

Virtue in Two Ghostly Tales of Russell Kirk

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by Jeffrey Dennis Pearce*

My first encounter with Russell Kirk's writings was in the late 1980s, when I was an undergraduate student at Biola University in California. My roommate had a brand-new horror anthology, and he let me borrow it. I didn't read the whole anthology, but I did see a story in it by Russell Kirk, "There's a Long, Long Trail A-Winding," with a short biography that identified Kirk as a conservative thinker. I don't recall if I read the story then, but I tucked Kirk's name into the back of my mind, and a few years later, while reading the Christian journal *Touchstone*, it popped up again. I read the articles that Kirk wrote for *Touchstone*, and as the years went on, grew more interested in understanding my conservative identity. Kirk showed the way for me, and clarified and ordered for me a whole way of seeing the world that I had always felt intuitively. About 12 years ago, I began to buy Kirk's books, and was impressed by the intelligence, warmth, and passion of his words. I had heard great things about the ghost stories, but once I read them, I knew that they were masterpieces of literature.

If I have any regrets about my past as a reader, the main one is that I found Kirk's stories early in my ghost story reading career, and am thus relegated for the rest of my life to read ghost stories that will never live up to Kirk's. Kirk's stories are creepy, morbid, dark, beautiful, and marvelous. When I think of his stories, I think of the ghostly tales of the Old Testament: King Saul and the Witch of Endor, the Prophet Elisha and the Reanimated Corpse, the Prophet Ezekiel's Valley of the Dry Bones. I also think of some key stories from the New Testament—little girls and young men coming back from the dead; the holy dead raised after the earthquake on Good Friday; Saint Lazarus coming out of the tomb. I also think of Christ coming to the Apostles on the water, and the

* Jeffrey Dennis Pearce is a history teacher and a writer. He is the creator and editor of [Ghostly Kirk](#), a web page dedicated to the ghostly fiction of Russell Kirk, and the president of [The Russell Kirk Society of Stanwood and Camano Island](#). Pearce lives among his ancestors, contemporaries, and descendants in Washington State.

Apostles being convinced that He was a ghost. Jesus set them straight, and while he corrected them about many mistaken ideas that they had in the three years that they spent with Him, He never once corrected them about their belief in ghosts.

Russell Kirk, in his landmark essay “The Moral Imagination,” writes, “What then is the end, object, or purpose of humane letters? Why, the expression of the moral imagination; or, to put this truth in a more familiar phrase, the end of great books is ethical—to teach us what it means to be genuinely human.” Kirk clarifies, though: “Now I do not mean that the great writer incessantly utters homilies. With Ben Jonson, he may ‘scourge the naked follies of the time,’ but he does not often murmur, ‘Be good, sweet maid, and let who will be clever.’ Rather, the man of letters teaches the norms of our existence through allegory, analogy, and holding up the mirror to nature. The writer may, like William Faulkner, write much more of what is evil than of what is good; and yet, exhibiting the depravity of human nature, he establishes in his reader’s mind the awareness that there exist enduring standards from which we fall away; and that fallen human nature is an ugly sight.” So, when Kirk writes that his ghostly tales are “experiments in the moral imagination,” it is clear that he means his tales to follow in this great tradition of humane letters (*Ancestral Shadows* 402). It is also important to remember, though, that Kirk enjoyed a good ghost story for the sake of the telling:

“Why did I write these sepulchral fantasies? Why, partly to remind you and myself that we are spirits in prison; and mainly in the hope of discomforting an old man on a winter’s night, or a girl in the bloom of her youth” (*Princess of All Lands* viii).

As Vigen Guroian and Andrew Lytle have both helpfully pointed out in essays about Kirk’s yarns, and as Kirk himself wrote, his stories are predicated upon theological premises. Kirk believed “... that the more orthodox is a writer’s theology, the more convincing, as symbols and allegories, his uncanny tales will be” (*Surly Sullen Bell* 239).

As Guroian sums up for us so nicely, “Kirk embraces a Christian vision of life and death, fall and redemption...he experiments imaginatively with possibilities of how we are eternally judged, what the nature of the ‘otherworldly’ journey is, and what heaven and hell are like ... to help us see how our earthly lives might be

improved and how we can more effectively care for our souls and the souls of others” (Guroian ix).

Writing about Kirk’s short story, “An Encounter by Mortstone Pond,” Guroian offers one sentence that is true of all of Kirk’s ghost stories: “God from eternity pronounces words of grace that possess redemptive power through revelatory ‘timeless moments’ in our lives” (Guroian xvii). Thus, you see my predicament. Kirk took the most excellent literary form of examining the human soul and its trials and joys, the ghostly tale, plunged it into the waters of Holy Baptism, and then wrote the best ghost stories of his age, or any age. What am I to read now?

David Whalen, provost of Hillsdale College, says that literature is an experience of mystery. Thus, any analysis of literature must be done with great care, so as to heighten the enjoyment of the mystery. I will try to do justice to the majesty of the stories I discuss today, but I encourage you to experience the mystery of these stories by reading (or re-reading) them attentively yourselves, preferably next to a roaring fire on a dark and stormy night while sampling a glass of port, brandy or Madeira.

J. R. R. Tolkien, in his essay “On Fairy-Stories,” writes exquisitely about how we are sub-creators. Since we are made by a Maker, we share His nature, which is to make:

“Though all the crannies of the world we filled
with Elves and Goblins, though we dared to build
Gods and their houses out of dark and light,
and sowed the seed of dragons— ’twas our right
(used or misused). That right has not decayed:
we make still by the law in which we’re made” (Tolkien 74).

Kirk, in his ghostly tales, does good service as a sub-creator, making some of the most memorable and important characters in Anglo-American letters. Some are disreputable rogues on the road to damnation, a road built and paved by themselves. Others are innocents, or nearly, in need of divine protection, which they readily receive. Still others are working out their own salvation with fear and trembling, hoping to be saved so as by fire. Some are dead, some are living, but all are alive. Kirk’s characters are no less real because they are imaginary. Fictional men and women emerging from a moral imagination are often more real than flesh-and-blood men and women who do not possess such imaginations themselves.

While Kirk's revenants haunt the living on both sides of the Atlantic, from the moors of Scotland to the hinterlands of Michigan, today I must, for the sake of time, discuss only some of his ghosts. So, I have selected two stories out of his nearly two-dozen to talk about today.

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In the tale "Sorworth Place," former soldier Captain Ralph Bain is living the rootless life of a drifter, carefully minding his disability pension. While staying at an inn in a small Scots town impoverished more by modern changes than by monetary depression, he spies the lovely Ann Lurlin, the young widow of the local morally-degenerate laird, and holder of his ancient house, Sorworth Place.

Bain is not a bad man, but, after suffering a combat injury, is in thrall to ennui, and alternates between boredom and frustration. Contriving to meet Mrs. Lurlin by expressing an interest in seeing the old house, Bain soon learns there is more to the beautiful woman's life than he ever imagined. Cash poor, with all of her husband's land sold, she clings unwillingly to the house because she has nowhere else to go. Soon Bain learns her dark secret. Let's allow Kirk to tell the tale for a bit as the pair, clearly drawn to each other, wander around the grounds of Sorworth Place. Note Kirk's gift for crafting a spooky setting. I have read this story several times, and it never ceases to scare me:

"They poked around the overgrown walks of the policies, talking of trifles, and presently strayed near the chapel ruin. 'May I glance inside?' asked Bain.

'There's very little...' she answered, somewhat sharply. But Bain already had passed through the broken doorway. Some defaced sixteenth and seventeenth century monuments were fixed to the walls, and a litter of leaves encumbered the pavement. Where his feet scattered these, Bain noticed two or three ancient bronze rings fixed in stone slabs; and, being rather vain of his strength of arm, he bent, gripped one of them, and pulled upward. The stone slid very slightly, though it was rather heavy, and when Bain let go the ring, the slab settled back with a dull reverberation.

'O, for God's sake, stop!'

He swung round to her. That delicate pallor of her young face had gone gray; she clutched at the door moulding for support. Bain took her hands in his, to save her from falling, and led her toward the house. 'What is it, Mrs. Lurlin?' He felt mingled alarm and pleasure thus to have a bond between them—even the terror in her eyes.

‘You shouldn’t have done that! He’s under, just under!’

Of course! In his wool-gathering, Bain had nearly forgotten this girl ever had a husband. He muttered something awkward, in his contrition: ‘I thought...with the leaves about, and everything so neglected, you know...I thought no one would have been laid there this century.’

She was calmer now, and they re-entered the house through the kitchen door. ‘I know. They shouldn’t have put anyone there, after all this time. His uncle and his grandfather are in the kirkyard in the village, and his two cousins. But he had himself buried in the old crypt; he wrote it into his will. Do you understand why? Because he knew I’d loathe it. I think tea will be ready, Captain Bain’” (*Ancestral Shadows* 184-185).

Over tea, Ann asks Bain to return to visit her the next day to keep her company. He is surprised at the invitation, but she quickly explains:

“‘Don’t you understand? I thought you’d guessed.’ She came a trifle closer to Bain; and she said, in her low sweet voice, ‘I’m afraid of my husband.’

Bain stared at her. ‘Your husband? I understood—I thought that he’s dead.’

‘Quite,’ said Ann Lurlin.

Somewhere in that Minoan maze of a house, a board or a table creaked; the wind rattled a sash; and this little room at the stairfoot was musty. ‘You know, don’t you?’ Mrs. Lurlin whispered. ‘You know something’s near’” (*Ancestral Shadows* 185).

Something is, indeed, near. Mrs. Lurlin clearly has a problem; and so, Bain, who has begun to love her, visits her every day, and as they walk and talk and take tea together, they soon develop a close and platonic relationship, though it is clear that Bain hopes for more.

Kirk, being an ardent student of classical and Christian literature, and a Stoic and a Catholic, was very familiar with the Seven Virtues. “Sorworth Place” most particularly addresses the virtue of fortitude, which is also one of the Seven Gifts of the Holy Spirit referred to in Isaiah 11:2, though the King James uses the synonym “might.” To modern, or, dare we say, postmodern ears, this word, “fortitude,” sounds odd, and most people do not use it anymore. “Courage” is a more common word that expresses the same idea. In *Mere Christianity*, C. S. Lewis gives a most helpful definition of fortitude:

“...Fortitude includes both kinds of courage—the kind that faces danger as well as the kind that ‘sticks it’ under pain. ‘Guts’ is perhaps the nearest

modern English. You will notice, of course, that you cannot practise any of the other virtues very long without bringing this one into play” (76).

The Catechism of the Catholic Church elaborates on the practice of this virtue:

“The virtue of fortitude enables one to conquer fear, even fear of death, and to face trials and persecutions. It disposes one even to renounce and sacrifice his life in defense of a just cause” (Paragraph 1808).

Ann Lurlin shares with Ralph Bain two key facts that would drive a man who lacked fortitude away: first, that her husband promised to return on the first anniversary of his death, a date fast approaching, and, second, that she does not love him, though she should; Bain cannot hope for a future with her, because her husband has ruined her for any future romantic relationships.

Still, Bain agrees to keep watch for her on the night of her revenant husband’s return, though he thinks it’s all in her head. “...whatever makes you do this for me?” asks Ann.

“‘Bravado,’ Bain said, ‘and boredom, mixed’” (*Ancestral Shadows* 190). Bain makes light of the importance of the help he is offering Ann, but soon discovers the thing he’s protecting her from isn’t just in her mind.

“He saw it plain, so there could be no possibility of illusion...It was a face at the slit of a window, damn it: a sickening face, the nose snubbed against the glass like a little boy’s at the sweetshop. The eyelids of this face were drawn down; but while Bain watched, they slowly opened, as if drawn upward by a power beyond themselves, and the face turned awkwardly upon its neck, surveying the cellar” (*Ancestral Shadows* 192).

To tell much more of the story would be to spoil it for you, but this is the point in the tale, where, if Bain was in for bravado and boredom, he would get out. It’s time to remember Lewis’s words again:

“... Fortitude includes both kinds of courage—the kind that faces danger as well as the kind that ‘sticks it’ under pain” (76).

Bain has shown his willingness to stick it—to help Ann in what he assumes is a psychological delusion—despite the pain of her rejection, but now that he realizes her dead husband is back, he decides to stay and face the danger. Ultimately, his fortitude leads him to “an impulse beyond duty, beyond courage, beyond even the love of woman” (*Ancestral Shadows* 194). Because he embraces fortitude, and denies himself, he goes beyond duty, courage, and

even romantic love to the sacrificial love of Christ. Though Bain's father was a parson, we have no indication of his own Christian beliefs, but we do see his Christian actions in the face of the ultimate unearthly terror for the sake of another soul. Bain's story continues in another stellar tale, "Saviourgate," which pairs beautifully with "Sorworth Place," and offers more intimations into Kirk's imaginative ideas about the Christian afterlife.

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"Ex Tenebris" is the Kirk story that I am most familiar with, since I own the Trinity Forum recording of it made by David Schock, and I have listened to it many times. For those, who, like me, aren't fluent in Latin, "Ex Tenebris" means "Out of the Darkness." Mrs. Oliver, the widow of a military officer who has spent most of her life in India, has returned to Low Wentford, the English village of her birth, and finds it much changed, and mostly abandoned. The local planning officer, S.G.W. Barner, a self-important progressive bureaucrat, is working on a way to get Mrs. Oliver out of her cottage and into a government retirement home in the nearby town of Gorst, "where there was no lack of communal facilities, including six cinemas," so that he can level the village. Mrs. Oliver's only friends are the local lord and lady, Sir Gerald and Lady Alice Ogham, and her cat, Bentinck (*Ancestral Shadows* 5).

She longs for the vicar to visit her, to keep her company. Kirk writes:

"He must have more than one parish, surely, and have been too busy to call upon her as yet. For the church was locked always. She had tried the door a number of times, especially on Sundays, but it never yielded. She supposed the vicar must come late Sunday evening, after she had gone to bed; indeed, she thought—though she could not be sure—that she had seen lights, like little candles, moving within the church, once or twice when she had risen in the middle of the night to shut a window against the rain. Doubtless he would call eventually, this poor harried vicar, and she would give him tea and her own scones" (*Ancestral Shadows* 8).

What Mrs. Oliver does not understand in her old age is that the local church has been abandoned, the last vicar long-dead. While she is sweeping the graves on the north side of the church one day, however, a vicar does appear:

"Mrs. Oliver turned sharp round, thinking that perhaps Mr. Barner had come again. But it was someone else: a parson, a tall man with a long, long

face, hatched lines crossing on forehead and cheeks...Drops of moisture ran from his long black hair down the furrows in his sad face, so he must have walked a great way in the rain” (*Ancestral Shadows* 9).

This man is the Reverend Abner Hargreaves, who had been a vicar at Low Wentford during Sir Gerald’s childhood, and who, unknown to Mrs. Oliver, had died many years before in an apparent suicide by drowning, after having been suspected of murdering the village atheist in what we imagine must have been a terrible confrontation. Yet even Hargreaves finds mercy in Kirk’s fine Christian tale. Instead of being relegated to Hell, he is sent back to be a companion for Mrs. Oliver in her old age, and thus, we realize, he is working out his salvation with fear and trembling in a purgatorial state. We read with dark amusement of Hargreaves taking tea with Mrs. Oliver: “He would eat nothing, yet he drank her tea with a prodigious thirst, and he seemed to need it, for his voice was fearfully dry and harsh, and to judge by his eyes, he suffered from malaria” (*Ancestral Shadows* 11-12).

The garrulous Mrs. Oliver finally has a regular companion, and it is not long before she relates to the vicar how Mr. Barner, the planning officer, will not leave her alone. In life, Hargreaves was known for being “remarkably harsh, fond of nothing but the cursing psalms and Jeremiah” (*Ancestral Shadows* 10). Now he quotes to her from Deuteronomy and the Psalms before rising to go confront the planning officer on her behalf: “Cursed is he that perverteth the judgment of the stranger, the fatherless and widow...All thine enemies shall feel thy hand; thy right hand shall find them out that hate thee...Thou shalt make them like a fiery oven in the time of thy wrath; the Lord shall destroy them in his displeasure ...” (*Ancestral Shadows* 12)

It seems that Hargreave’s penance is not merely to befriend Mrs. Oliver, but to get justice for her. Here we are reminded of Christ’s parable of the unjust judge in St. Luke’s Gospel, Chapter 18. There a widow gets justice from a judge not because he is good, but because she persists in beseeching him. Mrs. Oliver’s constant thoughts about Barner’s treatment of her, and her desire for a vicar to call, have reached her Heavenly Father: “And shall not God avenge his own elect, which cry day and night unto him, though he bear long with them? I tell you that he will avenge them speedily” says St. Luke, as he concludes the parable (*King James Version*, Saint Luke 18:7-8). Unlike the judge, God helps Mrs. Oliver

because of His mercy, not because Mrs. Oliver annoys Him. He is a just judge. Hargreaves, who in life was a most unmerciful man, and an unjust judge himself, must learn mercy after death, and must learn to put it before justice.

Mercy, one of the fruits of the virtue of charity, and a virtue in its own right, has, according to Dr. Robert Stackpole's explanation of Saint Thomas Aquinas' ideas, two aspects, "affective mercy," or the sorrow we feel for another in his condition, and "effective mercy," the actions we take to relieve the person of his condition. Hargreaves is in a bind, having been a most unmerciful parson in life, guilty of severe justice against his congregation, and particularly against the local atheist who he murdered.

Saint Isaac the Syrian, that most radical of Church Fathers, rejects justice entirely as alien to the character of God. He writes: "Do not speak of God as 'just', for his justice is not in evidence in his actions towards you...Where then is this 'justice' in God, seeing that, although we were sinners, Christ died for us"? (57) This is also suggested to us when Saint Paul writes to the Romans that the justice of God is revealed in the Gospel (*Douay-Rheims Bible*, Romans 1:16-17). While some may disagree with Saint Isaac, since justice is considered one of the Seven Virtues, at the very least, mercy must precede the getting of justice. This is a scriptural principle, perhaps most vividly demonstrated through the two comings of Christ our Lord: the first to offer mercy to all mankind, the second to bring the Father's justice to the unmerciful, as we read in Saint Matthew's account of the Last Judgement, where people are judged based solely on how they showed, or did not show, mercy to others. Hargreaves believed himself to be virtuous in his condemnations of evil and unbelief, but, as St. John Chrysostom teaches, "Even if we stand at the very summit of virtue, it is by mercy that we shall be saved" (Aquilina 183).

Thus, it is only through God's mercy that Hargreaves has a chance; he has been unable to live out mercy on his own, and has always practiced harsh justice. As God's obedient agent, however, he is able both to feel sorrow for Mrs. Oliver's abuse at the hands of Barner, and to seek to rectify it. He cannot find salvation apart from God's help, for his self-righteous justice has led him to murder. So, another confrontation ensues, one in which Hargreaves, to obtain God's mercy, must offer God's mercy,

before dispensing God's justice. Hargreaves must show restraint in this confrontation with Barner in order to find God's mercy, since he did not show it in his confrontation with the atheist he murdered.

As with "Sorworth Place," I will leave the rest of "Ex Tenebris" a mystery for you to discover, but rest assured that in Kirk's denouement, Reverend Hargreaves learns to put mercy before justice.

In both of these tales, Kirk has done many things, but perhaps most importantly, he has, through the use of ordinary ghostly fiction, given us insights into the character of God Himself. In "Sorworth Place," Ralph Bain appropriates the power of Christ's sacrifice through his practice of fortitude, giving his heretofore meaningless life the ultimate meaning, as Christ Himself expresses in Saint John's gospel: "Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends" (*King James Version*, Saint John 15:13). In "Ex Tenebris," Abner Hargreaves, a murderer and a suicide, and, in life, an unmerciful man, experiences God's mercy by being given the chance to extend it to another, and thus make amends for a life of putting justice before mercy, which is necessary for his salvation. As Saint James writes in his epistle: "For judgment is without mercy to the one who has shown no mercy. Mercy triumphs over judgment" (*New King James Version*, Saint James 2:13).

Dr. Samuel Johnson writes in his "Preface to Shakespeare" that "it is always a writer's duty to make the world better..." (253) Russell Kirk, in his ghostly parables, makes the world better by invigorating our own lives with tales that deal with eternal truths, yet without being preachy. Thus, he succeeds in his "experiments in the moral imagination." He understands, with David Whalen, that literature is an experience of mystery. "Experience" is the key word here. We can easily pass over the mystery without experiencing it as we read any stories, but with Kirk's tales, this is not advisable. Kirk's fables help us see, while still in our mortal shapes, that we must take the time to amend our lives, so that, after we have gone to the other side, we can hope, not fear, the Day when our mortal bodies will put on immortality, and death shall be swallowed up in victory.

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