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DELIVERING US FROM EVIL:
AN INTRODUCTION TO RUSSELL KIRK'S
SUPERNATURAL FICTION

A Thesis

Presented to the

Department of English

and the

Faculty of the Graduate College

University of Nebraska

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

University of Nebraska at Omaha

by

Ray Andrew Newman

May 1998

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THESIS ACCEPTANCE

Acceptance for the faculty of the Graduate College, University of Nebraska, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree Master of Arts University of Nebraska at Omaha

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DELIVERING US FROM EVIL:

AN INTRODUCTION TO RUSSELL KIRK'S SUPERNATURAL FICTION

Ray Andrew Newman, MA

University of Nebraska, 1998

Advisor: Professor Thomas P. Walsh

Russell Kirk, one of the founding fathers of the post-war conservative movement in the United States, is widely known for his works of history, politics, and literary and social criticism. He also wrote ghostly tales and novels, and this part of his work has been neglected. With his supernatural tales, Kirk sought reawaken a sense of mystery, to remind his fellow wayfarers in this world of timeless truths, and to have some eerie fun. This thesis provides an introduction to Kirk's supernatural fiction.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter

1. INTROIT 1

2. VISIONS OF HELL 6

3. INVERSIONS AND PERVERSIONS 19

4. COINCIDENCES AND OTHER CHANCES WHILE CONTENDING AGAINST EVIL 28

5. MERCY AND JUSTICE 41

6. LENTEN PILGRIMAGES AND EASTER DESTINATIONS . . 49

7. PLANTING TREES 60

WORKS CITED 64

CHAPTER 1

INTROIT

For Russell Kirk, ghost stories were not mere exercises in gore or terror without purpose. A gulag-and-gas-chamber-infested twentieth century provides demonic fright enough. With scary stories, he sought to reawaken a sense of a greater reality, of a world that touches the physical, in an age smothered by materialism and the decay of traditional religion--and to partake in a bit of eerie fun as well. As for ghosts, Kirk thought them very real and claimed ghostly folk lived right alongside his family at Piety Hill, his ancestral home in Mecosta, Michigan. "Have I ever seen a ghost?" he asked. "Why, I _am_ one, and so are you--a _geist_, a spirit, in a mortal envelope" (Prologue to "Princess" viii). The traditional religious imagery--demons, heaven, purgatory--that animates his work is neither window dressing nor a useful convention around which to stretch a yarn. "I venture to suggest that the more orthodox is a writer's theology," he maintained, "the more convincing, as symbols and allegories, his uncanny tales will be." The modern tale that "isolates itself from this authority drifts aimlessly down Styx" ("Cautionary Note," _Sullen Bell_ 238-239). The terror seems more real, after all, if damnation and

salvation are real possibilities, if angels and demons inhabit God's universe, not solely man's imagination.

Kirk is most widely known, not for his ghostly tales, but as one of the founding fathers of the post-war conservative movement in the United States. In 1953, Kirk, then a young professor of history at Michigan State, published The Conservative Mind, a study of Anglo-American traditionalist thought, which (along with such seminal works as F.A. Hayek's The Road to Serfdom and Wittaker Chambers's Witness) revitalized America's conservatives. Kirk set out to acquaint them with their patrimony: a rich, varied tradition stretching from T.S. Eliot to Edmund Burke and even further to medieval and classical Europe. But Kirk was no one-book author. Productive to the very end--man, he liked to say by way of Irving Babbitt, either discovers his happiness in work or not at all--Kirk took his vocation as an independent man of letters seriously. He authored some thirty books, including Eliot and His Age, The American Cause, Roots of the American Order, America's British Culture, and Enemies of the Permanent Things: Observations of Abnormity in Literature and Politics as well as seemingly countless articles, essays, and reviews; wrote "To the Point," a syndicated column for more than a decade; and contributed a column on educational matters, "From the Academy," to National Review for a quarter of a century. And yes, he also wrote ghost stories. Over the decades, his

tales appeared on both sides of the Atlantic in such periodicals and anthologies as _Fantasy and Science Fiction_, _London Mystery Magazine_, _Queen's Quarterly_, _Whispers_, _World Review_, _Frights_, and _Dark Forces_. The stories were collected in three editions--_The Surly Sullen Bell: Ten Stories and Sketches, Uncanny or Uncomfortable, With a Note on the Ghostly Tale_ (1962); _The Princess of All Lands_ (1979); and _Watchers at the Strait Gate_ (1984). His novels include the gothic but not supernatural _Old House of Fear_ (1961); a political thriller, _A Creature of the Twilight_ (1966); and his only supernatural book-length fiction, _Lord of the Hollow Dark_ (1980).

Why did Kirk, historian, philosopher, and literary critic, put pen to paper for these tales of the fantastic? The answer has already been touched upon, but there remains more to be said. As a man of letters with no tenured university position behind him, his stories no doubt brought in some extra dollars. In the same year _The Conservative Mind_ saw print, Kirk left his teaching job after coming to odds with the administration over the decline of academic standards. Another reason? A lover of old and odd places and true narrations of ghostly phenomena, he must have enjoyed the work. Finally and most importantly, after the fashion of C.S. Lewis, George MacDonald, and Charles Williams, he hoped to enrich what Burke called the "moral imagination" by demonstrating neglected but timeless truths,

and that far from a dreary determinism ruling the day, a beautiful, even at times awesome mystery shrouds man's existence. The stories, Kirk himself wrote, "may impart some arcane truths about good and evil; as Chesterton put it, all life is an allegory, and we can understand it only in parable" ("Cautionary Note," Watchers xiii).

Though scholar, literary combatant, and fiction writer, Kirk took time to open the doors of his haunted house for scholars, graduate students, and serious undergraduates. Professor Russell Hittenger remembers his first trip to Piety Hill for a conference on whether virtue can be taught. After hours of discussion, he said, everyone "retired to the living room on the final evening, whereupon Russell told ghost stories. I returned more than once to these annual affairs in Mecosta, and I can assure you that the ghosts always had the final word" (Hittenger 7). Here, too, the final word shall go to the ghosties, ghoulies, long-legged beasties, and things that go bump in the night; and to the good Lord, to whom the Scots asked for deliverance from such unholy terrors. What follows, then, is an excursion into a neglected part of Kirk's body of work. What follows, however, is not an exercise in mere source scrounging. Nor is this an exhaustive or definitive treatment of Kirk's fiction. What follows is a journey, the first significant foray, into Kirk's supernatural fiction. Wayfarers shall find that Eliot's Sweeney missed the mark. Life is more than

"birth, and copulation, and death" (Eliot 119). In Kirk's supernatural tales, the larger expanses of life open: love, courage, timeless moments that will survive the grave, purgation, the reality of evil, hell, damnation, and even glimpses of heaven.

CHAPTER 2

VISIONS OF HELL

Hell seems a fitting place to start. Dante's journeys begin there. For Milton, paradise is lost before it is regained. Christ himself descended there, as the Apostles' Creed has it, before rising. Yet hell, for denizens of the twentieth century, seems somewhat embarrassing, too medieval, too much of the stuff of sweaty tent revivals. Or too serious. What if Christianity is not all about Jesus meek and mild? Timid souls need not fear that a young Stephen Dedalus will hear of the eternal horrors of hell from the Jesuits. The doctrine of hell, for as much as it's heard from the pulpit in Roman circles, seems to have been pitched on the ash heap along with high altars, purgatorial societies, Latin, and Gregorian chant. Still, a doctrine's truth has very little to do with its favor or popularity. "Few doctrines of Christianity," Father Martin d'Arcy noted in Death and Life (1942), "have so much textual evidence as Hell to support them . . ." (127). If the faithful are to escape the snares of the Evil One, they must know a little about the ways of the powers and dominations. Kirk's short fiction may prove instructive. The words of an old prayer seem particularly appropriate here: "Remember, Christian Soul, / That thou has this day, and / every day of thy life,

/ . . . . Hell to avoid / Heaven to gain" (St. Augustine's Prayer Book 1). Unsuspecting souls of Kirk's tales, finding themselves privy to preternatural glimpses, must fight to do just that: avoid hell.

In "The Surly Sullen Bell," the title of which is taken from one of Shakespeare's sonnets, readers meet a sinner who, at first glance, doesn't seem too much of a sinner. Frank Loring is a traveling salesman for a publishing company and a bachelor who, with Eliot's Alfred J. Prufrock, has "seen the moment of my greatness flicker" (6). He too never had the courage "[t]o have bitten off the matter with a smile, / To have squeezed the universe into a ball / To roll it towards some overwhelming question" (6-7). What is Loring's overwhelming question? Back in his college days, he never fought for the hand of a young woman, Nancy Birrell, and so she ended up the bride of a self-assured fraternity president. Such is life, one may be tempted to say, but there is more. "You never truly fought for me," Nancy reminds him after they meet again, some ten years removed from college ("Bell" 88). Granted, Loring doesn't seem as pathetic a creature as Prufrock, but in Kirk's story, he is in his thirties: the slow but steady terror of growing older ("I grow old . . I grow old") may not have surfaced yet the way it has for Prufrock (7). Admittedly, at least as far as the reader can tell, Loring isn't so worried about what others think--or maybe he is, and that is why he

couldn't harness his will. "Our every decision, lifelong, is irrevocable for good or evil, Eliot was to say often in his later years," Kirk wrote in Eliot and His Age. "But Prufrock can hold to no decision for so much as a minute . . . he lacks the strength 'to force the moment to its crisis.' He is a Hollow Man" (58). So, it would seem, is Frank Loring.

Loring's job brings him to a city he would just as soon avoid, St. Louis, the home of Nancy and her husband. Not only painful memories, but the ugliness of the city makes him want to stay away from St. Louis: "a progressive town, in which the air stank from the breweries and the government stank from other fermentation" and urban renewers run amok ("Bell" 78). In St. Louis, while selling books, he happens across Nancy's husband, Godfrey Schumacher, now a professor of Spanish. Schumacher says Nancy would like him to stop by the house.

Schumacher has changed. The past fraternity president is now a frustrated man, Nancy tells Loring on his second trip to the house, while Schumacher is out of the room. He thought he would go far in life, but he is only a professor of Spanish. In fact, he cannot manage to become a dean, a feat, she reminds Loring, which is hardly impressive these days. Schumacher "stopped trying in everyday life, Frank--'in this plane,' he'd say--and he's seeing what will can do. He never loved anyone but himself, and now he detests the

whole world because people won't permit him to own them" (96). Like Satan, he cannot accept his position in the scheme or hierarchy of things. Schumacher believes he can be a master on the spiritual plane, the world of dreams, where will is all powerful. Dreams, he contends, are manifestations of a person's will, and he warns, "You ought to exercise what will is in you, Frank, for you never can tell when it may have to put up a fight" (90).

As a husband, Schumacher refuses to accept the authority and responsibility that God and tradition have granted him. Instead of sacrificing himself for his wife in imitation of Christ, as St. Paul instructs that a husband must do, he wants to sacrifice his wife to the insatiable demands of his ego. On the surface, he appears caring, much like the anti-Christ who Scripture and tradition has it will talk of peace, love, and harmony, all the while enslaving people. With his wife ill (from the small doses of poison he puts in her nightly cups of coffee, mind you), he reads to her and cooks for her. But in reality, Nancy says, he "wants to possess me, absorb me, lose me in himself" (96). In effect, a type or an icon of Satan, he wants her soul. Bending his intellect in an unnatural and evil fashion, he studies, among other occult tracts, Satan's Wonderful World Unveiled and decorates the room in which his sickly wife spends most of her days with paintings of hell, four on each of the four walls, prints by Breughel, Bosch, Teniers, and

Botticelli. Like the demons pictured, ignoring the sovereignty of God, he wants to rule. He invites Loring because he desires to know--to own--everything about his wife's life, and Loring is a part of her past. Nancy tells Loring that her will is too strong to be possessed, but she knows her mortal envelope is weaker than her will and asks him to look out for her young son in the future.

Nancy may be strong enough, but is Loring? Soon this Prufrock will be tested on the spiritual plane. Prufrock, Kirk observed, failed to make the great, even painful leap to love and the possibility of a meaningful life; and "[f]or love to endure, there must exist a community of souls. But Prufrock has rejected his part in the moral conversation of mankind; his song is a monologue of mankind; he ends in an infernal isolation" (Eliot 58-59). Will Loring? His life too has become a monologue.

Walking back to his hotel from the Schumachers', Loring makes his way through the Old Town, that part of St. Louis which after the urban renewers got done with it amounts to a collection of dilapidated and abandoned buildings, a "bulldozed wilderness that once was a historic community" ("Bell" 78). The wasteland of Old Town makes a fitting material backdrop for the spiritual battle between Schumacher and Loring. A face appears before Loring: Schumacher's. Loring scrambles into an alley through the snow drifts. He thinks he is safe and then through a window

in a house wall he again sees Schumacher's face. Schumacher has ambushed Loring on the shadowy plane. No longer is Loring aware of the world around him. Instead "visions of torment unceasing, ecstasies of revulsion, went round and round and round. And out of the chinks and corners of these arabesques peered the eyes of Schumacher" (101). Loring tries to hide in the blackness, away from the menacing eyes, but there are other eyes--Nancy's. He can hear her voice, "You never really fought, you never really fought." He wants to hide in the blackness, to allow himself to be consumed. But "something held him" (101). And to his mind comes a picture of Nancy on her couch, saying, "My little boy . . . " (101). Then "some wild struggle of will, or wills, was fought out then, lasting only seconds, perhaps, but seeming aeons. And abruptly Frank Loring sat up in the snow" (101). The face of Schumacher is still in the broken window, and Loring "wailed shrilly." The face "seemed to dissolve into its constituent atoms, and Loring was looking into an empty ruin" (02).

Loring makes his way to the police station, falling into the arms of a sergeant, to report that he has been poisoned. He lives, perhaps for the first time, because he dared to love. For once, Loring fought and he managed to save himself from one of Satan's own and hell; but he couldn't save Nancy from death. He avoided hell because he finally blew hot or cold, no longer only lukewarm. Now he

must care for Nancy's son--Schumacher, he learns, has shot himself--and always be reminded of his past sins of omission. Sin is not always in the action, but in the inaction.

Kirks shows another vision of that infernal place souls must avoid in "The Peculiar Demesne of Archvicar Gerontion." The story features a regular of Kirk's fiction: Manfred Arcane, adventurer, soldier, raconteur, and minister without portfolio to the sultan of the African state of Hamnegri. In this tale, Tom Whiston, an official with an American oil company, is in Hamnegri to talk business with the sultan and Arcane. He is invited to Arcane's residence to celebrate Christmas Eve with the diplomat-soldier's family, household, and close associates. The evening's festivities--starting with an old English custom, snapdragon, in which the guests attempt to consume flaming raisins that have been set ablaze in a tray of brandy--come as a surprise to the Texan. Afterwards they retire to a small white-washed room, with no decoration but "one of those terrible agonized Spanish Christ-figures, hung high upon a wall" ("Gerontion" 78). There, Arcane commences to tell a Christmas ghost story, another venerable English tradition, one, incidentally, beloved by another master teller of uncanny tales, M.R. James. But Arcane's--or Kirk's, for that matter--contain more theological import than the Cambridge don's.

Arcane's Christmas story features no ghosts but rather a frightening glimpse of hell and a heretical cleric, Archvicar Gerontion of the Church of the Divine Mystery. (This story leads directly into the novel, The Lord of the Hollow Dark, in which Manfred Arcane goes to Scotland, impersonating the now-dead Archvicar Gerontion, to discover what his cohorts are up to, and which shall be the focus of the next chapter.) Gerontion, the reader learns, turned up in Hamnegri as a pharmacist, but dabbling in drugs far removed from the average chemist's trade, he was arrested for the death of five beggars. They served as test cases for a powerful, hallucinatory drug he concocted called kalanzi. After looking into the case, Arcane became fascinated--he discovered that Gerontion had several aliases and a long criminal record that included charges of necromancy--so he took the matter under his jurisdiction and brought the old man, who had been physically bent but not psychologically in Hamnegri's jails, to his house. Gerontion wouldn't tell his jailers anything about his foreign connections, and Arcane thought that his own methods, far less brutal and more civilized, might work with such a fellow.

Man is a fallen creature, and Arcane's sin would have to be the pride that he could handle himself in such close proximity to one who worshiped the darkness. For, as Arcane discovered, the self-styled parson may have used his

religious affiliations as a means to separate little old ladies from their money, but he had theological convictions, if not powers. A follower of a "debauched Manichaeism," he bent the knee before the enemies of the light ("Gerontion" 85). "I was an unworthy servant of the light, and he was a worthy servant of the darkness," Arcane tells his guests (85)

On his fortnight stay with Arcane, the disciple of the darkness, now bound to a wheelchair from his interrogations at the hands of Hamnegri's authorities, spent many an evening conversing with Arcane over fine cognac and raisins. Gerontion told him, "You have entertained me well in this demesne of yours, and when opportunity offers I hope to be privileged to entertain Your Excellency in my demesne" (91). Arcane wondered what he could mean, but took it as nothing but irony. Gerontion requested a brandy, Arcane complied, and they returned to their conversation, sipping brandy and eating raisins. The talk turned to death, and Gerontion said he didn't fear the ghosts of the five beggars he had killed. They, he told Arcane, "are gone to my demesne. Having done with a thing, I dispose of it--even of Your Excellency." "Welcome to my demesne . . . I shall take your body," he whispered (91). The Archvicar, Arcane learned too late, had poisoned the raisins with <u>kalanzi</u>.

When Arcane came to, he found himself in a town that appeared to have been thoroughly sacked and upon which the sun had long since set: "Was this ruined town a 'real place' I cannot tell you. I am certain that I was not then experiencing a dream or vision, as we ordinarily employ those words" (96-97). Arcane realized he was being hunted by "an immense corpse-candle" (97). It was Gerontion: he wanted to possess Arcane's body, since his own body was feeble and now crippled, and leave the soul behind in this broken wasteland of a hell. Hunted, Arcane knew he must find somewhere to hide. He ran into the side chapel of a derelict, broken down church: "Over its battered altar, an icon of Christ the King still was fixed, though lance thrusts had mutilated the face." Arcane "clambered upon the altar and clasped the picture" (99). The corpse candle followed him, but then, as Arcane hung to the icon of Christus Rex, the candle extinguished and the icon and Arcane fell to the ground. At Arcane's residence, the servants wondered where he had gone to and later found him, unconscious, having grasped the Spanish crucifix and pulled it down upon himself.

After telling the story and before the guests file out of the room, Arcane, pausing from the revelry of the evening, genuflects before the crucifix. His wife earlier had said only such a man as Arcane could have had the

strength to have made it back from the Archvicar's City of Dis. Arcane knows better; sin brought him too close to the flame. Grace and his willingness to cooperate with grace saved him from being consumed. In the wasteland hell seemed triumphant. The city lay in ruin. Even the church was in a state of disarray, but the gates of hell had not prevailed, for over the altar still hung the icon of Christ the King. Though besmirched and mutilated by human hands, the icon testified to God's everlasting sovereignty. By clinging to Christ and His Church, Arcane saved his soul and body, for Christianity is concerned with both, from hell. He was found at home with the crucified Christ, for Christ is only the Victor because he is the Victim. Without Good Friday, there is no Easter.

Loring and Arcane, in their respective stories, come face-to-face with hell or at least a vision of hell and are able to escape. But what is hell? One night over dinner with Kirk and his wife Annette, Father d'Arcy speculated on the nature of hell as an inversion of heaven. Just as heaven may sparkle with the timeless moments of the saved, so too hell may have its own ever-present moments. The Jesuit theologian thought that, in hell, the damned's every vile act is present with him forever (Sword 368).

That may be the case in "Balgrummo's Hell." Balgrummo's Lodging became nothing short of a hell for its tenth and

final lord, Alexander Fillan Inchburn. This tale serves as a prelude to Lord of the Hollow Dark and, with the second edition, was even used as the prologue to the novel. The story takes place near the end of Lord Balgrummo's life. Some fifty years ago, he became embroiled in the occult and a diabolical ritual, performed in the house's chapel, turned unpleasant, not to mention bloody. Readers are not told the gruesome details in this story, but they do discover that Balgrummo avoids the scaffold by agreeing to be confined to his house for the rest of his life. Outwardly, Balgrummo seems distant, but his solicitor says,

> The Trouble is his lordship's obsessive reality. . . . Balgrummo is not merely remembering the events of what you and I call 1913, or even 'reliving' those events. No, I suspect it's this: he's embedded in those events, like a beetle in amber. For Balgrummo, one certain night in Balgrummo Lodging continues forever ("Balgrummo's" 176).

It has become his hell, and the solicitor will not spend too much time alone with Balgrummo, lest, he fears, he will be "drawn into Balgrummo's head" or Balgrummo's hell (177).

Rafe Horgan, an accomplished thief, however, has no such qualms, and he is able to elicit information about valuable paintings in the house from the solicitor and an equally cautious heir. Making sure the elderly Balgrummo is fast asleep in his chamber, Horgan pockets the keys to the chapel

and makes his way there, for the chapel houses the most valuable paintings. There, at the site of the Trouble, Horgan realizes he is not alone:

> Tall, arrogant, implacable, mindless, it drifted toward him. The face was Balgrummo's, or what Balgrummo's must have been fifty years before, but possessed: eager, eager, eager; all appetite, passion, yearning after the abyss. In one hand glittered a long knife (180).

The thief's sins are real, but he stumbled upon a much more malicious evil and in its own self-created lair, a vile but timeless moment. Horgan could not say he was warned about the dangers; similarly, over the centuries, the Church has warned people about the dangers and reality of hell. At times, the warnings have fallen on deaf ears, and yet hell can be avoided. Frank Loring showed the courage to love and to fight, while Manfred Arcane clung to the Lord in his time of danger. Both escaped the clutches of hell, but here in Balgrummo's Lodging, an evil discovered a greater evil in its own hell and paid the price for it. The wages of sin, after all, are death.

CHAPTER 3

INVERSIONS AND PERVERSIONS

Evil often appears as a perverse inversion of good. Christian scripture and tradition serve notice to the faithful that men of lies, anti-Christs, will come to steal from the Shepherd's flock. They may sound much like the Christ, all the while deceiving believers into forsaking their faith and pledging allegiance to a new Lord. Not only does evil cleverly lie but, revealing its true banners, it mocks truths as in a black mass or when the fallen angels in Milton's _Paradise Lost_ have before them a new Trinity: Satan, his daughter and mate Sin, and their offspring Death. In Kirk's supernatural novel, _Lord of the Hollow Dark_, Satan may not show himself but the archfiend makes his presence felt in an old Scottish country house. At Balgrummo's Lodging, a young woman must sort through the lies before she finds herself and her child the prime attractions in a blasphemous ritual. She has allies, if she accepts their aid--including that adventurer-diplomat-raconteur of Kirk's tales, Manfred Arcane, disguised as a clergyman--but they too must contend against a preternatural force, Dr. Apollinax.

Though undoubtedly evil, Apollinax is not the beast of Revelations. Yet if he is not the Anti-Christ, he is of the

anti-Christ, a reflection perhaps of the Beast, just as men and women may become in their life and actions reflections of Christ, the Virgin Mary, and the saints. In fact, Apollinax, as the novel suggests, may have delved so far into devilish knowledge that he has come under the possession or influence of an evil spirit, and this spirit can only act in the physical realm through Apollinax, thus explaining why Apollinax takes great caution in keeping himself out of harm's way.

A reflection of Revelations also seems to play itself out in Lord of the Hollow Dark. Satan the dragon, in the last book of the Bible, pursues a young woman so as to derail the promised return of Christ: "And the dragon stood before the woman who was ready to give birth, to devour her Child as soon as it was born" (Rev. 12.4) The woman and child flee into the wilderness. In anti-Christ fashion, Apollinax deceives a young woman, luring her into his trap, and attempts to have her and her baby sacrificed.

Alone in the world, the woman, Marina, thinks she has nowhere to turn. Her father is dead, and her sister left for New Zealand shortly after getting married. Marina had been a nun for a year, but in the earthquake that shook religious vocations after Vatican II, her order fell part. Thinking she had no vocation, Marina tried to find some happiness and contentment in what Malcolm Muggeridge called this century's false substitute for religious experience, sex. She and a

man who seemed nice "coupled as beasts couple, glorifying in her defiance, hoping that Harry loved her as much as she loved him . . . " (Dark 56). He seemed nice, but with only one thing on his mind, he procreated and ran. His consideration amounted to suggesting that she could have the growing blob of flesh removed at the local clinic. Later, he tried to hurt her by giving her name to a reporter: she made a good target for the gutter press because her father was a well-known general. Hardly a slut reveling in her sins, Marina knows she made a mistake but loves dearly the fruits of the mistake--and that love will repay her a hundred times fold. For what makes her suspicious of Apollinax while they are at Balgrummo's Lodging is that he refuses to bless her child: "he glanced at Michael critically, as if he were judging a piglet" (156).

Marina has no family, husband, or Church to ease the loneliness, and Apollinax steps in offering hope. He offers a chance at attaining a Timeless Moment. All problems, shame, and guilt of this world will be washed away when the "mind, in ecstasy, stands apart from the body; the spirit is liberated from the flesh" (60). To the former nun, his talk seems almost Christian at times and she "guessed all along that religious truth must lie behind" Apollinax's discussion (62). But Apollinax, though (the reader later learns) a former Roman Catholic priest who strayed far from Peter's fold, is no mystic seeking the holiness of God. In line with

the anti-Christ, Apollinax cloaks his true intentions in language that will appeal. To describe the Timeless Moments, he makes use of spiritual insights that the Church supposedly put down long ago and stamps them with the approval of "the methods of modern scientific investigation" (60). The twentieth century, if anything, is a century of science--the phrase "according to science" having replaced "the Bible says." Apollinax, like Satan, knows how to lie to impress.

Apollinax invites her to an old Scottish country house, Balgrummo's Lodging, for rites on Ash Wednesday that will induce a Timeless Moment. Kirk did not simply pick a place on the map. His gothic thriller, Old House of Fear, takes place in Scotland as do a number of his stories. While working on his doctorate at St. Andrew's during breaks and leaves of absence from his teaching duties at Michigan State, Kirk tramped about the Scottish countryside, poking into old ruins, churches, cottages, and country homes. After completing his doctorate and before getting married, Kirk would return so often to the land of Sir Walter Scott that Flannery O'Connor once remarked to a friend, "When anybody wants to get hold of Russell he is always in Scotland" (Quoted in Sword 195).

At her apartment, Apollinax tells Marina that "an extraordinary object or action to contemplate, so that the functions or the senses may be suspended" is necessary. What

he doesn't tell her is that she and her baby are that extraordinary object. And the action? Putting mother and child to death, just as Satan wishes to do in Revelations.

That name--Dr. Apollinax--might seem vaguely familiar; it comes to the novel by way of T. S. Eliot's poetry as do the names for all the characters, good and bad. Yet too much should not be made of this fact. The characters in Lord of the Hollow Dark often share some similarities with Eliot's, but they have not been transported from one genre to another. The characters, as the novel, are Kirk's own. The reason Dr. Apollinax has re-christened everyone with fitting names from Eliot's poetry stems from what he plans at Balgrummo's Lodging. The poet, Apollinax instructs his gathered faithful, "knew of Timeless Moments; some vision had been vouchsafed to him" (Dark 129).

Apollinax's reading of Eliot hits the mark, for time the devourer lurks behind much of his poetry. Lacking any courage, spiritual or otherwise, Alfred J. Prufrock shrinks before the march of time, thinking "there will be time, there will be time" and still more "time yet for hundred indecision, / and for a hundred visions and revisions" (Eliot 4). Yet he knows that while he worries so much about making a decision or possibly a fool of himself, he cannot transcend time; he, as Kirk wrote, "is granted a peep at the timeless; but being infirm of will, he creeps back into the prison of Time" (Eliot 58). Time is what he is most

conscious of, its slipping away day by day, hour by hour, and now he fears growing old, trying to comfort himself with self-pity: "Shall I part my hair behind? Do I dare eat a peach?" (Eliot 7).

Though Prufrock fails, time can be conquered. Time and the timeless, seemingly so distant, so much of two different worlds, sometimes intersect and something may be saved from the jaws of mortal time. In "Burnt Norton," Eliot shows the way:

> But only in time can the moment in the rose-garden,
> The moment in the arbour where the rain beat,
> The moment in the draughty church at smokefall
> Be remembered; involved with past and future.
> Only through time can time be conquered. (178)

Those moments--in the rose-garden, the rain falling in the arbour, the drafty church--will survive this world and not in memory only. Such moments could not have occurred if they were not part of time, but they escape time's shackles because they were exceptionally beautiful . . . poignant . . . lovely . . . other worldly. Mankind's words, though tied to the Word, shadowy reflections perhaps of the Word, are not the Word, and so they fail us here, just as Dante could not describe paradise as it is because words cannot do it justice. Kirk himself remembered such Timeless Moments with family and friends and thanked God for them, believing with Eliot that he would carry them past the grave.

Death cannot kill Timeless Moments. So said Jesuit theologian Martin d'Arcy, whom Kirk admired and whose works he suggested to his future bride during their courtship. In heaven the faithful shall worship before the very throne of God Himself, venerate Christ's Blessed Mother, and enjoy the blessed company of all the saints and martyrs, as the Church has taught through the centuries; but, in Father d'Arcy's words,

> God, who has done what is so much greater, turned sin and death into a triumph and restored the dead to life, will not withhold what is less, namely, to restore the experiences which made us what we are and bound friends to us by affection and vow. Nor will those experiences be just memories . . . (177).

Being timeless, they will live just as the blessed live in Christ. How people live their lives, then, is of great importance. Life truly is a rehearsal and those scenes, for good and bad, shall have the longest, continuous run on record.

In Lord of the Hollow Dark, however, Apollinax is not interested in such Timeless Moments. He says Eliot's "Timeless Moments would have been cribbed, cabined, confined, spoilt by foolish old prejudices from the childhood of the race . . . old saws of the Church, notions which modern science explodes" (129). A herald of his anti-

Gospel, Apollinax preaches that the Timeless Moment shall not be one of "withdrawal, stagnation, inaction" but of "passionate intensity, all feeling, all action" (129).

In the here and the hereafter, Apollinax and his disciples adhere to one code: everything is permitted. If it feels good, do it; if it moves, by all means fondle it. "Our Lord," Apollinax reminds his disciples, "is not the lord of prohibitions and shackles. We are to be liberated . . . from guilt, from shame, from memory, from expectation" (129). All impulses are good, Apollinax insists, and only through the stifling of them does man get into trouble. To buttress his theological utterances, he invokes the blessing of modernity. Science, he says, shows that "universal happiness may be secured through the removal of repression and inhibition" (126).

To what Lord, in a liturgy that combines extreme Gnostic and Mithraic rites, will they offer their homage? The Lord of This World, says Apollinax, "not the unjust Demiurge" (126). That Lord's world is one of spirit, "for the flesh is corruption, all flesh being grass" (362).

With the Timeless Moment, Apollinax says, "we shall acknowledge desire honestly, embrace it, and so be free. We shall invert Eliot, as we shall invert much else" (129). Apollinax orders a fast and a period of denial before Ash Wednesday--the inversion of what Christians traditionally have done on the days leading up to Lent. The food set

before the disciples is as bad as it tastes, and the only drink allowed is a non-alcoholic aperitif spiked with the doses of *kalanzi*, a sometimes lethal drug. Having fasted, they will feast in their Ash Wednesday orgy of blood, sex, and death.

CHAPTER 4

COINCIDENCES AND OTHER CHANCES WHILE CONTENDING AGAINST EVIL

Balgrummo's Lodging is a fitting place in Lord of the Hollow Dark for the ceremony of innocence, Apollinax believes, because of its history. The Lodging demonstrates the connection between the living and the dead that stretches across the centuries. A labyrinth of caves, created by nature, improved and expanded over the years by man, and sealed off in the sixteenth century, runs under the Lodging. Into those caves ancient Picts are said to have crawled to worship their gods. When the Romans came to Scotland, it is thought that they erected altars to Mithra in the caverns. As Christianity flowered in Scotland, old pagan gods withered on the vine and Celtic Christians converted the caverns into a holy cave. Legend has that a miracle worker, St. Nectan, saw visions of hell and purgatory in the cave. That order of builders and fighters, the Templars, were next to come to the caves. Rumors spread about the order there, perhaps to smear its name, that they worshiped a head in the subterranean passages, hoping to distill secrets of the future. But in reality, the head was the remains of Saint Nectan to be venerated, not worshiped as some prophetic demon idol. When the order was dispersed,

the caverns and the land surrounding came into the hands of a small band of contemplative monks, the Weem Fathers. For medieval Christians, the labyrinth under ground became symbolic of the soul's struggle to cast off sin and come to rest eternally in the embrace of God; the maze came to be known as Saint Nectan's Weem or Nectan's Purgatory.

Apollinax is even more interested in what legend says occurred after, in a whirlwind of broken stained glass and decapitated statues, the Reformation came to Scotland. The Third Laird of Balgrummo's Lodging, his ancestors having built onto the remains of the priory, took an interest in things spiritual and the Earl of Morton believed (or so he said) them to be devilish. In those formerly papist pits, a fact bad enough in the days of John Knox, legend and rumor have it that the Third Laird and his Bohemian wife (or succubus, as some said) performed diabolical rites. To stamp out the warlock lord and his followers, the Earl of Morton sacked the Lodging. The Third Laird, his wife and his men were trapped when they ignited explosives to prevent Morton's entry. Attempting to disassociate his family name with devilry, the Fourth Laird instructed his masons to further seal, even conceal, the entry to the Weem. Other stories indicate that the Third Laird and his wife were trying to set up a safe place not for a coven but so that mass could be said secretly and that Roman priests would have a place to hide from the eyes of the Scottish Kirk.

Apollinax, not knowing that the later version contains the truth, thinks that there "still broods over this particular spot the lingering power of those earlier communions; of conceivable centers for our ceremony, none seemed more propitious than this . . ." (130). Apollinax is right that the house has an unsavory past. More than a half century ago, the last lord of the Lodging became embroiled in the occult, searching not for Satan but secret knowledge. A married couple, the Hittes, corrupted him, leading Balgrummo farther and farther down an evil road. That road ended or began in Lord Balgrummo's chapel on Ash Wednesday 1913: during a ritual that the Hittes said would help Balgrummo discover a way into the Weem beneath his house, he (at least his illegitimate son believes) must have realized how low he had sunk into evil when they unveiled an almost pornographic cartoon rendition of a mother and a child being crucified on separate crosses. Grabbing the ceremonial axe from atop the altar, he dispatched the couple who had corrupted him to their fate in the next world. In a way, judgment was done. The corrupters were dead, and Balgrummo, who had failed to heed the Scripture's warning to test the spirits and not dabble in dark arts, was greatly humbled, if not damned. His doctors declared him insane and the authorities agreed that he could live out the rest of his days at the Lodging as long as he did not leave the property. As part of a discussion of "Balgrummo's Hell," Alec Balgrummo's story--

that is, how the Lodging became his own hell and Ash Wednesday 1913 his own ever-present Timeless Moment--has been touched on in an earlier chapter

Ash Wednesday nears again, and Apollinax hopes to try again to master time as those who corrupted Balgrummo promised. Apollinax tells his disciples: "There shall be raised up among us an essence which circumstance has bound to this spot; and that essence, that revenant, shall be compelled to minister to us" (130). To accomplish this task, Apollinax has hired a clergyman in the Church of the Divine Mystery, Archvicar Gerontion, who is the last person remaining who had any contact, and his was as little more than as a hanger on, with Balgrummo's Ash Wednesday liturgy of 1913. No pious cleric, Gerontion's lengthy rap sheet includes, among other crimes, being charged in India with necromancy. An accomplished chemist, Gerontion concocted a powerful but sometimes lethal drug called kalanzi, whose properties include making a person seem invincible, that proved useful in furthering his and Apollinax's quest into the occult. One problem or blessing: Gerontion isn't alive anymore and the Gerontion at the Lodging is Manfred Arcane in disguise. Attentive readers will note that, as discussed in an earlier chapter, Gerontion dies in "The Peculiar Demesne of Archvicar Gerontion" where he meets, in the African state of Hamnegri, and falls under the jurisdiction of Manfred Arcane. While prying information out of Gerontion

about his confederates, Arcane learned that a man by the name of Apollinax planned, with the help of Gerontion and his kalanzi, to pursue a Timeless Moment at Balgrummo's Lodging in Scotland.

Throughout the first half of the novel, Manfred Arcane and his party, consisting of his wife, foster son, and the woman who manages his house back in Africa, all suitably disguised, attempt to befriend Marina without revealing their true identities. Arcane isn't sure what Apollinax plans. Is he little more than a harmless charlatan peddling New Age nonsense for real money? Arcane doesn't want to take any chances. His curiosity is further piqued when he learns where the Ash Wednesday ceremony will take place. When Arcane is sure that Marina will not give away his secrets, he tells her his true identity and that he is in fact the illegitimate son of the last lord of Balgrummo's Lodging. "I might not have come here for this adventurous foolery, if I hadn't been told--fancy my astonishment--that the Timeless Moment was to occur at Balgrummo Lodging, of all possible places in this world," Arcane says (166).

One more character needs to step on stage to take a bow: Ralph Bain, whom we shall meet in Chapter 6. Apollinax's ceremony is all planned and the gates secured, but Bain stumbles down the den behind the house. The fall would have maimed, if not killed, most men, but Bain gets up and goes to work helping Sweeney in finding a way into the

Weem. Of Sweeney, more shall be said presently; but from the very beginning, then, something seems odd about Bain, who has a connection to the gathering: he was wounded in the war while serving under Marina's father, the General. Even the ardent materialist Sweeney wonders if there isn't something ghostly about Bain, renamed Coriolan for the proceedings at the Lodging. Since Bain appears again in these pages, he shall be refered to by his non-Eliot name. Arcane remembers reading something about Bain somewhere, about him dying under unusual circumstances. But, he thinks, that cannot be right.

Kirk, however, was right: this is his most complex work. One almost needs a graph to keep track of all the characters, several of whom have appeared in Kirk's short stories, and their histories and interactions. In fact, the reader might wonder if this isn't all too contrived. Aren't there too many coincidences? But that is the point. As Arcane says, "What a twisted skein of circumstance! Is there any such thing as coincidence? I doubt it; we're moved about like pins drawn by concealed magnets, I suspect." As Arcane himself knows--having seen the dark, chaotic side of human nature as a soldier and diplomat--those pins if they so set their minds can pull away from the magnet. Or they, if obtuse, might not even notice the magnet. By way of comparison, think of a man walking along. The grass at his feet hides a valuable coin. Will he see it? He may or may

not. If he is alert, he stands a better chance. Or he might see it and, thinking it a bottle cap or a mere penny, might not bother stooping down to pick it up. The same is true with an event or chain of events that we label coincidences. In those events, there is great opportunity for good or to prevent an evil. Ever alert, Arcane saw the coin hiding in the grass and set to pick it up. He doesn't fight with grace; he cooperates with it.

In the novel, Arcane--the name itself reminds one of something old or timeless--acts as an agent of God: not a saint, mind you, but an unworthy servant who will try to do God's bidding. He seems to follow St. Augustine's dictum that Christians should pray as though everything counted on God and work as though everything counted on themselves. Before Arcane and his party are led to the ceremony, he counsels them: "In what little time remains to us before we are summoned, we can pray" (314).

God, he believes, has moved him into this position to do some good, and he humbly, in his own flamboyant way, accepts the mission. Through prayer, intellect, and if necessary brute strength, he will save the young mother and child.

Another soul besides Marina will prosper from coincidence. From the beginning, Arcane has his eye on Sweeney. For starters, Arcane needs an ally if things turn ugly. Something, he thinks, might be made of Sweeney,

unlike Apollinax's disciples. Those vessels of dishonor have put themselves beyond redemption. To name a few, there is Dr. Channing Cheetah and his wife, who, from the comfortable spot of tenure, celebrate Marxist revolutionaries and the bloodier the better; Mr. Hakagawa, who owns abortion mills from Tokyo to Buenos Aires; Mrs. Equitone, who provided as sacrifice (the reader gathers) her child as well her money to Apollinax; Mr. Eugenides, who turns a healthy profit on women who turn something else; Madame Tornquist, a poisoner; and Mr. Bleistein, who apparently has driven companies into the ground and their assets into his pockets. Apollinax's acolytes match the disciples in loathsomeness but not success as they are little more than drug-laden dregs with guns. They cook and serve the ghastly meals and guard the one entrance and exit to Balgrummo's Lodging, thus ensuring that no one decides to make an untimely exit before the Timeless Moment.

Sweeney, however, is different. Like Gerontion, he was hired by Apollinax for his services. In the past, he procured the drug _kalanzi_, in Africa, for Apollinax, and in Hamnegri Sweeney met Gerontion. His training in architecture and engineering, though not exceedingly thorough, will prove useful in finding a way into the caves beneath Balgrummo's Lodging. Sweeney's sins are not slight. For him, there is nothing beyond this material world and his pleasures all provide some momentary release from physical

existence--sex, whiskey, and pot. Violent and ugly, his sins even include rape. Sweeney's sins are physical. He has a great deal of anger, aggression, and nowhere to channel them except into evil pursuits. He is in need of discipline to forge some sense of order in his truncated soul. Arcane, who commands his country's Interracial Peace Volunteers and put down a Marxist revolution, a feat detailed in A Creature of the Twilight, knows something about discipline. The qualities Arcane sees in Sweeney begin to emerge throughout the novel. After awhile, he appreciates Bain who helps him in the Weem, and he is not blind to evil. At first, he thought his employer nothing more than a run-of-the-guru swindler, but now "the Master had grown stranger and grander at every successive encounter" in the past two years: Apollinax's "total domination of those disciples, some of whom once had possessed minds and wills of their own; the Master's absolute enslaving of those acolytes . . ." (177).

In a soul's pilgrimage, there come times of momentous importance where the soul must choose one way or another, and Sweeney's first step to salvation comes in an odd fashion. Under the influence of kalanzi, Sweeney tries to force himself on Marina. Knife at the ready, Arcane's wife comes to the aid of Marina, who has since fled. She slashes his eyebrows. With blood pouring into his eyes, he thinks he has been blinded. Smashing him over the head, Arcane finishes him. This is Sweeney's baptism: the only kind such

an aggressive, passionate, and violent soul can understand. "You have not chosen me," Arcane says, beginning his sermon before his bloodied and bashed congregation of one, "but I have chosen you. I have turned potter, and mean to make a tolerable pot of you. In the end, how shall we find a shelf for this new pot? Would you be a soldier-pot? A monk-pot? Or first one, then the other? Your aggressions must be channeled, your longings directed, <u>eros</u> into <u>agape</u>. Why, I may even cure your cowardice, my Sweeney. Lie still now, or I will have Phelbas [Arcane's foster son] thump you; and listen well, for the life you save may be your very own" (201). Herewith begins the lesson of who Arcane is and what is going on in the house.

God has not deserted his servant, for Arcane has some help in addition to Sweeney: Ralph Bain. In the scuffle at the Ceremony of Innocence, Sweeney gets captured, unbeknownst to Arcane's party which has fled deeper into the Purgatory, hoping to find the other way out. Bain goes back to save him. Apollinax thinks him a "dead thing" that heard his summons. Partially true, but Bain tells him he was "sent to block" him (60). "Why I've died more than once already, I think, whatever death is, and that's my punishment, and that's my reward. Now clear out, for you're not to have this man" (60). The disciples, naked except for their animal masks, fall upon him, but he puts up a brave fight: "striking heavy blows with knife and fist and foot,

falling, rising again, shouting, tramping on some, tossing one in the air . . " (353). Finally Bain, bloodied, falls to the ground, but as Sweeney sees from safety, "the shape there was shimmering, translucent, smokelike. Then it vanished altogether. No corpse lay upon the floor" (353). Bain may be a shade from purgatory. Previously, while they are working on opening the Weem, he tells Sweeney, "Since most of us aren't saints, our alternative to Purgatory is hell." The souls in the purgatory and hell are as different as the sheep and the goats. Those in purgatory, as Father Martin d'Arcy noted, "are safe in that supernatural order which means certain happiness. Their suffering is only a purgation and a penance, and they are sustained by the joy that all danger is over and that no one evil can touch them" (143). Bain knows that no matter how evil Apollinax may be or how many drug-addled disciples spill his blood, his soul is beyond harm. He is in God's embrace, growing with every hero's death to the Beatific vision of heaven. Or, as Arcane suggests, Bain already might be experiencing the wonders of heaven while awaiting the Last Judgment.

What of old Alec Balgrummo? How fares his immortal soul? Balgrummo's Lodging became his own hell, as described in "Balgrummo's Hell," and Ash Wednesday 1913 his over-arching reality. In Lord of the Holllow Dark, he appears in a dream to Arcane, telling his son where he stashed the ceremonial axe and important papers he made as he explored

the Weem under the Lodging while imprisoned in his own house. These papers will later help Arcane and company escape. Balgrummo's imprisonment was not ill spent as he tried to find the exit to the labyrinth. Like a medieval pilgrim, he wound his way through the dangerous corridors, where one could get easily lost or drown in the underground river that races through the Purgatory, having to deal with what had collapsed over the years and when the Weem had been sealed. He hoped to find daylight. He could have found the secret exit from the outside on the ground of the estate. That would have been easier and faster, but Arcane says Balgrummo wasn't interested in what was easy or fast. Thoughts of spiritual victory filled his mind. The Third Laird, having sealed himself and his party in, couldn't manage the feat, but he had days. Balgrummo had decades and he almost made it, Arcane says, judging from Balgrummo's papers. One more day of work and "he might have emerged from the Purgatory into open air. He was not granted that one day: he caught pneumonia, and lay three years bedridden, being so old, and then died" (359). He had come so close, and Arcane wonders aloud, "Will you take me for a Pelagian heretic if I suggest that Balgrummo may be forgiven his sins, at the end of all things. He strove with all his powers to complete his pilgrimage of grace. . . . So, after all, this may not be Balgrummo's Hell, but merely Balgrummo's Purgatory--his Purgatory while he lived, his

Purgatory now he's dead" (376). In the end, Balgrummo, the Lord of the Hollow Dark himself, may be redeemed.

Balgrummo, perhaps a soul still working and striving to cast off the sins of his life, serves as an agent of a just God. Apollinax, having returned to the Lodging from the Weem, gloats, in the chapel, over his powers as a servant of the Lord of This World. He has left the thirty disciples and acolytes dying or dead below, their souls imprisoned in a single moment. He feels a dead presence. It refuses to acknowledge his commands. Balgrummo, an axe in his hand, says he heard the summons not of Apollinax but of his son, and returns to cleanse what befouls his house: "There can be but one Master in Balgrummo Lodging" (368). Underneath the house, Arcane has apparently fainted or fallen fast asleep. When Arcane awakes, he says he dreamt he has killed Apollinax. He has done more than dreamt. Somehow, in the mysterious connection between the living and the dead, he has a hand in justice being done, for in the Lodging's chapel, the axe connected again and again with Apollinax's mortal frame. "Blood shed in this house calls for more blood," Arcane's father says. For Apollinax there would be no Timeless Moment; he "felt himself swept into the great gulf of Time. In his ears there rang the chuckle of the Lord of this World" (369).

CHAPTER 5

MERCY AND JUSTICE

God by definition must be all merciful and all just. How this can be boggles the human mind, but that is understandable. In the hierarchy of reality, the Creator naturally stands far above his creation, and so there is no way man can understand fully how God judges. "Everyone receives what he deserves in accordance with his inner states," St. Mark the Ascetic wrote. "But only God understands the many different ways in which this happens" (Philokalia 131). In the following two short stories of Kirk's, the mysterious workings of a loving God come alive for the reader.

In an aptly named story, "Lex Talionis," Eddie Mahaffy wanders through an old part of a city; he stops by a church to say his penitential prayers. Long ago, before his prison days, even before the navy, he spent two years as a novice at a Pennsylvania monastery. He didn't last, and while with the brothers, he never could manage to meditate and pray, his mind continually wandering. In the prison and especially in the infirmary, in great pain, he learned to contemplate and pray. Eddie reflected that "upon some in their agony of tribulation, the Dove descends; and those are taught how to contemplate and how to pray" ("Talionis" 178).

He had ended up in prison because of a bad choice. His uncle Chris Mahaffy, "a humorous, ruinous man, grown grey in exciting crime, running fantastic risks for the risks' sake while burglarizing banks, had dared Eddie to prove his nerve" (190). High on drugs and in a weak moment, "an hour of depression of spirit, of the noonday devil" (190), he went along with the plan. The stick-up didn't go quite as planned. A man knocked Eddie over the head while he was racing out of the bar with the money. His uncle meant merely to hit the man with his gun, but it went off, killing the man, who turned out to be an off-duty police officer. At the trial, the uncle and another man who assisted in the robbery testified that they had no idea when they set out in their car that Eddie planned to rob the bar. They were acquitted and Eddie, who remained silent as to the truth, went to jail for life.

By robbing that bank, he had done his uncle's will and his own. Now, out of prison, kneeling in the church, he prays, "Thy will be done O Lord, not mine" (178). Leaving the church, he feels a strong urge, a command almost, to go into the Old Town Bar and Grill. There Eddie meets a man he hoped he'd never meet again, Butte, a man as depraved as he is massive. With his strength and connections outside the jail's walls, Butte lorded over the other inmates. Eddie, a lifer who kept to himself and was considered a religious nut, saw one day what Butte and his gang were doing to a new

inmate, "a foolish smooth-faced boy, [but] not bad by nature" (185). Angered, he threw himself fists first at Butte. His old Navy boxing experience paid some dividends, but Butte's sheer strength overwhelmed him. Bashed and knifed, Eddie ended up in the hospital seriously injured.

Butte has been paroled. Thinking Eddie must have escaped from prison, he wants Eddie's help to go back to a house where he and another helper, dead thanks to Butte, murdered a couple and raped and killed their teen-age niece. Some $40,000 remains in the house's cellar. Butte won't go into the house and especially climb down into the cellar. Butte's partner in crime, a drug addict supposedly, "went wild" when he went down in the cellar, going on about spiders, and Butte said he had to kill him to keep him from talking "about the fun he had" in the house. Time, however, is a-wasting: the house is going to be demolished in a week. He won't say why and gets angry when Eddie asks, but he does say the house hasn't been bothered because neighborhood children think it's haunted. Ghosts, it seems, are his concern. Assuring Butte that the good people he murdered have no doubt gone onto a better place, Eddie goes on to tell him, "Of course there are fundamentalist types who'd say you might find demons in that cellar, ready to pitchfork you in you own very private hell; but you couldn't meet a worse devil than yourself. At the core, you're a coward, Butte" (189).

For his sins and "for whatever purpose, he had been sent to Butte" (189). Thank God, Eddie thinks, for hell. Otherwise beasts like Butte would never see justice. For his own part, Eddie thinks--nay, knows--that he is now an instrument in God's hand and he chooses to follow the divine promptings.

At the house vengeance is the Lord's. Trembling in fear, in a house defiled by his crimes, Butte demands that Eddie go down in the cellar to the get the money: "They don't take you . . ." (196). No, Eddie tells him, whatever hell awaits in the cellar is Butte's alone, and neither he nor any "spooks or devils" down there can hurt Eddie anymore (196). The cellar, Eddie says, opens to Butte's "private hell. The wreckers may smash this good old house you polluted, and fill in the cellar; yet you'll be there to the end of all things, tramped among your horrors . . . . Get down with you!" (196). Angered and terrified not only by the house but of Eddie, Butte tells him to go hell. Sorry, Eddie says, wrong place. Purgatory is more like it and Eddie, whose penance involves humbly serving as God's instrument of divine justice, is already a resident: he left the prison not over the wall but in a box. He never recovered from the pounding that Butte gave him. "You scared of ghosts," he asks Butte, and a horrific change comes over Eddie as he steps towards the murderer. Stumbling backwards, Butte falls into the cellar. Eddie

bolts the cellar door and strolls eastward into the first of light of dawn. Like those sun rays, God's love has shone down, offering mercy to Eddie and a fitting punishment for Butte.

In "An Encounter at Mortstone Pond," Kirk fashions a vision of God's mysterious mercy. The story opens in 1919 with a ten-year-old boy thinking of death. Of death there had been much lately: his father, like so many young men, was tramped into the muddy fields of France a year ago. Last week, his mother was buried. Their home at Mortstone Pond is to be sold and he sent off to live with an aunt in San Francisco. Had he loved his mother as she should have been loved? Now Gerard Peirce is "wholly and forever alone. There could come no relief, ever, from his misery. He had prayed by his mother's bedside in her pretty room for a month, as she lay dying . . ." ("Pond" 227). She had tried to comfort her young son: "You must grow up, my darling, to be the sort of man your father was" (226). He knows what he must do. Nor is it the first time the thought has crossed his mind. He races to the dyke to throw himself over the dam.

There on the dyke a chill runs through his body, and he realizes that he isn't alone, though no one is in sight. Scared enough to cry for help, he finds he can't and as he walks with this presence, "certain words from without were impressed upon his consciousness--although no voice sounded

in his ears, as speech is heard" (227). He hears, internally, as it were: "The pain will end, boy, or nearly end. This too shall pass. You will grow to be a man. They will love you always, being made for an eternity" (227). The chill passes from him, as does the presence, and he runs to his mother's grave to pray. He finds the strength to go on, repeating to himself those lines--"The pain will end, or nearly end"

Young Gerard develops the stoical qualities necessary, implicit in those lines he heard on the dyke to make it through life. Donning his country's uniform, he becomes the sort of man his father was. The story moves forward to 1969, and Gerard, now Major General Peirce, or "what was left of him" comes home from war (228). Wounded in combat, he walks with an artificial leg. Quiet and reserved, he seems like a Roman come home from warring with barbarians on the Empire's frontier, to end his days peacefully tending his garden. Doctors, however, have told him he should put his affairs in order as he may not have too much longer to live. He wonders if his mother's grave is without an inscription, so he flies to Michigan where he walks, painfully and with a limp, on the same paths and on the dyke where he ran, played, and wept as a child. Trying to fight the pain, he walks, and though "[h]is hearing and his eyesight had suffered at Hue. . . . he did not require keenness of eye and ear to know that he was accompanied"

(230). What accompanied him is--is it a young boy? he wonders--in despair, torment, and anger, emotionally not unlike the young men under his command whose bodies he had seen ripped apart. Words came to him: "The pain will end, boy, or nearly end. This too shall pass. You will grow to be a man. They will love you always, being made for eternity" (230). The General then reaches "out his good left hand. Was it an illusion that for the briefest possible moment, flesh encountered flesh?" (230). He walks with the young presence for awhile before "what had been little despairing Gerard Peirce, perhaps heartened, was swept away by the current of Time" (230).

After the encounter, the aged Gerard wonders what had happened, pondering the mystery of existence:

> We are essences--but insubstantial really, such stuff as dreams are made of, not understanding death because we do not know what life is. Across the gulf of years, had the boy who was to be man and the man who had been a boy met in some fashion? Had a conscience spoken briefly to a conscience? (233)

What of those words that came to him? "Did they really issues from me? Or were they put into my consciousness by a tender Other?" (233). Before his mother's grave, he kneels, now as a man as he had decades before as a young boy. Someone--he can't think of whom--had taken the time to

engrave an inscription on his mother's headstone. Taken from Eliot, the epitaph reads,

> And what the dead had no speech for, when living,
> They can tell you, being dead: the communication
> Of the dead is tongued with fire
> Beyond the language of living. (233)

Knowing the pain will end is not the end of the story, though it is an important chapter. Christ never promised the faithful an earthly paradise. Death may come, even for parents and even if prayers are said, but in reality, as Donne says, "Death, thou shalt die." A great gulf seems to separate Gerard from his parents, but he and his parents are united forever in the mystical Body of Christ. "They will love you always, being made for eternity." Saving a young boy from committing the worst of all sins, God lets him know that not only can he bear the pain of living but that his parents and their love for him truly are not gone. Later, as a man, the general has fought the good fight, and this message of mercy soothes his time-scarred soul.

CHAPTER 6

LENTEN PILGRIMAGES AND EASTER DESTINATIONS

Much of Kirk's short fiction revolves around the Christian pilgrimage, often filled with hardship and suffering, in this world and the next. The path to salvation is not easy. "This world," as Orthodox theologian Alexander Schmemann insisted, "through all its 'media' says: be happy, take it easy, follow the broad way. Christ in the Gospel says: choose the narrow way, fight and suffer, for this is the road to the only genuine happiness" (14). As Kirk's wayfarers discover, this Lenten road is hard, but the destination, an eternal Easter, will make the perseverance, suffering, and struggle worthwhile.

In "There's a Long, Long Trail A-Winding," a wandering hobo, Frank Sarsfield, finds courage and grace along this path. The main character is based on an actual hobo, Clinton Wallace, who happened upon the Kirks. In the spirit of Christian charity, they took him in for six years as a hired man--who, incidentally, did little heavy work but liked to set the table and spent his pay on lottery tickets and gifts for small children--until he died and was laid to rest in the Kirk family plot (Sword 351-52). In fact, Frank the literary character shares a number of Clinton's proclivities and beliefs--for instance, he scoffs at the

notion that prisons can, as modern progressives claim, reform anyone; abhors violence; is fond of poetry and good at recalling lines of verse from memory; and spends his adult life alternating between prison for petty offenses, such as pilfering church poor boxes, and roaming the countryside. But before the reader merely substitutes Clinton wherever Frank appears in the ghostly tale, he would do well to heed Kirk's own words cautioning that "[a]ny resemblance of this book's characters to actual persons, living or dead, is not coincidental. My lovely young wife may find herself here, or my stalwart old hired man--though translated by a sea change into something new and strange" (Prologue to Princess viii).

Frank, in Kirk's tale, is a wandering pilgrim who leads a troubled, guilt-ridden existence for leaving his mother and sister with his drunken and violent father when he was in his teens. He thinks himself without courage and probably damned. "There's a long, long trail a-winding into the land of my dreams," he likes to sing, and it has been a purgatorial trail ("Trail" 188). Perhaps, as an old priest who has taken a liking to him says, Frank may be working out his purgatory in this life, his hardships paying for what he has done in the past. Or, Father O'Malley also suggests, as part of his spiritual journey, Frank may have to gather his courage for one great, signal act of contrition.

In the story Frank stumbles upon the deserted town of Anthonyville. Taking shelter in the stately old Tamarack House, Frank thinks the town dried up after the new highway cut it off from the outside world. Everything seems vaguely familiar. In fact, he has stepped out of time into a world between the present and a past before he was even born, in which he played a decisive role. As the story unfolds, the reader learns that Anthonyville was home to the state prison and Tamarack House the residence of the General, a former State Supervisor of Prisons and Reformatories, and his family. In the early morning hours of January 14, 1915, convicts escape from the prison and seek their revenge at the house, killing the General. As they are about to harm the General's little girls, a hired man named Frank, a wanderer who has been in and out of jail, comes down the stairs and, angered that the savage brutes may hurt the children, kills all six of them, making quick work of them with an axe, but not before they shoot him. Frank Sarsfield takes shelter at the seemingly abandoned house January 12, two days before his birthday.

The two Franks are one and the same, and at the house Frank Sarsfield relives or lives for the first time this monumental moment on his journey to salvation. Soon the blood-soaked scene fades away, and, to the sixty-year-old hobo, "[i]t was like the recurrent dream which had tormented Frank when he was little: he separated from Mother in the

dark, wandering solitary in empty lanes, no soul alive in the universe but little Frank" (218). As we shall see in another Kirk story, Frank's Lenten trail is not at its glorious end, but God has given Frank a chance to let his goodness, his fondness of children, blossom into a self-sacrificing love that allows three young girls and their mother to live and propels his own soul closer to the lasting Easter vision.

For Kirk himself, purgatory was no idle speculation. Rather, it amounted to a cornerstone of his faith: "No doctrine is more comforting than the teaching of Purgatory. . . . For purgatorily, one may be granted opportunity to atone for having let some precious life run out like water from a neglected tap into sterile sands" (Sword 475). For the hobo Frank, purgatory seems to have been part of his earthly pilgrimage. Musing on his own soul's future path, Kirk saw purgatory in the next world and he knew he would be judged for how he had performed in his appointed task: defending, as Eliot called them, the Permanent Things of life on the "darkling plain against all comers and all odds." Shortly after penning the autobiography that contains those thoughts, on April 29, 1994, Kirk's time on the darkling plain came to an end but not his own, as the faithful Catholic termed it, "tramp from corruption to incorruption" (475-476).

In Kirk's fiction, even the defenders of orthodox religion and the Permanent Things, in these unstable times, are not immune from dangers and suffering along the pilgrim's path. For instance, in "The Invasion of the Church of the Holy Ghost," the main character, Father Thomas Montrose, is an Anglo-Catholic priest who maintains orthodoxy in the decaying and dangerous district of Hawkhill in an unnamed city and in the face of his liberal bishop who "spends his days comminating the president of the United States and ordaining lesbians" ("Invasion" 4). Were he to depart his post, he is sure the next visitor would be a bulldozer. Kirk also makes clear that Father Montrose is not merely holed up in his Romanesque church. In Hawkhill, "which Satan claims for his own," he is engaged in a battle for souls, including those of "girls off Pentecost Road, fugitive from their pimps" (4). Much to the dismay of his bishop, who believes more in bad publicity than immortal souls, the celibate clergyman even lodges them occasionally behind the protective walls of the church. Merely maintaining and living the faith are not the only chores on his journey. He must do spiritual battle with demons who wish to possess him, tempting the chaste priest sexually with a beautiful and trusting young woman.

Similarly, in "Watchers at the Strait Gate," an aging Roman Catholic priest, Father Justin O'Malley, holds out in the farthest reaches of the diocese, St. Enoch's in

Albatross, against the "New Breed types at the chancery." The stone church he pastors "could have stood with little repair for another two or three centuries; but the New Breed meant to pull it down 'to facilitate the new liturgy' once Justin O'Malley was disposed of" ("Watchers" 235-36). An admirer of John Henry Cardinal Newman, O'Malley notes ironically how "[i]n Newman's spirit, very nearly, Vatican II had been conceived and convened; but that council had led, vulgarized, to much that Newman would have found anathema" (235). As we have seen in "There's a Long, Long Trail A-Winding," Father O'Malley is a good pastor, providing the meandering Frank with hot meals and money, seeing in him something good that the world missed, and trying to get Frank to confess his sins so as to free him from guilt and save his soul. But now Father O'Malley is tired and wants "for little but to depart in peace" (237).

For this concerned priest and defender of the faith, his pilgrimage is not over, even though eternal life nears. His wandering acquaintance Frank arrives in the dark of night to help him over those last, rough steps. Frank confesses to the priest that he killed five men, the same men whose death is recorded in "There's a Long, Long Trail A-Winding." Startled, the priest fears Frank has gone mad and turned into, as he once warned him, a berserker. What the priest does not know is that both he and Frank are no longer of this world; they have passed beyond and Frank is

returning the priest's favors by helping him on the last and possibly most dangerous part of their spiritual journey.

> I came back here, or maybe was sent back here, to lend you a hand on your journey, Father Justin. I know the way to the little gate so to speak, fool though I am. It's fearsome, Father, groping that way when the Watchers are purring in the dark. But the two of us together . . .

he tells the priest who has yet to see his own lifeless body back at the rectory (254). Soon they begin to make their way through "what seemed a darkling plain," on guard for the Watchers. Frank tells Father O'Malley: "Let's have no gnashing of teeth now . . . . It's the faint hearted that the Watchers catch" (256). The way is never easy for pilgrims.

To Kirk, elusive, dangerous Watchers and the strait gate are more than intriguing ideas. The story begins with lines from <u>All's Well That Ends Well</u>:

> I am for the house with the narrow gate, which I take to be too little for pomp to enter. Some that humble themselves may, but the many will be too chill and tender, and they'll be for the flow'ry way that leads to the broad gate and the great fire (236).

He concludes his autobiography, <u>The Sword of the Imagination</u>, with the same lines. Further, in the paragraph

immediately preceding the extended quotation, he makes reference to the Watchers and hopes that, in imagination at least, he may be permitted to take the eighteenth century Mogul sword that hangs above the chimneypiece of his beloved Piety Hill so as to "repel certain Watchers--the old Egyptians dreaded them--at the Strait Gate. Quite conceivably imagination of the right sort may be so redemptive hereafter as here" (Sword 476). Hope is a virtue for Christians, and like old Father O'Malley and Frank, Kirk hopes to be brave when he navigates the final leg of his spiritual trek.

Readers meet another sort of pilgrim, Mark Findlay, in "Saviourgate," one who doesn't, when the story starts, even know that a spiritual journey is necessary. In fact, the fate of his immortal soul is far from Findlay's mind: he is contemplating suicide. "I've been in oil rigs in Aberdeen for the past two years," Findlay says, "and I'm not so young as I was, and my wife is in a bad way. Now I'm in deep trouble--not enough ready money, and the banks pressing me hard about overdrafts" ("Saviourgate" 225). Findlay thinks he has failed his wife, and he hopes that a doctor may rule his suicide on some prescribed capsules an accidental overdose, securing the insurance money necessary to meet the debts and have some left for his wife. In this state of mind, while waiting for a train, he stumbles upon the Crosskeys Hotel on a cold Christmas Eve in Northminster.

He dimly remembers that he has been there before. As it turns out, all the people at the inn are dead, and the moment, December 24, 1939, is a happy and timeless one that they are reliving in what is Kirk's vision of the Church Expectant or heaven. The souls in this state may live in any pleasant surrounding or experience any moment that they did during life. The souls here have only experienced perhaps a Provisional Judgment, as Canon Hoodman informs Findlay; the Last Judgment remains in the future. The people who have crossed over the Border, as they refer to it, however, have received salvation; their pilgrimage on Earth is done.

Ralph Bain, whose story Kirk tells in "Sorworth Place," admits to Findlay that he does not deserve to be there. After the war Bain started drinking. In life he amounted to nothing, but by dying he saved his soul. He gave his own life to save a young woman whom he loved but who, because of a dreadful first marriage, told him she "couldn't bear to be anything to man again" ("Sorworth Place" 161). Her beastly husband Alstair Lurin had tried to break her spirit but failed while living. On his death bed, he told his wife Ann that the grave would not be her ally. "Wait a year," he whispered (157). One year later to the day, Bain opted to stay and watch while she retired to her bedchamber, locking the door behind her. Alstair's final words proved not to be idle threats. The revenant of Ann's dead husband inched its

way along the roof to the window of her bedroom. "What propelled Ralph Bain then was an impulse beyond duty, beyond courage, beyond even the love of woman"--he hurled himself at the "dark hulk" and together they plunged to the rocks and the sea below (166). "That one decent impulse of mine," Bain tells Findlay at the Crosskeys Hotel, "is why I'm in the same room with the Canon. Because of that violent act for love--she'd never have taken me--everything else that I'd done was forgiven" ("Saviourgate" 225). The important part of his life-long pilgrimage of misery came at the very end. In an act of self-sacrificial love, he united himself with the sacrificial Christ of Good Friday, and now enjoys a perpetual Easter.

In the liturgical cycle, the worshiper sees, in Father Schmemann's words, "far, far away--the destination. It is the joy of Easter, it is the entrance into the glory of the Kingdom" (15). The men Findlay encounters at the Crosskeys are enjoying the Kingdom, and they share it with him. He thinks their stories little more than yarns to soothe a cold night, but he is tired and accepts their invitation to stay. He awakes the next morning invigorated and not alarmed that he must have missed the train: "To sleep in that old bed for eternity! That prospect was far more attractive than were those capsules waiting at the station" ("Saviourgate 236). No longer does he contemplate suicide; a feeling of hope

makes a welcome passenger accompanying his hosts' charade of the previous night.

Refreshed, Findlay leaves the Crosskeys and hails a cab. He looks behind: Bain is no longer there. Neither is the Crosskeys. The street is in ruins, and the cab driver tells him it has been that way since the war. The Christian nature of the story is further underlined when he asks the name of the street. "Saviourgate, sir" (238). God, in Kirk's story, has allowed him to peep through the strait and narrow gate. Having been granted this Easter vision, Findlay will continue his own journey. With his sick wife and financial problems, his pilgrimage--like those of Father Montrose and Father O'Malley and Frank--may not be easy, even starkly Lenten at times, but he knows the final destination.

CHAPTER 7

PLANTING TREES

Readers sometimes asked C.S. Lewis how he came to write his Narnia tales. Did he one day, taking pen in hand, say to himself, "I shall write a Christian fable with a lion whose life and actions shall remind the reader of Christ"? No, he said, "[e]verything began with images; a faun carrying an umbrella, a queen on a sledge, a magnificent lion. At first there wasn't even anything Christian about them" (73). The religious element came of its own accord, Lewis being blessed with a Christian imagination, and because the author in Lewis saw in the fairy story "the ideal Form for the stuff I had to say" (73).

In his own writing, Kirk shared Lewis's method: "I do not commence with a well-concerted formal plot. Rather, there occur to my imagination certain images, little scenes, snatches of conversation, strong lines of prose" (Decadence 231). Sometimes a true ghost story, too fragmentary to stand on its own, would catch his fancy, or something that happened in his own life or to his friends or family, or memories of country houses or old churches. Kirk would "patch together these fragments, retaining and embellishing the sound images, discarding the unsound, finding a continuity to join them" (231). After Kirk the artist was

done with those fragments, he said he would have "a coherent narration, with some point to it" (231). And Kirk's point? To reawaken a sense of mystery; to remind his fellow wayfarers in this world of timeless truths; and yes, to have some creepy fun. Terror without purpose, however, was not his aim: he did not seek to dump more blood and gore on the table of horror fiction that already groaned beneath their weight. Of senseless horror, why, the history of the twentieth century provides a-plenty.

The best stories begin with images and end with images. An image comes--say, a harmless, lovable bum who happens upon the Kirks and winds up employed as a not-so ambitious hired man. After the writer and his moral imagination have worked upon that image, another one emerges: a wanderer who finds salvation along the purgatorial path. From his northern outpost in Mecosta, Kirk, as a writer, turned magician, conjuring up powerful images of the reality of evil and good, of the soul's pilgrimage, of grace, and of the necessity of having courage.

Though Kirk never became a household name of horror like Stephen King, Anne Rice, or Peter Straub, his fiction earned him appreciative readers, though far fewer than the quality of his work deserves, and a handful of awards. For the Surly Sullen Bell and the gothic novel Old House of Fear, Kirk received the Anne Radcliffe Award, and in 1970, the Count Dracula Society bestowed upon him a knighthood for

his uncanny tales. In 1977, "There's a Long, Long Trail a-Winding" gained him a World Fantasy Award for short fiction. "Soworth Place" appeared on the small screen thanks to Rod Serling. But even with such honors on his vita, Kirk's fiction, unlike his works of history and social and literary criticism, has been sadly neglected, and none of his short stories and only one of the three novels remain in print. That, however, seems to be changing. Readers will have a better chance to explore his supernatural fiction now that Williams Erdmans plans on publishing, sometime in 1998, an edition of Kirk's stories, and the novel that remains in print is Lord of the Hollow Dark. This study, it is hoped, helps to illuminate the path.

Though he travelled the world speaking and debating, Kirk insisted he was "best content when planting little trees at Mecosta. To plant a tree, in our age when the expectation of change commonly seems greater than the expectation of continuity, is an act of faith" (Bohemian Tory 29). When tucked into the soil, saplings seem little sturdier than weeds, but those flimsy shoots may some day hold back icy winds, shelter a family and animals alike, and provide a pleasant sight, long after the man who planted them is gone. Kirk is gone. His works of the moral imagination remain. Sturdy saplings, they will continue to gain height and stature, reminders of the mysterious

connections between the generations and between this world and the next, and much-needed shelter from evil winds.

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