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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).

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