

# A Cautionary Note

on the

*The Critic*

## GHOSTLY TALE

By RUSSELL KIRK

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SINCE MOST modern men have ceased to recognize their own souls, the spectral tale has been out of fashion, especially in America. As Cardinal Manning said, all differences of opinion are theological at bottom; and this fact has its bearing upon literary tastes. Because—even though they may be churchgoers—the majority of Americans do not much hunger after personal immortality, they cannot shiver at someone else's fictitious spirit.

Perhaps the primary error of the Enlightenment was the notion that dissolving old faiths, creeds and loyalties would lead to a universal sweet rationalism. But deprive man of St. Salvator, and he will seek, at best, St. Science—even though he understands Darwin, say, no better than he understood Augustine. Similarly, our longing for the invisible springs eternal, merely changing its direction from age to age. So if one takes away from man a belief in spirits, it does not follow that thereafter he will concern himself wholly with Bright Reality; more probably, his fancy will seek some new realm—and perhaps a worse credulity.

Thus stories of the supernatural have been supplanted by "science-fiction." Though the talent of H. G. Wells did in that *genre* nearly everything worth undertaking, a flood of "scientific" and "futuristic" fantasies continues to deluge America. With few exceptions, these writings are banal and meaningless. My present point, however, is simply that many people today have a faith in "life on other planets" as burning and genuine as belief in a literal Heaven and a literal Hell was among twelfth-century folk, say—but upon authority far inferior. It is amusing to see physicists like Dr. Harlow Shapley, having abandoned all hope for this world (which obdurately declines to become Utopia) declare enthusiastically that there are people away out yonder: for they have not one

shred of scientific evidence. Having demolished, to their own satisfaction, the whole edifice of religious learning, abruptly and unconsciously they experience the need for belief in *something* not mundane; and so, defying their own inductive and mechanistic premises, they take up the cause of Martians and Jovians. As for angels and devils, let alone bogles—why, Hell, such notions are superstitious!

But if the stubborn fact remains that, although not one well-reputed person claims to have seen the men in the flying saucers, a great many well-reputed persons, over centuries, have claimed to have seen ghosts; or, more strictly speaking, to have perceived certain "psychic phenomena." From Pliny onward, the literature of our civilization is full of such narrations. Scholars have analyzed soberly such appearances, from Father Noel Taillepied's *Treatise on Ghosts* (1588) to Father Herbert Thurston's *Ghosts and Poltergeists* (1955). *The Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* has examined painstakingly, for decades, the data of psychic manifestations. Eminent people so different in character as the Wesleys and Lord Castlereagh have been confronted by terrifying apparitions.

And men of letters have encountered spectral visitants so often as to become altogether casual about these mysteries. Take, as a random example, an aside in Ford Madox Ford's *Portraits from Life*. Ford's London editorial office was in an old house "reputed full of ghosts." Thus—

My partner Marwood, while sitting one evening near the front windows of the room whilst I was looking for something in the drawer of a desk, said suddenly:

"There's a woman in lavender-coloured eighteenth-century dress looking over your shoulder into that drawer." And Marwood was the most matter-of-fact, as it were himself eighteenth-century, Yorkshire Squire that England of those days could have produced.

Ford touches upon this little episode merely to introduce his first meeting with D. H. Lawrence, in that office.

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*Russell Kirk's interest in the ghostly tale is reflected in his recently published novel, "Old House of Fear," and his soon to be published collection of ghost-stories, "The Surly Sullen Bell."*

As Ford Madox Ford implies, he then felt more embarrassed than alarmed or even interested. For in such matters we always doubt the plain asseverations of our friends, and even the testimony of our own senses. Some impression has been made upon the imaginative brain, yes; something very extraordinary seems to have happened. But what? Ordinarily the experience is so evanescent and so meaningless, however alarming, that speculation seems vain.

That "psychic phenomena" occur, even a philosophical materialist like George Santayana took to be indubitable. Santayana's own explanation, or the gist of it, is that in a medium-like state we make out shadows or reflections, as it were, of past events.

This is only one analysis of the puzzle, with really no more to substantiate the argument than there is to prove Cicero's suggestion that ghosts are the damned, condemned to linger near the scenes of their crimes. Here I am but suggesting, in fine, that no one ever has satisfactorily tested or demonstrated a general theory of ghostly apparitions: yet a mass of evidence, of all ages and countries—though particularly abundant, for reasons no one ever has discussed properly, in northern Europe and in Japan and China—informs us that strange things beyond the ordinary operation of life and matter have occurred at irregular intervals and in widely varying circumstances. Two forms of psychic phenomena are fairly frequent: the revenant, and the poltergeist or racketing spirit; and these terrify men. (Telepathy and the milder forms of "second sight" are encountered even more frequently, but they rarely bring with them the horror and dread of the "ghost.")

At the end of his serious book *Apparitions*, Professor G. N. M. Tyrrell remarks, "Psychical research has certainly not drawn a blank. It has, on the contrary, discovered something so big that people sheer away from it in a reaction of fear." This is true; and possibly some day these mystifying events will be properly examined in a scientific spirit, classified, and somehow fitted into the natural sciences—though I doubt it.\* At present, such phenomena submit neither to rhyme nor to reason: the revenant seems unpredictable and purposeless, and the poltergeist behaves like a feeble-minded child. Thus it is that the True Narration of ghostly happenings almost never attains to the condition of true literature. To guess at any significance in these manifestations, we still must resort to literary art—that is, to fiction. And art, as Burke says, is man's nature.

Because this limbo has no defined boundaries and interiorly remains *terra incognita*, the imaginative writer's

\* Suppose, suggests, C. E. M. Joad, that we appoint a sober committee of three to sit in the haunted room at midnight and take notes on the appearance of the ghost. But suppose also that one of the conditions necessary for ghostly phenomena is that there *not* be present a sober committee of three: well, then, the very scientific method has precluded the possibility of obtaining scientific results.

fancy can wander here unimpeded by the dreary baggage of twentieth-century naturalism. For symbol and allegory, the shadow-world is a far better realm than the hard, false "realism" of science-fiction. A return to the ghostly and the Gothick might be one rewarding means of escape from the exhausted lassitude and inhumanity of the typical novel or short story of the 'Sixties. Unlike the True Narration, the fictional ghostly tale can possess plot, theme and purpose. It can piece together in some pattern the hints which seem thrown out by this vision or that haunting or some case of second sight. It can touch keenly upon the old reality of evil—and upon injustice and retribution. It can reveal aspects of human conduct and longing to which the positivistic psychologist has blinded himself. And it still can be a first-rate yarn.

WHAT MAKES A ghostly tale worth reading? Or writing? Certainly the supernatural has attracted writers of genius or high talent: Defoe, Scott, Coleridge, Stevenson, Hoffmann, Maupassant, Kipling, Hawthorne, Poe, Henry James, F. Marion Crawford, Edith Wharton; and those whose achievement lies principally in this dark field, among them M. R. James, Algernon Blackwood, Meade Faulkner, Sheridan Le Fanu and Arthur Machen. Many of the best stories are by such poets and critics as Walter de la Mare, A. C. Benson and Quiller Couch. Theirs are no Grub Street names. The *genre* has in it something worth attempting.

Clearly a fearful joy is one attraction, from Horace Walpole to L. P. Hartley. Most of us enjoy being scared, so long as we are reasonably confident that nothing dreadful really will overtake us. Thus the fun of the Gothick tale is the fun of the roller-coaster or the crazy-house at the county fair. It is worth noting that the great milieu of the ghost-story was nineteenth-century Europe, and especially England, versatility and technique improving as the century grew older. Despite its revolutionary changes, to us today the last century seems an age of security and normality; and Britain especially was cozy and safe. The Christmas ghost-story, told by the glowing hearth with all the strong defenses of a triumphant civilization to reassure the timorous, reached its apogee in the delightful frights of Montague Rhodes James, provost of Eton, shortly before the First World War.

Yet, this is not the whole of the matter; if it were, supernatural fictions would have short shrift in our age. The fountains of the great deep being broken up in this time, we have supped long on real horrors, and require no fanciful alarms to titillate our palates. Gauleiter and commissar are worse than spectral raw-head-and-bloody-bones. What is nearly as bad, man in modern fiction—as Mr. Edmund Fuller has pointed out—tends toward a depravity more shocking than Monk Lewis grotesqueries. The august schools of Mr. Dashiell Hammett and Mr. James M. Cain provide for appetites that

find phantasms not sufficiently carnal. And for those who are after pure, and relatively harmless, excitement, the daily slaughter in the Wild West of television may suffice. Without straining credulity, no ghost could do half so much mischief as a Private Eye.

Notwithstanding these handicaps, I expect the tale of the supernatural to endure as a minor form of genuine literary art, and perhaps sometimes—as in *The Turn of the Screw*—to emerge as a major form. For at its best the uncanny romance touches upon certain profound truths: upon the dark powers that aspire always to possess us, and upon intimations of immortality.

Mr. Gerald Heard said to me once that the good ghost-story must have for its base some clear premise as to the character of human existence—some theological assumption. A notable example of such a story is Mr. Heard's own best piece of fiction, which I believe to be the most impressive supernatural tale of recent years: "The Chapel of Ease," a long short story of a mystical Anglo-Catholic vicar who prays for tormented souls in Purgatory. Their bodies, the bones of gallows-crows, lie beneath his ancient and half-derelict chapel; and their ghosts, rising in the pews, hate the man who struggles to save them; and in the end the pain of the contest is too much for the priest, and he dies. All this is told with a chilly power peculiar to a writer himself a mystic and a poet.

George Macdonald, and his disciple C. S. Lewis, employ the ghostly and supernatural means in letters to a moral and theological end; and from them the rising generation of authors ought to learn that naturalism is not the only road to higher reality. For the writer who struggles to express moral truth, indeed, "realism" has become in our time a dead-end street; it fully justifies now the definition in Ambrose Bierce's *Devil's Dictionary*: "The art of depicting nature as it is seen by toads. The charm suffusing a landscape painted by a mole, or a story written by a measuring-worm."

Emerson, amid nineteenth-century meliorism, never could credit the reality of evil. But a good many twentieth-century writers are unable to credit the reality of anything except evil. Now it can be said of the better ghostly tale that it is underlain by a sound concept of the character of evil. The necromancer, defying nature, conjures up what ought not to rise again this side of Judgment Day. But these dark powers do not rule the universe; they are in rebellion against Providential order; and by bell, book and candle, literally or symbolically, we can push them down under. This truth runs through the priest's ghost-stories in A. C. Benson's *The Light Invisible*; also it is hinted at in some of the eerie narrations of W. B. Yeats' *Mythologies*.

I venture to suggest that the more orthodox is a writer's theology, the more convincing, as symbols and allegories, his uncanny tales will be. One of the most unnerving of all spooky stories is Algernon Blackwood's "The Damned," which concerns an ugly modern house

where the cellars seem to be full of souls in torment, doled out little drops of water by a medium-housekeeper. But in its concluding pages—and this is true of too many of Blackwood's creations—the power of the story is much diminished when the reader is informed that, after all, the cellars aren't really Hell: it is merely that people who formerly lived in the house *believed* in Hell, and so invested the place with an unpleasant aura. Because the Christian tradition, with its complex of symbol, allegory and right reason, genuinely penetrates to spiritual depths and spiritual heights, the modern supernatural fiction which isolates itself from this authority drifts aimlessly down Styx.

Though Freudianism retains great popular influence today, as an intellectual force it has been compelled to retreat; and Freud's naïve understanding of human nature must make way for older and greater insights. For Freudians and positivists, only the "natural" exists. The philosophical and ideological currents of a period necessarily affecting its imaginative writing, the supernatural in fiction has been somewhat ridiculous much of this century. But as the rising generation regains the knowledge that "nature" is something more than mere sensate existence, and that something lies both above and below human nature—that reality, after all, is hierarchical—then authors will venture once more to employ myth and symbol, to resort to allegories of the divine and the diabolical, as lawful instruments. And in this revival the ghostly tale may have its part. *Tenebrae* ineluctably form part of the nature of things; nor should we complain, for without darkness there cannot be light.

But enough of this: I am turning into a ghostly comforter. I do not ask the artist in the fantastic tale to turn didactic moralizer; and I trust that he will not fall into the error that shapes under the hill are *merely* symbols. For the sake of his art, the teller of ghostly tales ought never to enjoy freedom from fear. As that great moralist Samuel Johnson lived in dread of real eternal torment—not mere "mental anguish"—so that great "invisible prince," Sheridan Le Fanu, archetype of ghost-story writers, is believed to have died literally of fright. He knew that his creations were not his creations merely, but glimpses of the abyss.

And I hope that in writing Gothic romances for moderns who suffer from *taedium vitae*, the coming set of eerie authors will not modernize their craft beyond recognition. It has been a skill innately conservative. As M. R. James wrote of Le Fanu, "The ghost story is in itself a slightly old-fashioned form; it needs some deliberateness in the telling; we listen to it the more readily if the narrator poses as elderly, or throws back his experience to 'some thirty years ago.'" If faithless to this trust, the ghost-story writer will deserve to be hounded to his doom by the late James Thurber's favorite monster, the Todal, "a creature of the Devil, sent to punish evil-doers for having done less evil than they should."