

The Wizard of Mecosta

Russell Kirk, Gothic Fiction, and the Moral Imagination

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Series in Literary Studies



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For Li and Annette,
the Chinese and conservative beauties, respectively.

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ad majorem Dei gloriam

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Introduction

The Wizard of Mecosta: Russell Kirk, Gothic Fiction, and the Moral Imagination offers an extended analysis of the fiction of Russell Amos Kirk, a central figure in modern American conservatism who is, indeed, sometimes referred to as “the father” of the same.¹ He is best remembered today for 1953’s *The Conservative Mind*, a study of social and political thought from the time of Edmund Burke to the early twentieth century, which served as a “catalyst” for American conservatives of all persuasions and helped “to precipitate a new political identity in America.”² Kirk’s thesis in that work is that “conservatives have adhered to [certain] principles or sentiments with some consistency, for two centuries,” dating back to Burke’s *Reflections on the Revolution in France*; that, in other words, and whatever their disagreements on specific policies or beliefs, all modern conservatives are the spiritual descendants of Burke.³ Along with William F. Buckley, Jr., founder of *National Review*, Kirk played a pivotal role in the nascent rise of the conservative movement during the 1950s and 60s: Buckley himself insisted that neither the magazine nor the movement would have existed without Kirk.⁴ In thousands of newspaper columns, scholarly articles, and well-researched books, Kirk promoted conservative principles while attempting to preserve what T. S. Eliot referred to as the “permanent things”: the core values and beliefs of Western civilization.

But why another book about Kirk, and why now? The decades since his death have seen the release of several excellent studies of Kirk’s life and thoughts. In 1999, just five years after Kirk’s passing, James E. Person published *Russell Kirk: A Critical Biography of a Conservative Mind*. His intentions in this slim volume were, he admits, relatively modest: “I have tried to craft a critical primer, an introduction to Kirk’s thought that will serve the intelligent, interested reader ... and at the same time provide a starting point or springboard for scholars who will in time depart from this study to write more in-depth works on

¹ Matthew Continetti, “The Forgotten Father of American Conservatism,” *The Atlantic*, 19 October 2020, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2018/10/russell-kirk-father-american-conservatism/573433/>.

² Mark C. Henrie, “Conservative Minds Revisited,” *Modern Age* 45, no. 4 (2003): 291, *OmniFile Full Text Mega* (H. W. Wilson).

³ Russell Kirk, *The Conservative Mind: From Burke to Eliot* (1953; repr., New York: Regnery, 2016), 9.

⁴ Gerald Russello, *The Postmodern Imagination of Russell Kirk* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2007), 2.

[Kirk].”⁵ The first of these more “in-depth works” appeared about a decade later: Gerald Russello’s *The Postmodern Imagination of Russell Kirk*. Kirk’s “affinity” for “postmodern themes,” Russello argues, anticipates the rise of a strain of “conservative postmodernism” in the present, which may offer a possible solution to the fractured state into which American conservatism began to dissolve even in its early days.⁶ More recently, Bradley J. Birzer’s *Russell Kirk: American Conservative* considers the “life, mind, and, at least by my hope and desire, Platonic soul of Russell Kirk as a lens through which to view the world of the mid-twentieth century.”⁷ Birzer benefitted from having unprecedented access to Kirk’s unpublished manuscripts, including letters and diary entries.

A variety of non-academic sources has also promoted Kirk’s legacy. The most important of these is the Russell Kirk Center for Cultural Renewal, which is based at his ancestral home in Mecosta, MI, and recently celebrated its twenty-fifth anniversary. Headed by Kirk’s wise and vigorous widow, Annette, the center pursues Kirk’s life work of “linking together generations past and present in an educational journey to discover and nourish the roots of America’s political, economic, and religious order.”⁸ In 2018, a collection of Kirk’s letters, edited by Person, was published with favorable reviews. As Luigi Bradizzi writes, the collection “fills a gap in our knowledge of Kirk ... There are no surprises in these letters that would contradict the very strong impression communicated in his other works that he was a man of civility, decency, great intellectual seriousness, and deep cultural conservatism.”⁹ In honor of the centenary of Kirk’s birth in 2019, the State of Michigan installed a commemorative plaque outside his house in Mecosta. As proof of Kirk’s enduring appeal in the twenty-first century, *The Imaginative Conservative* has been active for the past decade. “We address culture, liberal learning, politics, political economy, literature, the arts, and the American Republic in the tradition of Russell Kirk, T.S. Eliot, Edmund Burke, Irving Babbitt ... and other leaders of Imaginative Conservatism.”¹⁰ The website, co-founded by Birzer and named after a favorite phrase of Kirk’s, promotes his thinking to an online readership that spans the globe.

⁵ James E. Person, “Preface” to *Russell Kirk: A Critical Biography of a Conservative Mind* (1999; repr., Lanham, MA: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), x.

⁶ Russello, *Postmodern Imagination*, 12-26.

⁷ Bradley J. Birzer, *Russell Kirk: American Conservative* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2015), 10-11.

⁸ “About Us,” *The Russell Kirk Center*, accessed 5 May 2023, <https://kirkcenter.org/about-us/>.

⁹ Luigi Bradizza, Review of *Imaginative Conservative: The Letters of Russell Kirk*, *Independent Review* 23, no. 4 (2019): 637, *Academic Search Premier*.

¹⁰ “About Us,” *The Imaginative Conservative*, accessed 23 May 2023, <https://theimaginativeconservative.org/about-us>.

But Kirk was more than a social and political thinker. He was also a prolific author of fiction, whose short stories and novels encompass several different genres, ranging from Gothic romance to political satire. He had a special knack for horror, which mirrored his lifelong fascination with the supernatural. “Kirk’s ghostly achievements form their own creative legacy,” James Panero writes appreciatively, “one not necessarily advantaged by Kirk’s more prominent political association as a founding father of the American conservative movement. Yet they were all of a piece.”¹¹ Person, Russello, and Birzer all devote sizable sections or even multiple chapters to explications of Kirk’s stories and novels. *The Imaginative Conservative*, likewise, regularly publishes perceptive articles exploring the nuances of Kirk’s fiction. To my knowledge, however, no one has yet undertaken a full-length study of the *entirety* of Kirk’s fiction, which spans twenty-two short stories and three full-length novels written over nearly thirty years. This is surprising because Kirk was no more of a historian and social critic who happened to dabble in fiction than T. S. Eliot was an essayist who also wrote poetry. Whatever modesty he feigns in his memoirs,¹² it is apparent that Kirk regarded literature as a potent force for conveying conservative ideas and attempted to effectuate his views through the stories and novels he wrote. As Vigen Guroian observes: “It is in his fiction that Kirk puts to the test his principles.”¹³

By focusing exclusively on his fiction, this monograph is intended to fill a prominent gap in the field of Russell Kirk’s studies. That this gap exists is evident from recent protests, such as one in the *Catholic Herald*, that “Kirk’s talent as a writer of fiction is effectively unknown in the literary world and treated as mere addenda to his philosophizing within the circle of Kirk enthusiasts.”¹⁴ As the title of James Barasel’s article holds, Kirk’s fiction has been “unjustly ignored” by critics—a belief shared even by many of those who have written extensively about the subject.¹⁵ In the same manner that Kirk attempted to bring attention to neglected thinkers such as Albert Jay Nock or Peter Viereck, I hope that, by promoting a greater appreciation for Kirk’s fiction,

¹¹ James Panero, “Introduction” to Russell Kirk, *Old House of Fear* (New York: Criterion Books, 2019), ix.

¹² Russell Kirk, *The Sword of Imagination: Memoirs of a Half-Century of Literary Conflict* (1995; repr., Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), 250-51. Kirk explains that he wrote his first novel “mostly for his own entertainment” or “amusement.”

¹³ Vigen Guroian, introduction to *Ancestral Shadows: An Anthology of Ghostly Tales*, by Russell Kirk (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004), vii.

¹⁴ James Barasel, “Russell Kirk’s fiction is unjustly ignored,” *The Catholic Herald*, 8 August 2019, <https://catholicherald.co.uk/russell-kirks-fiction-is-unjustly-ignored/>.

¹⁵ E.g., Person, *Critical Biography*, 150: Kirk’s Manfred Arcane is “one of the most memorable, though critically neglected, heroes in modern literature.”

this book can help return him to public prominence. Kirk used the phrase “moral imagination” to describe what he regarded as the most distinguishing feature of great literature, that it be ethical or even didactic. The moral imagination seeks to promote an understanding of the ancient and inherited principles held by those living within a certain community and direct the reader towards an appreciation of the permanent things that are shared by all men and women, past, present, and future. “The aim of great books is ethical,” he explains, “to teach what it means to be a man.”¹⁶ In a general sense, this monograph will explore traces of the moral imagination in the stories and novels that Kirk himself wrote. Each chapter, however, will focus on a different aspect of his fiction, as discussed below.

Since this is primarily an extended work of literary criticism, it may be helpful to describe the hermeneutics I will employ in my analysis of Kirk’s fiction. As Gregory Castle asserts, there has been much hand-wringing in recent decades about the alleged “death” of literary criticism or theory (for the sake of simplicity, I use these terms interchangeably); scholars today seem less interested in theory than in “meta-theory,” or the “institutions and sociopolitical conditions that produce theoretical ideas and discourse.”¹⁷ Vincent B. Leitch, conversely, believes the young twenty-first century to be a time of “literary renaissance,” albeit one that assumes a “characteristically postmodern form” marked by extensive “disorganization” and “disaggregation,” with dozens of viable approaches to interpreting fiction.¹⁸ Neither of these approaches seems particularly suited to an analysis of Kirk’s writing since he was vocal in disclaiming any adherence to specific worldviews or ideologies,¹⁹ and his stories and novels are obscure enough to warrant the use of more traditional methods. In fact, and perhaps unsurprisingly given the subject, I shall employ in this book a variation of one of the more traditional forms of literary theory known as “New Humanism,” which was developed in the early twentieth century by two individuals who strongly influenced Kirk’s approach to criticism: Irving Babbitt and Paul Elmer More.²⁰

¹⁶ Russell Kirk, *Enemies of the Permanent Things: Observations of Abnormity in Literature and Politics* (1984; repr., Peru, IL: Sherwood Sugden & Company, 1988), 16.

¹⁷ Gregory Castle, *The Literary Theory Handbook* (Hoboken, New Jersey: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 47.

¹⁸ Vincent B. Leitch, *Literary Criticism in the 21st Century: Theory Renaissance* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014), vi.

¹⁹ Kirk, *The Conservative Mind*, xv. “The book distinctly does not supply its readers with a ‘conservative ideology,’” he writes, “for the conservative abhors all forms of ideology.” See also “The Drug of Ideology,” reprinted in Kirk, *The Essential Russell Kirk*, 348-64.

²⁰ Person, *Critical Biography*, 152.

Like Philip Sidney, Samuel Johnson, and Matthew Arnold before them, Babbitt and More sought a means by which to reconcile the latest developments in art with the history of English letters and its place in the whole Western tradition dating back to the ancient Greeks. Arnold, the late Victorian poet and critic, had feared that “the decline of religion would leave an increasingly divided society with no common system of beliefs, values, and images, with potentially disastrous consequences.”²¹ This danger was also acutely felt by Babbitt and More, who attempted to develop “a universally applicable code for humanity based on traditional philosophical teachings of the East and the West.”²² Although their concern for religion, ethics, and traditional values would be viewed with scorn by many academics today, the kind of moral criticism they pioneered had numerous adherents throughout the twentieth century and beyond, including M. H. Abrams, T. S. Eliot, Wayne Booth, and Kirk himself. Indeed, Kirk may have borrowed the term from Burke, but his emphasis on the moral imagination probably owes more to Babbitt and More in the long run. In this book, an expanded form of my dissertation, I am purposefully eschewing the political, destabilizing hermeneutics utilized in many contemporary schools of criticism (i.e., those inspired by structuralism, deconstruction, and their various derivations) in favor of a more unitive and moral approach, based upon the ideals of the New Humanists.

Outline

Chapter 1 is divided into two parts: the first offers a biography of Kirk, and the second a bibliography of his fiction. Both are, by necessity, cursory; my intention in describing key events from the author's life is to provide the reader with sufficient detail for being able to place the ensuing discussion of his work in the proper context. This is especially important, I believe, because so many of Kirk's stories have a basis in reality: “Though inconsistently,” as Birzer explains, “Kirk uses his own experiences or those of those close to him for backgrounds and characters.”²³ A basic understanding of the author's life is necessary for making sense of a story like “There's a Long, Long Trail A-Winding,” which features thinly-veiled characterizations of members of the Kirk household and family. Likewise, in my overview of Kirk's fiction, I do not intend to describe the plots of all of his stories and novels but focus on those that are representative of his development as a writer or that reflect important

²¹ Peter Barry, *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory* (Manchester, England: Manchester University Press, 2009), 25.

²² Li Tonglu, “New Humanism,” *Modern Language Quarterly* 69, no. 1 (March 2008): 62, doi: 10.1215/00267929-2007-025.

²³ Birzer, *American Conservative*, 295.

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