to his own *Geschäft* – a term we shall encounter later, in the context of his ethical writings. Could it be that there are, in fact, two *Geschäfte*, two forms of "business": that of philosophy, on the one hand, and that of literature, on the other? Philosophy, classically conceived, would be that discourse which avoids indirection even when encountering it and defining it, which flees the very territory (the figural minefield of aesthetics) it sets out to map. The philosophical transit and level are based upon clearly definable geometrical principles, upon mathematical laws, whereas what lies within aesthetics, the indirect realm of analogy, is subject to rules no one has discovered, rules that each work of art, on its own, must discover for itself. Could it be that between philosophical aesthetics and

works of art in their praxis there resides a fundamental, foundational “antinomy” in the literal Greek sense (a conflict of laws or rules), an antinomy no amount of dialectical manipulation can overcome? This is the direction in which the indirection of analogy has led. Beyond the immediate Kantian context in question here, the problem is as follows: in what ways can a theorizing discourse, a discourse of generalizing concepts, contain what I should like to call the *inside of the aesthetic*, i.e., its elusive figural dimension, when that inside is the indirect translational movement of analogy, the tending-toward the to-be-discovered concept which the reader must pursue in a series of individual and repeated interpretive efforts?

What I am calling Kant’s retreat from the territory of the aesthetic in paragraph 59 serves to clarify, retroactively, a number of his most important and celebrated propositions concerning the beautiful and the sublime. Thus, his observations on artistic design in paragraph 14 of the “Analytic of the Beautiful,” which have led critics to attack him or defend him for his “formalism,” can be seen as the philosopher’s defensive reaction against the tortuous workings of art in its praxis: one attaches oneself to the outward form when the artwork’s inner force is too strong, too threatening, to be encountered on its own terms. What is interesting in Kant, however, and also emblematic for formalist appreciations of art in general, is that the fear of what constitutes or founds the work in its innermost recesses – namely, its figural *déviance* – finds expression in the philosopher’s manifest distaste for what he/she represents, metaphorically, as the farthest reaches of its “outside” – namely, the seductive raiment in which the work of art clothes its design (color, sound, rhetorical ornament).⁹ Because the labyrinthine inside of the work of art is threatening in its very indirection, the philosopher/theorist *re-configures* the work of art, presenting it as an aesthetic object and emphasizing its form rather than its dangerous content. The philosopher then tells us that this form is enveloped in a pleasing outer envelope, which is deemed to be seductive in its appeal to the senses. It is easier to peel back the envelope and reveal the geometry underneath than it is to encounter seductiveness *as danger* within the workings of poetic language, in the byways of indirect discourse. Kant’s most emphatic pronouncement on the fundamental importance of form, on the superiority of form over the “charm” of color, is to be found in paragraph 14:

In painting, in sculpture, and in all the visual arts – including architecture and horticulture insofar as they are fine arts [*sofern sie schöne Künste sind*] – design is what

is essential [*ist die Zeichnung das Wesentliche*]; in design the basis for any involvement of taste is not what gratifies us in sensation, but merely what we like because of its form [*sondern bloß, was durch seine Form gefällt*]. The colors that illuminate the outline belong to charm [*Reiz*]. Though they can indeed make the object itself vivid to sense, they cannot make it beautiful and worthy of being beheld. Rather, usually the requirement of beautiful form severely restricts [what] colors [may be used], and even where the charm [of colors] is admitted it is still only the form that refines the colors [*und selbst da, wo der Reiz zugelassen wird, durch die erstere allein veredelt*]. (CJ 71; KU 64–65)

As was the case in paragraph 59, paragraph 14 also depends upon a rhetoric of *ennoblement* (*Veredlung*), whereby the enticing charms of the sensible, when given over to the disciplining power of design, are lifted above their own realm and are permitted entrance (*werden zugelassen*) into the domain of beautiful forms. Colors are allowable, but only insofar as they are muted by the rigors of form. It is difficult not to sense here a strong trace of Kant's Pietistic upbringing, a Protestant aversion to those forms of iconic figuration that purportedly convey a diabolical allure. One senses, in general, that Kant was not comfortable, not "at home" in the domain of the beautiful, largely because this province, in and of itself, remains too close to the merely sensual: it is in constant need of ennoblement and elevation, of disciplinary supervision.

Kant was able to recuperate the fine arts not so much in his theory of the beautiful per se, but rather in his original and multi-faceted meditation on the sublime.¹⁰ To conclude my remarks on the crossings of aesthetics and ethics in the *Critique of Judgment*, I shall examine selected passages from paragraphs 29 and 42 of this work, in which the proximity of the sublime to the moral law is posited and somewhat cryptically developed.

In the long "General Comment on the Exposition of Aesthetic Reflective Judgments" that occupies the center of paragraph 29, Kant delineates, in an apparently simple contrast, the essential differences between the beautiful and the sublime as they arise from his earlier exposition on the two forms of aesthetic judgment:

Beautiful is what we like when we merely judge it [*Schön ist das, was in der bloßen Beurteilung gefällt*] (and hence not through any sensation by means of sense in accordance with some concept of the understanding). From this it follows at once that we must like the beautiful without any interest.

Sublime is what, by its resistance to the interest of the senses, we like directly [*Erhaben ist das, was durch seinen Widerstand gegen das Interesse der Sinne unmittelbar gefällt*].

Both of these are explications of universally valid aesthetic judging and as such refer to subjective bases. In the case of the beautiful, the reference is to subjective bases of sensibility [*Sinnlichkeit*] as they are purposive for the benefit of the contemplative understanding. In the case of the sublime, the reference is to subjective bases as they are purposive [*zweckmäßig*] in relation to moral feeling, namely, against sensibility [*wider dieselbe (die Sinnlichkeit)*] but at the same time, and within the very same subject, for the purposes of practical reason. The beautiful prepares us for loving [*zu lieben*] something, even nature, without interest; the sublime, for esteeming [*hochzuschätzen*] it even against our interest (of sense) [*wider unser (sinnliches) Interesse*]. (CJ 127; KU 114)

It is important to respect the complexity of Kant's argument in this passage: he is positing that the beautiful and the sublime are both different and similar; their relation is not that of a simple binary opposition. They differ from each other in a subtle but essential way – the beautiful pleases “without any interest,” whereas the sublime pleases “in resistance to the interest of the senses.” The reader needs to take Kant's idea of opposition (*Widerstand*) to the seductions of the sensible in its full active sense, as a fight, a *résistance* planned and executed by a combatant. The sublime is morally elevated or “ennobled” by the fact that it stands its ground against the charm (*Reiz*) of the sensible, much as Odysseus braves the song of the sirens. At the same time, however – and herein lies the interesting difficulty of Kant's line of reasoning – both the beautiful and the sublime, in their specific and different ways, *tend toward* the goal of the ethical. In Kant's vocabulary, both are “purposive [*zweckmäßig*] in relation to moral feeling,” a phrase that suggests an ethically grounded teleology for the aesthetic. The aesthetic has its territory, which can be surveyed by the aesthetician, but its borders are continually shifting toward the neighboring frontier occupied, inhabited, by the moral law. Art has its field, but if one views that field from the final perspective of the ethical, from the ethical downward, so to speak, one is obliged to note that art *as territory* is, in reality, a staging-ground, an area of “preparation” for the moral. And the reason Kant's own taste inclines him toward the sublime more strongly than in the direction of the beautiful, is that the former prepares us to *esteem* (*hochzuschätzen*) rather than “merely” to love (*zu lieben*). Resistance to charm is also resistance to love. Kant retreats from the beautiful as that area in which charm can lead to love, and chooses to emphasize the sublime, where esteem emerges from initial terror and places us in closest proximity to the moral good.

The sublime (*das Erhabene*) being that which lifts up or elevates (*das, was erhebt*), the question arises as to whether it might tend to lift the human

being too high, beyond the finite limitations which are his or hers in the world. Kant's intellectual honesty compels him to address this problem quite directly, in a development on the role of the sublime in its elevation of one's mental disposition above the plane of the sensible into what might seem to be the threatening reaches of abstraction. Kant reassures his reader as follows:

the sublime must always have reference to our *way of thinking* [*die Denkungsart*], i.e., to maxims directed to providing the intellectual [side in us] and our rational ideas with supremacy over sensibility.

We need not worry that the feeling of the sublime will lose [something] if it is exhibited in such an abstract way as this [*durch eine dergleichen abgezogene Darstellungsart*], which is wholly negative as regards the sensible. For though the imagination finds nothing beyond the sensible that could support it, this very removal of its barriers also makes it feel unbounded [*fühlt sich doch auch eben durch diese Wegschaffung der Schranken derselben unbegrenzt*], so that its separation [from the sensible] is an exhibition of the infinite; and though an exhibition of the infinite can as such never be more than merely negative [*als bloß negative Darstellung*], it still expands the soul [*die aber doch die Seele erweitert*]. Perhaps the most sublime passage in the Jewish Law is the commandment: Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image [*kein Bildnis*], or any likeness of any thing [*irgendein Gleichnis*] that is in heaven or on earth, or under the earth, etc.¹¹ (*CJ* 134–35; *KU* 122)

For Kant, unlike Burke, the important stage in the experience of the sublime occurs not during one's awe or terror at the immensity of nature, but rather in the final return to reason which takes place once the imagination has faced its limits. Yet the originality of Kant's theory consists not only in this emphasis on the enveloping force of reason as final resting-place of the sublime, but also in his description of the pathos of the imagination, which, even though it can "attach itself" to nothing beyond the realm of the sensible, feels the exhilaration of its own *boundlessness*. This is one of the rare moments in Kant's critical enterprise when all limits fall and all boundaries evaporate, the moment of the unsayable and unrepresentable infinite.

The concrete problem for art, for *mimesis* as such, becomes: how is it possible to render, to make visible, the sublime – that which, in its very infinite abstraction (or withdrawal: *Abgezogenheit*), can be nothing but a negative exhibition or presentation? How does one represent the unrepresentable? Kant's answer to this question places the sublime in such close proximity to the territory of the ethical that the frontier between the

two areas seems to disappear altogether. This answer appears abruptly, just after the remarks on the “expansion of the soul” that is said to arise from the experience of the sublime. We are told that the biblical admonishment against the making of “graven images” is a quintessentially sublime passage, the very model for the textual sublime. The linguistic form of the sublime is that of the *command*, or, more precisely, of the command in a negative or privative mode. The sublime participates in the moral law in its earliest Old Testament guise, and shares with this law its categorical, unambiguous character: no images, no likenesses of anything, whether above or below the inhabited world. The command is absolute; the moral authority of the textual statement is unquestionable, since it emanates from the mouth of God. But within this austere environment, this sacred context, what remains of the aesthetic? No image or likeness: nothing representational or rhetorical remains (*Bildnis* can mean portrait as well as likeness; *Gleichnis* is a general term that can signify image, simile, allegory, or parable – all of this disappears under the privative power of the moral law). The negative imperative form is the closest thing in language to non-language: it puts a stop to the flow of narrative action, and in this particular case, to the process of figuration itself. The threat of the figural is removed in the command. The “expansion of the soul” which occurs within the sublime does so at the expense of the aesthetic, which contracts to nothing.

Kant’s admiration for a certain Goethian form of “genius” (paragraphs 46–50) cannot hide from his reader the philosopher’s profound distrust of art. In fact, Kant most often locates the aesthetic in nature rather than in works of artistic creation, and it is impossible not to sense that the “schöne Künste” are beautiful for him only insofar as they approach (but never reach) the loveliness or awesome power of the natural realm. Thus, near the conclusion of paragraph 42 in the “Analytic of the Sublime” entitled “On Intellectual Interest in the Beautiful,” Kant associates authentic beauty with nature and art with deceit. He imagines a scene in which a “jovial innkeeper” fools his guests into believing that they are hearing the song of a nightingale when, in fact, a “roguish youngster” is imitating the bird’s distinctive song with a reed or rush (CJ 169). Kant states the moral of his story before relating it: the kind of artistic playfulness which consists in such an imitation of nature ruins one’s further appreciation of the thing imitated. In this case, it is no longer possible to enjoy the actual song of the nightingale once it has been thus counterfeited. In Kantian terms, the intellectual

“interest” we take in the beautiful *must* be in the beautiful as it occurs in nature:

But in order for us to take this interest in beauty, this beauty must always be that of nature; our interest vanishes completely as soon as we notice that we have been deceived, that only art was involved [*es verschwindet ganz, sobald man bemerkt, man sei getäuscht, und es sei nur Kunst*]; it vanishes so completely that at that point even taste can no longer find anything beautiful, nor sight anything charming. (CJ 169; KU 154)

Underneath the architectonics of the Third Critique, below Kant's theory of taste in the general sense, lies the philosopher's *distaste* for art as deception (*Täuschung*), for the non-natural aesthetic field as locus of a playfulness whose moral dimension is suspect. Art, for Kant, will have always been “mere art” (*nur Kunst*). Herein resides Kant's lifelong admiration for Jean-Jacques Rousseau, whose *Rêveries du promeneur solitaire* located beauty in nature rather than in “les tromperies de l'art” – the seductive aesthetic *Täuschungen* that characterized, in Rousseau's view, not only the French theater of his time, but also the frivolous *jeux de société* staged in the decadent Parisian salons. In the end, moral earnestness seems to have separated Kant from the aesthetic *in art*. I am suggesting that this is the conclusion one reaches on the basis of a rhetorical reading of the *Critique of Judgment*, a reading which locates personal tastes and distastes under the garb of a general *Theorie des Geschmacks*. In Kant, the aesthetic is a precarious, fragile, and shifting field that risks losing its own territory by annexation into the domain of the ethical. But the question remains: just how stable is the ethical itself, just how safe is it from the incursions of the aesthetic? Is the ethical a *terra firma*, or is it also subject to moments of instability? This point cannot be examined from within the Third Critique, but requires a brief foray into the *Critique of Practical Reason*.¹²

II CRITIQUE OF PRACTICAL REASON

Commonplace intellectual usage has long held that the “pure” is to be situated on a higher plane than the “practical,” which, at best, is related to the former as its execution or application. Thus, in the domain of literary studies, a “pure” narrative theory would be capable of generating principles that are universal, that are valid for all individual stories; whereas applied or practical narratology would be the workmanlike verification, on individual texts, of certain hypothesized narrative laws. In Kant's philosophy, however, “practical reason” is not only not “lower”

than pure reason as described in the First Critique; it is, rather, the *extension* of pure reason in the direction of the supersensible. The human being who is capable of comprehending the laws of causality within the sensible territory of nature – the domain staked out in the *Critique of Pure Reason* – discovers, upon reflection, that “pure reason alone must of itself be practical” (CPrR 23).¹³ This practical pure reason, the intellectual agency of the moral law, functions within the carefully prescribed limits of the categorical imperative, of the universally legislating “ought” which, while establishing the moral dimension of our world, calls us all to live beyond the causality of the sensible, in freedom.¹⁴

Fundamental to Kant’s conception of morality is the relation between the desires of each individual and the moral law in its universality. The author of the Second Critique distinguishes, from the beginning, between “maxims” (which a human subject establishes as “valid only for his own will”) and “practical laws” (which are valid “for the will of every rational being”) (CPrR 17). Maxims are, by definition, self-interested guidelines in which the force of personal desire has not been tamed. The most important of these is perhaps the maxim of self-love (post-Freud, we would call this narcissism), which Kant singles out to contrast with the moral law:

The maxim of self-love (prudence) merely advises; the law of morality commands [*Die Maxime der Selbstliebe (Klugheit) rät bloß an; das Gesetz der Sittlichkeit gebietet*]. Now there is a great difference between that which we are advised to do and that which we are obligated to do. (CPrR 37–38; KPrV 43)

To advise someone is to open up a direction of conduct for that person, to lead him or her toward the obtaining of a certain advantage or final goal. Advice is a rhetorical strategy not uncommonly associated with deviousness and seduction: Mme de Merteuil gives Valmont much advice in Laclos’s *Les Liaisons dangereuses*, to the peril of Mme de Tournon. Advice given either by the self to others or by the self to the self occupies the dangerous intellectual field of *Klugheit*, which does not mean the “prudence” (*Vorsicht*) of a merely reactive form of self-preservation, as in the cautious attitude one should manifest before crossing a street, but rather cleverness, shrewdness, cunning. To return for a moment to *Les Liaisons*: Valmont’s seduction of Mme de Tournon is more interesting in its multiple strategies than in its final triumph, in its shrewd psychological manipulations than in its achieved goal. The seduction is not so much an accomplished action as an emerging (cruel) work of art, a cunning, duplicitous aestheticization of an increasingly undermined moral code.¹⁵

Unlike the advice-giving maxim of narcissistic self-gratification (which is the true final goal of all seductions, the goal behind the “goal”), the law of morality *commands*, which means that its message is univocal, understandable to all human beings. Everyone can obey an absolute order, meaning, at the close of the eighteenth century, not just the worldly-wise aristocracy. Just as *Les Liaisons dangereuses* is inconceivable as story outside the highest (and therefore, most decadent) levels of society, so the moral law would be inconceivable if it did not address itself, democratically, to all citizens. Kant’s central notion of “duty,” the expression of each person’s adherence to the moral law in its universality, is thus characterized by clarity, whereas the maxims of self-love and the mere pursuit of happiness are hidden in obscurity:

What duty [*Pflicht*] is, is plain of itself to everyone, but what is to bring true, lasting advantage to our whole existence is veiled in impenetrable obscurity [*in undurchdringliches Dunkel eingehüllt*] and much prudence [*Klugheit*] is required to adapt the practical rule based upon it even tolerably to the ends of life by making suitable exceptions to it. But the moral law [*das sittliche Gesetz*] commands the most unhesitating obedience from everyone; consequently, the decision as to what is to be done in accordance with it must not be so difficult that even the commonest and most unpracticed understanding [*daß nicht der gemeinste und ungeübteste Verstand*] without any worldly prudence [*Weltklugheit*] should go wrong in making it. (CPrR 38; KPrV 43)

The moral law must be easy to understand, but it can only be expressed in language. To express the moral law, therefore, one must render language unambiguous; one must free it from all semantic slippages; one must remove all its “veils” so that nothing but clarity remains. One can see, then, that the kind of moral perversity characteristic of Laclos’s novel goes hand in hand with artfulness, understood as the devious, polyvalent behavior of persons or personages who possess no conscience, who refuse to engage in the economics of guilt and forgiveness, in the dialogic universe of the forgiveness of sins. To act deviously, in Kant’s German, is *künsteln* (this term is used in the philosopher’s discussion of the role of conscience in moral behavior [CPrJ 101; KPrV 114]) – a term that occupies the same semantic field as *Klugheit* or *Weltklugheit*. To act according to one’s advantage is, finally, to *aestheticize life*, to live it as if it were a work of art, which is to say, a fictional universe of symbols in which meaning itself is “veiled in impenetrable obscurity.” The worst imaginable enemy of moral certainty would be the symbolist aesthetic of Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, the artfully fashioned domain in which the *Weltklugheit* of

Kurtz progresses through Enlightenment philosophy toward the extreme maxim-made-command: “Exterminate all the brutes!”

If we look (chronologically) forward now from the Second to the Third Critique, I think it is possible to risk a few general remarks. In the *Critique of Judgment*, we saw that the aesthetic tended toward the moral, especially in Kant’s “Analytic of the Sublime.” The moral could be seen as providing a ground, perhaps the final ground, of the aesthetic. The lifting upward of *Erhabenheit* as the sublime in nature, which is already massively present as a properly moral force in the *Critique of Practical Reason*,¹⁶ provided an antidote to what the philosopher saw as the dangerous charms of the aesthetic in the sensuality of its ornamentation – in the colors and sounds that enveloped, and possibly obscured, the formal design beneath. The aesthetic is saved from itself, so to speak, by the pressure which the moral exerts on the aesthetic in the experience of the sublime. In the *Critique of Practical Reason*, we find that the moral must guard itself against the unwanted intrusions of the aesthetic. The moral law, in order to establish its universality, must suppress the primary danger lurking in human language – that of subtlety, of ambiguity, of “prudence” understood in the strong sense as the cunning of world-wisdom, *Weltklugheit*. But is this guarding against the aesthetic from within the watchtower of *Sittlichkeit* something that can be accomplished easily, in an act of the will accessible to all humans – including philosophers? Put differently: is it possible to write morally about morality, in such a way that literary style, with its own manifold forms of “prudence,” does not aestheticize one’s clear-sighted and straightforward purpose? To conclude my remarks on the points of intersection between the ethical and the aesthetic in Kant, I should like to look at one final passage from the *Critique of Practical Reason* in which the philosopher, in a rare moment of first-person confidential discourse, addresses the issue of the coherence of his critical project in an ethical register, but with an interesting, and in Kantian terms rather suspicious overlay, of self-involved, cunningly manipulated artfulness.

The rhetorically convoluted section to which I refer occurs in the final paragraph of the “Analytic of Pure Practical Reason,” when Kant, having concluded this part of his argument, pauses for a moment to reflect upon how easily and naturally each structural articulation of the Second Critique “fits” or “attaches to” (*schließt sich an*) the grand architectural plan of the *Critique of Pure Reason*. This moment of Kant’s text is properly self-congratulatory, with a tone verging on pride. The tending-toward-pride expresses itself in a very interesting methodological statement, in a

theory of intellectual honesty and “openness” which is also a criticism of those writers who fall short of this ideal. The question is whether Kant’s text, in developing his theory of honesty, is itself honest. Following is an excerpt from the final paragraph:

Here [*bei dieser Gelegenheit*] I wish to call attention, if I may [*sei es mir erlaubt*], to one thing, namely, that every step which one takes with pure reason, even in the practical field where one does not take subtle speculation [*subtile Spekulation*] into account, so neatly and naturally dovetails [*sich . . . anschlieÙe*] with all parts of the critique of theoretical reason that it is as if each step had been carefully thought out merely to establish this confirmation [*als ob jeder Schritt mit überlegter Vorsicht, bloÙ um dieser Bestätigung zu verschaffen, ausgedacht wäre*]. This agreement [*Eintreffung*] was by no means sought after . . . Frequent observation has convinced me that once one has seen through such business [*dieses Geschäft*], that which, when half-finished, appeared very dubious in view of extraneous theories, is at last found to be in an unexpected way completely harmonious [*vollkommen zusammenstimmt*] with that which had been discovered separately without the least regard for them [*ohne Parteilichkeit und Vorliebe für dieselben*], provided this dubiousness is left out of sight for a while and only the business at hand is attended to until it is finished [*wenn ich diese Bedenklichkeit nur so lange aus den Augen ließ und bloÙ auf mein Geschäft acht hatte, bis es vollendet sei*]. Writers could save themselves many errors and much labor lost (because spent on delusions [*weil sie auf Blendwerk gestellt war*]) if they could only resolve to go to work with a little more ingenuousness [*wenn sie sich nur entschließen könnten, mit etwas mehr Offenheit zu Werke zu gehen*]. (CPrR 110; KPrV 123)

Kant’s emphasis on the spontaneous character of the “dovetailing” between the architectural designs of the first two Critiques in their minutest details foreshadows a fundamental aesthetic tenet of literary Modernism – the superiority of instantaneous creative discovery over a merely planned, laboriously and artificially conceived intellectual construction (see Joyce’s “epiphanies” and Proust’s endorsement of *mémoire involontaire* over *mémoire volontaire*). Like Joyce and Proust, however, who may have based their novels on aesthetic theories of spontaneity but who certainly also lavished extraordinary attention on the necessarily voluntary constructedness of their respective fictional universes, Kant may be protesting too much, indulging in what Freud called *Verneinung*, when he tells his reader that he is agreeably surprised by the harmonious coming together of the two Critiques. The reason he gives for this purported surprise is of interest, nevertheless, whether one chooses to believe Kant’s own “ingenuousness” at this point in the text or not: namely, that a domain of openness, honesty, and transparent communicability (the “practical,” the moral) can attach itself so readily, so beautifully,

to the territory of “subtle speculation” (that of “pure” or “theoretical” reason).

Much is at stake in this overlapping. First (logically): if the practical – which must be evident to all persons – could not be attached to or extended from the intellectual complexity inherent in the theoretical, there could be no community of thinking citizens, only a fragmentary assemblage of individuals separated by their variable talents rather than united by the ends of nature. Second (at a higher level of rhetorical complication): Kant, the author of the very subtle and speculative First Critique, as he reaches the final sentences of his confidential aside, makes it clear that, when he writes *about* morality, he does so morally (in the mode of *Offenheit*), and that many writers would do well to follow his example, instead of giving in to the “delusions” (*Blendwerk*) that are born of the intellectual’s hubris-infused desire to erect theoretical systems in an act of precipitous distraction. Not only should one proceed to one’s work with no prejudgment of its eventual outcome (*ohne Parteilichkeit und Vorliebe*), but one should concentrate on one’s “business” (*Geschäft*) while closing one’s eyes to extraneous difficulties. Thus, one could paraphrase the overt message of the passage as follows: “Writers, follow my example, my maxim; concentration on the here-and-now of work, avoidance of diversions, of Pascalian *divertissement*, will guarantee philosophical results imbued with moral probity.”

But how does concentration, or focusing on one’s “business,” function textually? Kant is arguing for openness, which is the zero-degree rhetorical mode of morality and the very antithesis of the speculative subtlety one finds in theoretical knowledge (the First Critique) or in the labyrinthine movements of aesthetic symbolization (the Third Critique). Subtlety as such must be banished from the moral realm if the latter is to remain on solid ground. But how can one characterize the final stages of Kant’s argument in the “Analytic of Pure Practical Reason” except by the term “subtle”? What happens, textually, as his argument unfolds, is the following: in attempting to demonstrate that concentration on one’s work is a philosophical value in that it contributes to the lifting of “dubiousness” and the founding of clarity, he resorts, curiously and significantly, to the image of blindness. Indeed, in order for the philosophical *Geschäft* to be in order, the thinker must *close his eyes* to the outside, the “extraneous,” all that risks calling into question the integrity of his system. The philosopher with closed eyes then immediately accuses an undefined group of *other writers* of basing their own ideas on “delusions” – in German *Blendwerk*, a term deriving from the verb *blenden*,

to blind, meaning frippery, mockery, and hocus-pocus, and suggesting the kind of sleight-of-hand one associates with gaming houses, circuses, and other places housing the lowest forms of illusion-making. *Other* writers are the ones who are guilty of “blinding” their reading public with *trompe-l’oeil* devices, if one takes Kant’s argument in its overt earnestness.

The text’s rhetorical fabric glimmers in a different light, however, and shows that the integrity of the system – in this case, the Kantian critical system – rests upon the philosopher’s blindness to his own devious argumentative strategies, to the self-blindness that allows *Offenheit* to mask a writerly strategy of closed-mindedness. I do not mean anything “negative” with this latter term. All systems of thought, whether they be conceived architecturally as grand unities (Kant, Hegel) or as self-annihilating and self-constructing fragmentary structures (Friedrich Schlegel and the Athenaeum group), must necessarily pose themselves in the very act of opposing the “outside” of their thought – namely, those “other writers” against whom they construct their models and their theoretical discourses. But it is important not to forget that the very act of intellectual decision-making, the tracing of categories and boundaries for thought, which the philosopher would like to conceive as a *resolution*, an *Ent-schließen*, is at the same time a closing-off, a seclusion, a roping-off of the frontiers, an *Ab-schließen*. Kant, in trying to convince us that his going-to-work is a moral “resolution,” is practicing a little *Blendwerk* of his own, since the “ought” of the philosopher’s “I ought to work” is the exterior form of his “I wish to work,” “I aim to convince,” and “I am driven to write because writing itself (not morality, not the law as supreme abstraction) compels me to enter the minefield of persuasive, that is, rhetorical, tropological, discourse.”

If we now return to survey the landscape of the aesthetic and the ethical in Kant from a more distant perspective than my micro-readings have permitted, it becomes possible to reach some general conclusions. Kant presents the overlapping of these two fundamental areas in both the Second and the Third Critiques, and does so with considerable finesse and (despite his moralizing intentions) subtlety. In the *Critique of Judgment*, the aesthetic is in danger of encroachment from the ethical, from two sides: first, from Kant’s elevation and ennobling of the province of the sublime, *das Erhabene*, which draw it, Icarus-like, dangerously close to the splendence of the moral law in its supersensible domain; and second, from the philosopher’s annexation and domestication of the hinterlands of the symbolical or analogical. These areas of aesthetic play, which

belong most properly to Daedalus, labyrinth-constructor of infinite polysemic possibilities,¹⁷ are robbed of their “irresponsible” freeplay through Kant’s ethically motivated imposition of a stable and recuperative form onto the proliferation of seductive ornament. In the *Critique of Practical Reason*, the moral becomes subject to encroachment from the aesthetic from within Kant’s own writing style. Kant postulates the unity, clarity, and transparency of *Sittlichkeit* (because the moral must be accessible to all and without “subtlety”), but his rhetoric, in its subtlety, introduces the aesthetic snake of seduction into the garden of good and evil. The turn toward the self in the final paragraph of the “Analytic of Pure Practical Reason,” in which Kant, like God in Genesis, is well pleased with the beauty of his creation, presents itself as a paean to moral *Offenheit*. Yet this philosophical song of praise cannot erase manifest traces of an aesthetically articulated *Selbstliebe*, of the pride of an author who deserves, and receives, our respectful admiration for the edifice he has formed, but who also merits a skeptical survey of the fault-lines beneath his work’s architectural splendor.