The ghosts of Russell Kirk
by James Panero

The subject of ghosts, both their literary and spectral forms, was a lifelong fascination for Russell Kirk. He was a scholar of speculative fiction, also called “genre” fiction. These days, stories of horror and the supernatural are often disparaged when held against the “quality literature” of modern realism. Yet Kirk saw realism as “dreary baggage,” the “art of depicting nature as it is seen by toads.” For a “writer who struggles to express moral truth,” wrote Kirk, “realism has become in our time a dead-end street.”

So Kirk appreciated what he called the “fearful joy” of ghostly tales. Such tales formed their own literary tradition, one that he traced from Horace Walpole to L. P. Hartley. Kirk was sure to distinguish these ghost stories from the more recent “flood of ‘scientific’ and ‘futuristic’ fantasies,” which he called “banal and meaningless.” “For symbol and allegory,” Kirk wrote, “the shadow-world is a far better realm than the hard, false ‘realism’ of science-fiction.”

Kirk did not fear ghosts. He feared the death of ghosts and their afterlife in myths and tales. In his own scholarship and writing, he saw to their revival. As he studiously wrote in “A Cautionary Note on the Ghostly Tale,” an essay he first published in The Critic in the spring of 1962, the supernatural has attracted writers of genius or high talent: Defoe, Scott, Coleridge, Stevenson, Hoffmann, Maupassant, Kipling, Hawthorne, Poe, Henry James, F. Marion Crawford, Edith Wharton; and those whose achievement lies principally in this dark field, among them M. R. James, Algernon Blackwood, Meade Falkner, Sheridan Le Fanu, and Arthur Machen. Many of the best are by such poets and critics as Walter de la Mare, A. C. Benson, and Quiller Couch. Theirs are no Grub Street names. The genre has in it something worth attempting.

Regrettably, as Kirk went on: “since most modern men have ceased to recognize their own souls, the spectral tale has been out of fashion, especially in America.” Kirk called himself the “last remaining master of ghostly stories,” something he lamented as a “decayed art.” Still, unfashionable as they may be, it did not mean ghost stories went unread. Beneath our rationalist feet, as Kirk knew, there remains haunted ground. And, in fact, Kirk’s own supernatural fiction brought him widespread popular success. He began by publishing ghostly tales in the early 1950s in small periodicals, such as World Review, Queen’s Quarterly, London Mystery Magazine, Fantasy and Science Fiction, and Southwest Review. Many of these stories have now been anthologized several times over.

Kirk’s thriller of a novel of 1961, titled Old House of Fear, became a surprise bestseller. Kirk said it outsold all of his other books; its royalties provided some financial buoyancy to the Kirk family for years after publication. These literary achievements form their own creative legacy, one not necessarily advantaged by Kirk’s more prominent political associations. Yet they were all of a piece. The writing quality and studied interest of this ghostly fiction were not ancillary to his conservative mind but central to his Gothic sensibility. Quoting Edmund Burke, Kirk wrote, “art is man’s nature.” And ghost stories were Kirk’s nature.
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“The Surly Sullen Bell,” Kirk’s short story of 1950, first published in *London Mystery Magazine*, sounds a tone that resonates through much of his fiction. Kirk takes his title from Shakespeare’s Sonnet 71: “No longer mourn for me when I am dead/ Than you shall hear the surly sullen bell/ Give warning to the world that I am fled/ From this vile world with vilest worms to dwell.” The story lends its title to Kirk’s first story collection, published by Fleet in 1962.

It opens in the rubble of St. Louis, where “they have pounded the Old Town into dust.” Against this backdrop of so-called urban renewal, we read, “To the modern politician and planner, men are the flies of a summer, oblivious of their past, reckless of their future.” A character named Frank Loring is visiting, reluctantly, the home of Professor Godfrey Schumacher. The professor’s wife, the former Nancy Birrell, is an old flame. Loring is a self-admitted “reactionary . . . not yet forty”: “Ecclesiastes was Bible enough for him. . . . yesterday’s sun had been warmer than today’s.” Schumacher, in contrast, is a “compliant positivist.” Loring now finds the professor wrapped up in “a startling blend of psychiatry and quasi-Yoga, spiced with something near to necromancy and perhaps a dash of Madame Blavatsky.” Since Schumacher is “late a disciple of the mechanists,” what explains his new philosophy? “Well,” Loring admits, “the line of demarcation between the two cults perhaps was no more difficult to cross than the boundary between Fascism and Communism.”

Schumacher has taken up an interest in mysticism, he claims, to help his ailing wife, who has become a neurotic suffering from “dreadful sights.” This Godfrey is playing God. “He wants to possess me, absorb me, lose me in himself,” Nancy confides to Loring. As Schumacher pours another cup of coffee, he also pours out his strong philosophy: “restraint is for spiritual weaklings. Strength is everything upon the physical plane, and that’s just as true, really, upon the spiritual—the moral—plane. Strength and appetite are the only tests. You’ll admit that soon enough, Loring.”

Walking home “through the district of ruined and ruinous old houses,” Loring finds he is followed by a “hulking figure . . . slipping now and again into deep shadow.” After another visit, the figure follows him again. This time Loring collapses in a ruined alley only to see a spectral face taunting him from an abandoned window. Believing there was something off with the coffee, Loring barely makes it to the police station. When the authorities go back to investigate the Schumachers, they find Nancy dead of heart failure and Godfrey shot by his own hand. Nancy and Loring had been poisoned, yet our final understanding of Godfrey’s drug “was little better than approximation.”

In “A Cautionary Note on the Ghostly Tale,” Kirk writes: “Tenebrae ineluctably form part of the nature of things; nor should we complain, for without darkness there cannot be light.” Kirk’s 1957 story “Ex Tenebris,” first published in *Queen’s Quarterly*, takes on slum clearance front and center. The setting has been relocated to the fading English farm village of Low Wentford and its supposed replacement by the new council-housing scheme of Gorst. Mrs. Oliver is a hold-out in the old town. Even though her windows “were too small” and her ceilings “lower than regulations,” she simply wants to “train rosebushes against the old walls” and to “spade her own little garden.” She also has little interest in Gorst, which boasts “six cinemas” but no churches, and was a “jerry-built desolation of concrete roadways” designed to “make it difficult for people to get about on foot.” S. G. W. Barner, “Planning Officer,” knows better, and has different ideas for Mrs. Oliver: “She would be served a compulsory purchase order before long . . . and would be moved to Gorst where she belonged.”

“A thick-chested, hairy man, . . . rather like a large, earnest ape,” Barner thinks he understands all he needs to know about the future: He was convinced that the agricultural laborer ought to be liquidated altogether. And why not? Advanced planning, within a few years, surely would liberate progressive societies from dependence upon old-fashioned farming. He disliked the whole notion of agriculture, with its rude earthiness, its reactionary views of life and labor, its subservience to tradition. He also disliked Low Wentford, which he believed served as an “obsolete fragment of a repudiated social order.” Therefore it must be effaced:
“Ruins are reminiscent of the past; and the Past is a dead hand impeding progressive planning.”

Mrs. Oliver is frightened of Barner, who “seemed more unchristian than any Indian, worshipping his maps.” So she seeks refuge in conversation with Abner Hargreaves, the vicar of Low Wentford’s old church. Problem is, this church has been long abandoned. When Barner goes to investigate, he enters into an argument with the spectral vicar, who tells him, “Cursed is he that smiteth his neighbor secretly.” Barner says: “Individual preferences often must be subordinated to communal efficiency.” The vicar responds: “I speak not simply of whim and inclination, but of the memories of childhood and girlhood, the pieties that cling to our hearth, however desolated.”

Just then, as Barner feels the vicar’s hand on his neck, the “roof of the north porch . . . fell upon him.” A new planning officer abandons the Gorst scheme and recommends a “plan of deconcentration.” Mrs Oliver can stay in her cottage, where she “weeds her garden, and bakes her scones, and often sweeps the gravestones clean.”

Reviewing Kirk’s first collection of stories, Virginia Kirkus’s Service took note of how the ghosts of Kirk’s tales “generally work for the good to defeat the modern evils of city planners, hoodlums or census takers.” At the same time, “there is perhaps too much commonsense reality in these tales for them to be truly terrifying.” Set in the haunted Small Isles of the Scottish Inner Hebrides, Old House of Fear, Kirk’s first novel, quickly does away with terra cognita for a landscape charged with dark spirits.

Duncan MacAskival is an Andrew Carnegie–like industrialist who wants to return to his ancestral Scottish home. “Look at it all,” he says of his Iron Works. “I made it. And what has it given me? Two coronary fits. . . . Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers.” He taps Hugh Logan to travel to Carnglass, where the old Lady of the MacAskival clan still lives, to purchase the island and its castle, called the Old House of Fear. The name is Gaelic, we learn, and Fir means “man,” just as Carnglass means “gray stone.”

The first half of the book concerns Logan’s efforts to get on island; many conspire to keep him away—just as Kirk, famously resistant to editorial intervention, no doubt conspired to thwart any efforts at elision. Here we learn about the lingering old superstitions of this remote land: “to preach the Gospels among the Pequots or Narragansetts is a facile undertaking by the side of any endeavor to redeem from heathen error these denizens of the furthestmost Hebrides.”

Kirk’s writing here is possessed of specific beauty. Having earned his doctorate of letters from the University of St. Andrews, the first American to do so, he luxuriates in the maritime Scottish scenery. Just consider the following passage:

At six o’clock the “Lochness” steamed away from the pier toward the Sound of Mull. They crossed the Firth of Lorne; and then, to the south they skirted the great rocky mass of Mull, while the wild shores of Morven frowned upon them from the north. Several islanders were among the passengers, and for the first time in years Logan heard the Gaelic spoken naturally, that beautiful singing Gaelic of the Hebrides. It went with the cliffs, the sea-rocks, the ruined strongholds of Mull and Morven, the damp air, the whitewashed loney cottages by the deep and smoothly sinister sea.

When Logan makes landfall, he meets Mary MacAskival, a red-haired ingenue and soon-to-be love interest. They pretend to be betrothed in order to get past a Dr. Edmund Jackman, a man, we learn, “who knows all about the occult. He has just come back from a trip to Roumania.” This guru figure has taken over the Old House and entranced the old Lady. It turns out he is also a Communist agent seeking to use Carnglass as a forward base of operations to disrupt advanced Atlantic defenses. Working with a henchman named Royall, the “humanitarian with the guillotine,” Dr. Jackman uses “sham bogles to frighten old women.” Says Logan: “But when you play with things from the abyss, you run risks. In this dead island of Carnglass, all round us things are ready to stir, if they’re called.”

“Fed on fantasies of one sort or another,” Jackman says of Mary, “the legends of Carnglass . . . are real.” Mary indeed knows the old Pictish “hidie-holes” of the island. She helps Logan escape and summons her relatives from Daldour, the island next door. While some of the island’s apparitions prove to be false—a happy warrior named Dumb Angus dons the skin of a sheep’s
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head to frighten Jackman—the legends of Carn-glass also come true. Jackman is shown to be a
demon, “the Firgower, the Goat-Man. And he
saw all things, past, present, and future, through
his Third Eye.” Far from being saved by the light
doors, only Mary’s belief in these same dark leg-
ends preserves the island from Jackman’s boot.

In the last year of his life, Kirk spoke about ghosts
at length from his “ancestral home” on Piety Hill
in Mecosta, Michigan. He was convalescing from
bronchitis, “an illness I contracted for the first
and, I trust, the last time in my life,” he propheti-
cally declared. Still, he had gathered a small audi-
cence in order to tell “some ghostly tales.”

Before he read one of his ghost stories, he
elaborated on what he called the “true narration”
of the ghosts in his life and the life of his family.
Kirk’s ancestors were followers of the mystical Lu-
eran theologian Emanuel Swedenborg. A New
York lumberman from the burned-over country
of the Finger Lakes, Kirk’s great-grandfather came
for the trees of northern Michigan and brought
Swedenborgism with him, building a spiritualist
church across from his settlement in Mecosta.
After the church burned, the family conducted sé-
cances in their home. “My great-aunt Norma told
tales of those days,” Kirk said. “A rocking chair
levitated toward the ceiling. A great round ma-
hogany table floated up.” Before the Old House
burned in 1973, Kirk observed an increase in its
spiritual activity. He remembers sleeping on the
parlor sofa aged eight or nine, seeing two figures
looking back at him through the bay window
one winter’s night. They left no footprints in the
snow, but years later he learned that his Aunt Faye
reported seeing similar figures, with whom she
would play. Kirk’s eldest daughter, Monica, also
saw these men. “Three generations had some sort
of experience,” Kirk concluded. “One of the more
pleasant ghost stories of the house.”

Mine was not an Enlightened mind,” Kirk fa-
ously said of himself. “It was a Gothic mind,
medieval in its temper and structure. I did not
love cold harmony and perfect regularity of or-
ganization; what I sought was variety, mystery,
tradition, the venerable, the awful.”

Directed not by ideology, but rather a pru-
dential anti-ideology—a disposition—Kirk’s
pathways were sinuous. There is no single key,
no one access point or unobstructed promon-
tory to give way to his worldview. Instead he
left many clues, often medieval in temper and
structure. And for this we are fortunate. He saw
the modern age with a time-traveler’s remove.
He surveyed the world with idiosyncratic fascina-
tion, looking for lost connections between the
timely and the timeless; the past, the present, and
the future. In his writing, he was his own po-
tergeist or “rattling spirit,” making critical noise
to remind us of lost ties and of the subterranean
spirits of culture just below the rubble at our
feet and the theories in our heads. With his own
Third Eye, Kirk saw through the many false faiths
of the modern age: “The primary error of the
Enlightenment,” he wrote, “was the notion that
dissolving old faiths, creeds, and loyalties would
lead to a universal sweet rationalism. But deprive
man of St. Salvator, and he will seek, at best,
St. Science.” That’s why fruitful inquests might
still be made into Kirk’s dim views of post-war
urban planning, for example, or the entrancing
flicker of information technology—just two areas
of many where he was remarkably farsighted.
The more we look to the “variety, mystery, tra-
dition, the venerable, the awful” of his life and
work, the better we appreciate his Gothic form
of conservative mind.

Kirk believed in ghosts. He believed in people
who believed in ghosts. He believed in people
who believed in the stories of ghosts. Whether
ghosts were objective or subjective phenomena,
whether they were forces of the universe or of
the human imagination, he would not definitively
say. “Can we imagine a human soul operating
without a body?,” he said at the end of his life.
“You and I are just a collection of some electri-
cal particles, held in suspension temporarily. We
aren’t really solid at all. Can there be a collection
of such particles in a different form that can oc-
casionally manifest itself? Nobody knows.”

Subjective belief and objective existence were
fluid dynamics in Kirk’s mind. He believed in the
life of the dead. He believed in the afterlife of
the soul and the soul imbued in the living spirit
of the culture. His beliefs still haunt us. On the
centenary of his birth, if we have managed to
conjure his legacy, then we have also summoned
a revenant spirit.