Robert Champ

Russell Kirk's Fiction of Enchantment

Long before I became aware of Russell Kirk as the author of *The Conservative Mind,* I knew him as a teller of deliciously scary ghost stories. Indeed, it was not until I had worked my way through *Old House of Fear* (1961), his first novel, and *The Surly Sullen Bell* (1962), his first short story collection, that I began to poke around to see if this author, who seemed to have so much more substance to him than other modern adherents of ghostly and Gothic tales, had produced anything in a more philosophical vein. I found, thank heavens, more than I bargained for and thereafter sought out his social and literary criticism with a will. Yet anyone who has shared with Kirk, as I continue to do, a taste for "variety, mystery, tradition, the venerable, the awful," and who has an interest in the man himself, will find his or her way back to these fictions and to others Kirk produced over the years.

With the fiction of his time mired in the conventions of naturalism, by which we must mean finally the conventions of a fiction grounded in materialism, it is not surprising that Kirk was drawn early to genres so far removed from the literary pale. The literature of the fantastic alone he found "good at need"—first and foremost, because, in its inclusiveness of subject matter, it provided him with the necessary freedom to explore his religious ideas; second, because it gave him an opportunity to develop a style appropriate to their expression. At the same time, the fantastic allowed Kirk to claim the authority of tradition for his work. Hence, he openly asserted his kinship with Mrs. Radcliffe; and he put himself, in his concern with matters spiritual, directly in the line of the nineteenth century fabulist, George MacDonald. In effect, perhaps without fully realizing it at first, Kirk set himself up as the American counterpart to two other twentieth-century writers of the fabulous, the Englishmen C.S. Lewis and Charles Williams. Like these men, he turned to the past for his inspiration, finding there the stuff of allegory and spiritual sustenance. Like them, too, he used the past to interrogate the abuses of the present. The past for Russell Kirk, however, was intensively individual as well, and like all truly original writers, he used it to place his distinctive mark on the genres wherein he worked.

Thus it happens that the origin of much of Kirk's fiction was "the enchanted world of Mecosta," as he called it, where he spent the better part of his life. In *Confessions of a Bohemian Tory,* he speaks of the silence and awfulness of that world, of its "bleak ridges and its scrubby second-growth woods, its remote lakes and its sand trails, its poverty racked farmsteads and the silent village of Mecosta itself...where no one seemed to stir

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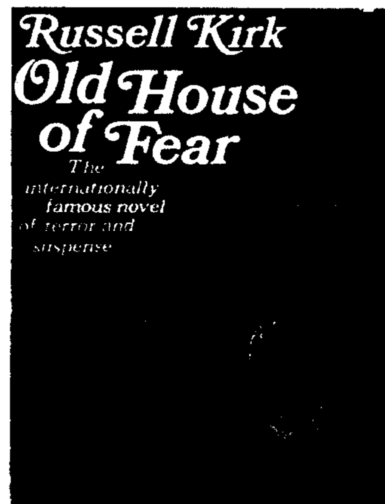
except on Saturday nights, and then only feebly." It was, he says, "like the empty land that peers out of the pages of the Mabinogion"—in brief, a land, however desolate, promising mystery and myth, and filled with the echoes of a grander time. Add to this atmosphere an attachment to an ancient family house and a family history which included relatives who regularly "talked with the dead," and the basic elements of the stories fall into place. The feeling for the land especially is strong from Kirk's earliest stories—in, for instance, "Behind the Stumps" from *The Surly Sullen Bell*, a tale of the Michigan pine barrens. And unquestionably it is the silent village of Mecosta that provides the setting for one of his best stories, "There's a Long, Long Trail A-Winding." (The latter, which appears in Kirk's second collection, *The Princess of All Lands* [1979], won the 1977 World Fantasy Award.)

Kirk's parents, too, did their part in forming his taste for the fantastic. His father, he tells us, "felt an enduring dissatisfaction with the age of the machine," an aversion Kirk came to share; his mother fed his imagination with reading from Lewis Carroll, Stevenson, Scott, Grimm, and the Arthurian Legends. It is, accordingly, against the prophets of a mechanistic world that Kirk's heroes most often find themselves contending; and it is the high adventure of his mother's early readings, along with their intimations of beings and things beyond this world, that Kirk recreates in all his fictions.

The past that so intrigued Kirk was not confined to Mecosta or even America, however. His lifelong fascination with Scotland—where, in the early 1950s, he went to write *The Conservative Mind* and where he settled in the university town of St. Andrews—indelibly influenced his fictions: two of his three novels, *Old House of Fear* and *The Lord of the Hollow Dark* (1979), have Scottish settings. For admirers of these works, the pity is that he did not produce a novel with an American setting. But the long, labyrinthine turnings of Scottish history (especially family and clan history), the physical presence of that history in the country's great manor houses and churches, and the attraction of the cloudy, brooding North itself seemed to have offered him the fictional scope he could not find in his



native land. It also offered an ancient spiritual tradition, a sense of hallowedness that is missing from the American stories. Thus, the great caverns beneath Balgrummo Lodging in *The Lord of the Hollow Dark* hold vestiges of worship—Roman, Mithraic, Celtic, medieval Christian—that stretch back beyond the Incarnation and throw into high relief the novel's very modern religious concerns. Into such novels Kirk built a veritable architecture of faith—heavens, hells, and purgatories are physical as well as spiritual realities and palpable as the stones of a castle wall. Time, substance, and

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spirit—both good and evil—move together in them, tempting and molding the souls of the living, demanding again and again that one makes the old choices, the final choices.

It is worth noting, in a somewhat more mundane humor, that his Scottish experiences also piqued Kirk's antiquarian interest, as evidenced in stories like "The Reflex-Man in Whinnymuir Close" (in *Watchers at the Strait Gate* [1984]). In its use of the vernacular, its historical setting, and its connection between high crimes and ghostly visitations, this tale and others are reminiscent of another great storyteller and antiquarian, M.R. James. Like James, Kirk has a fondness for the out-of-the-way fact, the precise name of a forgotten implement or structure, the apt but long neglected word, that invests his stories with just the right mix of the archaic and beautiful to lend his stories magic and at the same time leave their horror intact. In works of this kind one sees clearly the truth behind Kirk's early realization that, "Mine was not an Enlightened mind...it was a Gothic mind, medieval in its temper and structure.... I would have given any number of neo-classical pediments for one battered gargoyle."

If the past were the whole of his novels and stories, Kirk might be accused of mere nostalgia. Instead, a central purpose of his concern with the past is the criticism of the present. In his work, past and present are forever touching upon, sometimes careening into, each other. When it comes to older ways and values, it is true, the men and women of the present are usually naive folk, though clearly hungry for something represented by those things. More distressing are the insistently destructive moderns, usually the agents of the secularized State: planning boards, tax collectors, contractors, visionless politicos. Invariably, in Kirk, such individuals are dutiful, efficient, emotionally flat, or at least filled with a wearying spite. They are, above all else, spiritually vacuous and quickly—usually unconsciously—fall prey to the demonic.

In *A Creature of the Twilight* (1966), Kirk's "African" novel, he draws perhaps his most pointed criticism of the type in the character of T. William Tallstall, a liberal State Department official on a visit to the sultanate of Hamnegri. Like many an actual African country of the time, Hamnegri is undergoing a Marxist-inspired revolution, led by an European educated "Progressive" named Dr. Zingu. The blindness of Tallstall to Zingu's real agenda, his astonishment that the leader "had turned extremist overnight," points to a fault of liberalism generally. As a "progressive" movement itself, convinced that the growth of the state and the good of the populace are one and the same, it is incapable finally of seeing the distinction between the rhetoric of altruism and the organs of force. As counterbalance to Tallstall, Kirk's hero, a mysterious European named Manfred Arcane, supports the forces of the Sultan, which Tallstall considers feudal and reactionary. Arcane, a recurring character in Kirk's stories and novels, is a Gothic hero on the grand scale: he is a wealthy wanderer, a seeker after truth, a man inwardly scarred (in all this, he is much like his namesake, Lord Byron's Manfred). His appearance, however, heralds not only the defeat of Zingu's forces but Kirk's vision of the proper relation between past and present: the necessity for continuity—for example, the grounding of government in the experience of the governed and the sanctioning of values found in a people's inherited traditions and religion.

All this may seem far removed from Kirk's ghostly tales, but in fact the latter are replete with instances of spiritual awakening in the face of modern secularism and statist control. Those deprived by the state of belief struggle toward it; those who be-

lieve battle to overcome the "powers and dominations" that, whether its agents know it or not, lay behind the spirit of modern secularism. Hence, it is no incongruity that Manfred Arcane returns as the hero of the undeniably supernatural novel *The Lord of the Hollow Dark* or that, among the followers of the novel's villain, the leader of a Gnostic cult named Dr. Apollinax, we find a Marxist couple who have been involved in the Third World revolutionary atrocities.

It is impossible, of course, to talk about Kirk's protagonists without noting the Christian—and, in latter stories, overtly Catholic—nature of their adventures. All are on a pilgrimage toward a salvific moment; all feel a "call" to perform an act, go to a specific location, turn toward a particular individual. Kirk's fictions, in other words, are governed by Providence not chance. Some of his heroes, like the ex-convict Frank in "There's a Long, Long Trail A-Winding," exist in a purgatorial state, working their way slowly toward transcendence; others, like Gerard Pierce in "An Encounter by Mortstone Pond," one of Kirk's most moving stories (from *Watchers at the Strait Gate*), experience, after a lifetime of painful growth, a moment of insight into spiritual realities that give meaning where none was before. Like Frank and Pierce, Kirk's heroes are hardly perfect; and it is their intense knowledge of the fact that points toward their salvation. They cry out for help, they pray, and they accept. And in the end, despite all odds and appearances, they are redeemed. With the assurance of the true believer himself, Kirk invariably turns the conventions of the ghost story genre into occasions for the influx of the sacred. And in so doing, he moves his stories beyond the concerns of the past and present and toward the steady contemplation of the eternal.

None of this, I hasten to add, detracts one whit from the pure fun of the stories. To put it in the vernacular, Kirk is a "great read." He builds tension with a master's hand, he creates three dimensional characters the reader comes quickly to care about or distrust, he knows where to twist a plot in such a way as to cause a catch in the reader's breath. And he writes very scary stories. "If I conjure up in you a dreadful joy, like that

Kirk, shown here in Scotland (1962), was an acclaimed writer of ghostly tales.

of a small boy on a secret stair," he wrote in explanation of his tales in the prologue to *The Princess of All Lands*, "my malice will be satisfied." He would write later in "A Cautionary Note on the Ghostly Tale" (the prologue to *Watchers at the Strait Gate*) that his stories are really "experiments in the moral imagination." They contain "retributive ghosts, malign magicians, blind angels, beneficent phantoms, conjuring witches, demonic possession, creatures of the twilight, divided selves," and hence "may impart some arcane truths about good and evil."

Frightening stuff, good and evil. And oh so very real.