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ETHICS AND AESTHETICS IN EUROPEAN MODERNIST LITERATURE

David Ellison's book is an investigation into the historical origins and textual practice of European literary Modernism. Ellison's study traces the origins of Modernism to the emergence of early German Romanticism from the philosophy of Immanuel Kant, and emphasizes how the passage from Romanticism to Modernism can be followed in the gradual transition from the sublime to the uncanny. Arguing that what we call high Modernism cannot be reduced to a religion of beauty, an experimentation with narrative form, or even a reflection on time and consciousness, Ellison demonstrates that Modernist textuality is characterized by the intersection, overlapping, and crossing of aesthetic and ethical issues. Beauty and morality relate to each other as antagonists struggling for dominance within the related fields of philosophy and theory on the one hand (Kant, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Freud) and imaginative literature on the other (Baudelaire, Proust, Gide, Conrad, Woolf, Kafka).

DAVID ELLISON is Professor of French and Comparative Literature and Chairman of the Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures at the University of Miami (Florida). He is the author of *The Reading of Proust* (1984), *Understanding Albert Camus* (1990), and *Of Words and the World: Referential Anxiety in Contemporary French Fiction* (1993).

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From the Sublime to the Uncanny

DAVID ELLISON

University of Miami

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Kierkegaard faces the problem, whether to enjoy life aesthetically or to experience it ethically. But this seems to me a false statement of the problem. The Either-Or exists only in the head of Søren Kierkegaard. In reality one can only achieve an aesthetic enjoyment of life as a result of humble ethical experience. But this is only a personal opinion of the moment, which perhaps I shall abandon after closer inquiry.

Franz Kafka (quoted by Gustav Janouch in *Conversations with Kafka*)

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For Ellen, in the words of the poet

Ich hatt es nie so ganz erfahren, jenes alte feste Schicksalswort, daß
eine neue Seligkeit dem Herzen aufgeht, wenn es aushält und die
Mitternacht des Grams durchduldet, und daß, wie Nachtigallgesang
im Dunklen, göttlich erst in tiefem Leid das Lebenslied der Welt uns tönt.

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Preface

This book is an investigation into the historical origins and textual practice of European literary Modernism. My study does not extend to Spanish *modernismo*, but limits itself to the interpretation of selected writings from the cultural spaces of France, England, and Germany, including locations which, in their own individual ways, were in Germany's philosophical and literary orbit from the mid-nineteenth to the early twentieth centuries – Kierkegaard's Copenhagen and Kafka's Prague. My project is, at one level, comparative in the classical sense of that term, in that I pursue the categories of the sublime (*das Erhabene*) and the uncanny (*Unheimlichkeit*) across national borders, in the belief that the transition from the first to the second of these terms is a determining factor in the movement from Romanticism to Modernism. At the same time, however, the mode of my pursuit is not that of traditional intellectual history, in which individual texts are mustered to exemplify the general concepts under investigation, but rather the reverse: I begin and always remain with individual texts and find, within them, the points of emergence of the sublime and the uncanny, those areas that are inhabited or haunted by these categories.

Both the sublime, in its Kantian definition, and the uncanny as theorized by Freud via E. T. A. Hoffmann, are hybrid notions in that they are built upon the complex mixture and interplay of the aesthetic and the ethical. Whereas both Kant and Kierkegaard, in their stylistically diverse ways, set the aesthetic against the ethical as separate, cordoned-off areas equal in philosophical importance but dangerous to the integrity of each other's territory, imaginative writers from the period of German Romantic irony through what we call high Modernism have found it impossible not to break down the barriers separating the two heterogeneous domains. I shall be arguing that Modernist literature, from its earliest origins in the convoluted arabesques of Romantic irony, is the textual space in which uncanniness is both feared and desired, at times

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censored and prohibited from exerting its power but at others allowed to function freely, dangerously, diabolically.

The structure of my book has two dimensions. On the one hand, seen from the point of view of literary history, it is linear and (with pedagogical intent) straightforward in its presentation. I begin with a reading of selected passages from Kant's Second and Third Critiques with the purpose of uncovering those areas of rhetorical complexity in which the aesthetic and the ethical, despite the philosopher's considerable efforts to the contrary, do in fact overlap and contaminate each other's theoretical integrity. I continue with Kierkegaard, with an analysis of both *The Concept of Irony* and *Either/Or*, and concentrate on the difficulties inherent in the framing of the aesthetic by the ethical (this key notion of framing is viewed both philosophically and narratively, as will be the case throughout my study). And finally, the third essay of the book's first part is a close reading of Freud's essay "Das Unheimliche," with continual reference to the text underlying Freud's own: E. T. A. Hoffmann's "Der Sandmann." Chapter three is the theoretical center of my book.

With the literary-historical and theoretical backgrounds established in part one, I move on, in the next section, to five essays dealing with the heritage of Romanticism and the transition to Modernist textual practice. In chapter four I examine the Dionysian emblem of the thyrsus as it emerges in the late Romantic works of Nietzsche, Baudelaire, and Wagner. Chapter five is a reading of Alain-Fournier's *Le Grand Meaulnes* in the light of the notion of the "beautiful soul," a figure of considerable philosophical importance which incorporates or symbolizes the mixed mode of aesthetic morality. The universe of Alain-Fournier's novel lies at the threshold of Modernism, but does not cross over into it. Chapters six to eight are devoted to the interpretation of texts by what literary historians have designated as exemplary or canonical Modernist writers: Proust and Kafka; Conrad and Gide; and Virginia Woolf. In each of these chapters there emerges some form of textual uncanniness, and in each case my analysis focuses on the points of intersection or overlap between the categories of the aesthetic and the ethical. Throughout part two I combine a narratological perspective with psychoanalytic theory in my examination of intertextual linkages and uncanny textual echo-effects.

Following Flaubert's excellent advice – "l'ineptie consiste à vouloir conclure" – there is no conclusion to this book (no final totalizing frame) but rather an opening outward, in the form of an epilogue on Kafka and Blanchot. In this final essay I examine Kafka's Modernist redefinition of the sublime and his convergence with Blanchot in the conceptualization

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of death as unhomely home. If there were to be a conclusion, it would be, with apologies to Freud: "The aim of all texts is death." But "death" here is to be taken in the spectral neutrality with which it is given to us by both Kafka and Blanchot, as a place beyond places which we inhabit but which will have always inhabited us.

The second dimension of my book's structure is not based upon the perhaps deceptively clear chronological trajectory extending from Kant to Blanchot, but can be characterized as "musical." The book as a whole is a series of variations on the twin grand themes of the aesthetic and the ethical in which certain *Leitmotive* (the sublime, the uncanny, the diabolical, narrative framing, psychological ambivalence) and certain authors (notably Proust and Kafka as uncanny *Doppelgänger*) recur with some frequency, but change in their significance according to their insertion in new contexts. There is Kant's sublime but also Kafka's sublime; there is Freud's uncanny but also Woolf's uncanny; Kierkegaard and Gide are masters of a same-but-different narrative framing; the Proust of chapter five differs from the Proust who inhabits the depths of chapter eight; the Kafka twinned with Proust in chapter five is and is not the Kafka associated with Blanchot in the epilogue. This book, in other words, does not just describe the textual uncanny, but is pervaded by it. The chronological guard-rail running from Kant and Kierkegaard to Kafka and Blanchot is a framework of sorts, but by the time the book ends, the shortcomings of framing as such should have become abundantly clear. I leave it to the individual tastes of my reader to determine whether the first or the second structural dimension of my study is more appealing, more rhetorically convincing or enlivening.

Whether my reader's inclinations take him or her in the direction of literary-historical chronology or of structural musicality, in either case there is one fundamental tension inhabiting my book that will be constantly present, namely, the sometimes antagonistic pull or strain between conceptual generality and textual particularity. I have undertaken a project whose scope is vast (more than 150 years of literary and philosophical history) and whose intellectual effectiveness will depend upon how well my reader is convinced of my manipulation of large and notoriously slippery categories such as the sublime, the uncanny, Romanticism, and Modernism. The very nature of my project obliges me to deal with large generalities. Yet the interpretive method I have chosen is that of close reading, and, in particular, detailed scrutiny of the role of the signifier in the texts I analyze. It is precisely in the diabolical freeplay of the signifier that the upsetting or unsettling of the grand categories of the

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ethical and the aesthetic can be best observed. For this reason, I am asking of my reader a certain patience, a willingness to dwell within the signifier and its complex ramifications, a willing suspension of hermeneutical disbelief. My task will be to play Virgil to my reader's Dante, and to lead him or her through the textual "selva oscura" in the direction of the larger questions toward which the works examined here point. There will be signposts along the way, in which I remind the reader of the larger issues and problems; but it is my conviction that these issues, these problems, are only available, only ascertainable, after considerable interpretive labor. And the locus of this labor is the detail, the fragment, the word, sometimes the individual sound. To range between such smallness and such largeness is difficult. Perhaps it is the reader's active participation, even collaboration, in elaborating the meanings of my book, that will grant this study whatever value (aesthetic and ethical) it may contain.

The writing of this book was made possible by a generous sabbatical leave granted me by the University of Miami in 1997–98. My thanks go to Deans Paul Blaney and Kumble Subbaswamy, to Provost Luis Glaser, and to my colleague and friend Celita Lamar, whose willingness to assume the duties of department chairmanship during my absence is much appreciated. I would also like to express my appreciation to Greta West, whose clerical and computer expertise, as well as gracious encouragement, were most appreciated throughout the various compositional stages of this project.

I am grateful to Robert Norton and to the twist of fate that allowed for a certain lunchtime conversation to take place some years ago – a conversation that seems now to have produced two books. And there are those who deplore the lack of intellectual dialogue in our "benighted" times . . .

Finally, I would like to thank Dr. Linda Bree, Humanities Editor of Cambridge University Press, for her guidance and support throughout the final phases of the project. And my appreciation goes, as well, to the two subtle readers chosen by Dr. Bree to read the manuscript. Their comments and advice were both thought-provoking and of practical help to me in the revision process.

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Abbreviations

ALR	Marcel Proust, *A la recherche du temps perdu*
B	Franz Kafka, *Brief an den Vater*
BT	Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*
C	Franz Kafka, *The Castle*
CI	Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony*
CJ	Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*
CPrR	Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*
CS	Maurice Blanchot, "Le chant des sirènes"
D	Franz Kafka, *Diaries 1910–1913*
DS	E. T. A. Hoffmann, "Der Sandmann"
DU	Sigmund Freud, "Das Unheimliche"
DW	*The Diary of Virginia Woolf*
E/O	Søren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*
F	Grimm brothers, "Von dem Fischer und seiner Frau"
GT	Friedrich Nietzsche, *Die Geburt der Tragödie*
GW	Sigmund Freud, *Gesammelte Werke*
HD	Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*
I	André Gide, *The Immoralist*
J	Franz Kafka, "Josefine, die Sängerin oder das Volk der Mäuse"
JMF	Franz Kafka, "Josephine the Singer, or the Mouse Folk"
KPrV	Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der praktischen Vernunft*
KU	Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der Urteilskraft*
L	Franz Kafka, *Letter to His Father*
L'Imm	André Gide, *L'Immoraliste*
RTP	Marcel Proust, *Remembrance of Things Past*
S	Franz Kafka, *Das Schloß*
SE	Sigmund Freud, *Standard Edition*
T	Franz Kafka, *Tagebücher*

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TL	Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*
TS	E. T. A. Hoffmann, "The Sandman"
TU	Sigmund Freud, "The Uncanny"
VN	Maurice Blanchot, "La voix narrative, le 'il,' le neutre"
VW	Hermione Lee, *Virginia Woolf*

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