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Haunted America: *The American Scene* as Gothic Landscape

Nobutaka Takahashi

Introduction

A travelogue of Henry James's, *The American Scene* (AS), is full of ghosts. It was not only material civilization in metropolitan areas that had awaited this elderly exile who returned home after a lapse of approximately twenty years; he also encountered ghosts. Why did he record in this travelogue the fact that he had spectral encounters? As examples of his texts which describe the supernatural in city areas, we can take ghost stories such as "The Altar of the Dead" (1895) and "The Jolly Corner" (1908). AS, however, is a noteworthy text in that James himself sees ghosts as well as suggests his own view of them. Karen Scherzinger points out about ghostliness in AS that "James [...] becomes as vividly drawn, yet as ethereal and impermanent, as the Newport ghosts" (176): she attempts to identify him, whom "American history has [...] left [...] behind" (176), with ghosts deserted in history. But my emphasis is on what James thinks of American history through his response to and rapport with apparitions, not on the analogy like Scherzinger's quoted above. In discussing AS from such a perspective, I would like to draw on Gothic points of view as well as on Jacques Derrida's hauntology: spectral logic.

What does Derridean philosophy of ghosts have to do with AS? The following passage from his *Specters of Marx* (1993) provides us with a key to the intertextual relationship between his hauntology and ghostliness in AS:

It is necessary to speak *of* the ghost, indeed *to* the ghost and *with* it, from the moment no ethics, no politics, whether revolutionary or not, seems possible and thinkable and *just* that does not recognize in its principle the respect for those others who are no longer or for those others who are not yet *there*, presently living, whether they are already dead or not yet born. No justice — let us not say no law and once again we are not speaking here of laws — seems possible or thinkable without the principle of some *responsibility*, beyond all living present, within that which disjoins the living present, before the ghosts of those who are not yet born or who are already dead, be they victims of wars, political or other kinds of violence, nationalist, racist, colonialist, sexist, or other kinds of exterminations, victims of the oppressions of capitalist imperialism or any of the forms of totalitarianism. (*Specters of Marx* xix)

Derrida here both sympathizes with and attempts to save the ghosts of those who were oppressed in society rather than exorcizes them. By doing so, he aims to reveal violent aspects of capitalism and imperialism and then urges us to construct the society in which the oppressed are rehabilitated.

Like Derrida, James in *AS* observes that ghosts not only oppose materialistic totalitarian America but also are oppressed by it. America is a mysterious area which tells him much about sufferings of ghosts and how dark materialism and totalitarianism are. Classifying the ghosts he encounters in three categories, this paper on *AS* discusses why he is interested in persecuted ghosts. The three categories are the ghosts of outsiders, those of the soldiers who fell in war, and those in confrontation with capitalism.

I. Ghosts as Outsiders

James is surprised to see the New York Ghetto; what I would like to notice here is that he is haunted by images of phantasmagorias: optical devices for projecting ghosts onto screens. Comparing Jews to ghosts on phantasmagoric screens, he describes the whole Ghetto with phantasmagoric metaphors:

[...] [T]he denizens of the New York Ghetto, heaped as thick as the splinters on the table of a glass-blower, had each, like the fine glass particle, his or her individual share of the whole hard glitter of Israel. This diffused intensity, as I [James] have called it, causes any array of Jews to resemble [...] some long nocturnal street where every window in every house shows a maintained light. The way [...] this chapter of history [the chapter of the New York Ghetto] did, all that evening, seem to push, was a matter that made the “ethnic” apparition again sit like a skeleton at the feast. It was fairly as if I could see the spectre grin while the talk of the hour gave me, across the board, facts and figures, chapter and verse, for the extent of the Hebrew conquest of New York. [...] Phantasmagoric for me, accordingly, in a high degree, are the interesting hours I here glance at content to remain — setting in this respect, I recognize, an excellent example to all the rest of the New York phantasmagoria. Let me speak of the remainder only as phantasmagoric too, so that I may both more kindly recall it and the sooner have done with it.
(100-01)

The Jews whom James looks at are both the ruled and rulers: they are confined within the Ghetto as well as occupy it with their growing population. When represented as ghosts, the Jews give him those ambivalent feelings. The Jews as rulers

seem to him uncanny. They — so to speak, strangers — appear to him as ghosts on phantasmagoric screens. James feels “the new chill” (AS 66) when he observes the Ellis Island crowded with Jewish immigrants; he adds that this “chill” means a new kind of horror by which even the “privileged person who has had an apparition, seen a ghost in his supposedly safe old house” (AS 66) is overwhelmed. James in the Ellis Island suggests that the horror of immigrants is still stronger than that of traditional ghosts. He finds in the Jews “*their* monstrous, presumptuous interest” (67): growing Jewish immigrants strike him as “the Hebrew conquest of New York” (101). But it is hasty to define James as an anti-Semite, for he also thinks each of Jews in the Ghetto has “like the fine glass particle, his or her individual share of the whole hard glitter of Israel” (100) and that “they [the Jews] were all there [in the New York Ghetto] for race” (101).

James’s contradictory attitudes toward Jews can be found in his description of the cityscape of the Ghetto as well. He feels that unlike “the dark, foul, stifling Ghettos of other remembered cities” (101), the New York Ghetto is in “conditions so little sordid, so highly ‘evolved’” (103). Recalling the appearance of a tenement house, he observes: “The white marble was surely the New Jerusalem note, and we followed that note, up and down the district, the rest of the evening, through more happy changes than I may take time to count” (103). These statements of his can be regarded as friendly to Jews.

As we have seen, James’s view of Jews oscillates between Semitism and anti-Semitism. In Jonathan D. Sarna’s words, Semitism leads to the “Jew next door” and anti-Semitism to the “mythical Jew” (Sarna 63). Just as intellectuals in nineteenth-century America “held different views at different times about different Jews, and never reconciled them” (Sarna 61), so too

did James. He is haunted by the undecidability of distinguishing the “mythical Jew” from the “Jew next door.” The word “undecidability” is borrowed from Derrida, and it is in order to show that James’s contradictory views of Jews allow us to read them in terms of deconstruction that I employ the word undecidability. Deconstruction “is the vigilant seeking-out of [...] blindspots or moments of self-contradiction where a text involuntarily betrays the tension between rhetoric and logic, between what it manifestly *means to say* and what it is nonetheless *constrained to mean*. To ‘deconstruct’ a piece of writing is therefore to operate a kind of strategic reversal, seizing on precisely those unregarded details (casual metaphors, footnotes, incidental turns of argument) which are always, and necessarily, passed over by interpreters of a more orthodox persuasion” (Norris 19). According to Norris’s definition of deconstruction, it can be said that James’s use of analogy of Jews to specters is regarded as a significant expression because it has been thought of as one of “unregarded details” in a text. I would like to continue to focus on the self-contradictory James who wavers between “rhetoric” (the haunted Ghetto) and “logic” (Semitism).

One of the effects which the haunted Ghetto has on James is that he considers the whole of New York as a phantasmagoric Gothic scene. In a restaurant of the Ghetto, James feels that there is the ghost of Guy Fawkes: a British terrorist who attempted to explode Parliament at the beginning of the seventeenth century:

Each warm lighted and supplied circle, each group of served tables and smoked pipes and fostered decencies and unprecedented accents, beneath the extravagant lamps, took on thus, for the brooding critic [James], a likeness to that terrible modernized and civilized room in the Tower

of London, haunted by the shade of Guy Fawkes, which had more than once formed part of the scene of the critic's taking tea there. In this chamber of the present urbanities the wretched man had been stretched on the rack, and the critic's ear [...] could still always catch, in pauses of talk, the faint groan of his ghost. (105)

This restaurant draws James into the early-seventeenth-century space. The "shade of Guy Fawkes," who has stolen in a common scene of "taking tea," shows to James the inside of "the Tower of London" notorious for tortures. His reference to Guy Fawkes also is ambiguous because it is not clear whether he is afraid of or sympathetic with the ghost. This ambiguity seems to derive from James's intimacy with "old knighthood astride of its caparisoned charger" (105) and from his sympathy with Guy Fawkes's sufferings. To James who carries on "the consecrated English tradition," a criminal like Guy Fawkes seems "the dragon most rousing, over the land, the proper spirit of St. George" (105). Why does he regard himself as a knight anachronistically? This pseudo-chivalry derives from his social pretensions with which he despises a Guy Fawkes who disturbs the established order. From the fact that the light and the sound of the Ghetto restaurant contribute greatly to the appearance of Guy Fawkes's ghost, we may infer that James also considers the Jews — those who were unrightfully separate from the mainstream of society — to be uncanny. First of all, it is the lamplight and Jews' speech that remind James of the Gothic landscape such as "the Tower of London" where Guy Fawkes's ghost suffers. If we postulate that the lamplight is the light of a film projector and that Jews' voice that of actors, the scene which James looks at can be considered as that of a horror movie. His eyesight and auditory sensation are seized with Gothic effects.

As we have seen, James connects phantasmagorias with ghosts. Terry Castle calls this kind of method “spectral technology” (Castle 26). To delve into the significance of the phantasmagoria image in *AS* more deeply, I would like to refer to Castle’s view of writers’ uses of phantasmagoria images. Writers’ figurative use of phantasmagorias increases their “sensitivities,” which lead up to their “visionary” recognition of the world (Castle 48). Just as symbolist writers attempt to find the “spiritual truth” (Castle 48) by means of phantasmagoria images, so too, in my view, does James.

James as the seeker of a Gothic landscape tries to grasp the “spiritual truth” of the dead who were done political or racial violence as well as committed their crimes. In Richmond, James finds in blacks their violence as well as their painful past. He associates them with a prison like a haunted castle:

There had been an indistinct sign for him [James] — “somewhere there” had stood the Libby prison; an indication that flung over the long years ever so dreary a bridge. He lingered to take it in — from so far away it came, the strange apparition in the dress of another day; and with the interest of noting at the same time how little it mattered for any sort of intensity (whether of regret or of relief) that the structure itself, so sinister to the mind’s eye, should have materially vanished. It was still there enough to parade its poor ghosts, but the value of the ghosts, precisely, was that they consented, all alike, on either side, to the grand epic dimness. (278)

Louis S. Gross points out that one of the characteristics of the American Gothic is to delineate the encounter with blacks (Gross 91). According to Gross, the encounter with blacks is also that with anxiety (Gross 90). This is true in the case of

James who visits Richmond: black specters represent anxiety and terror. The “Libby prison,” which has housed numerous black prisoners in the past, is located in the other world. To cross the bridge to the “Libby prison” is to enter the nether world. “[S]o dreary a bridge” is the one between the visible world and the spirit world. Black prisoners’ ghosts go across “so dreary a bridge” to overwhelm James. He figures the crimes, punishment, and violence, which have accumulated for long years, as the prison; the evil place called the haunted prison acts as a trigger for James’s restlessness because he writes: “I [James] had found my own [ease] threatened, I remember” (276). His look at invisible “ghosts” by means of his inward eye subjects himself to the mysteriousness of the “Libby prison” as the nether world.

James not only fears the black prisoners’ “ghosts” but also attempts to respond to their appeal. This attempt mentally enables him to cross the gulf that opens between the visible world and the other world. Ambiguous as the amount of his sympathy with the “ghosts” is, he tries to establish a rapport with their unhappy history, which I think consists mainly of political and racial persecution. What he feels by attempting to find in the “ghosts” “the grand epic dimness” is the embryonic sense of justice.

II. Ghosts, War, and the Gothicism of Blood

As might be expected, many prisoners in the “Libby prison” bleed owing to punishment and acts of violence. Richmond, whose dark past consists of persecution, violence, and murder, is for James as “restless analyst” (272) the representation of anxiety. Presenting an image of disturbance, Richmond which he himself calls “the haunted scene” (272) overwhelms him. Let us read his mind, which is struck with horror. His fear of

Richmond is described as follows:

They hang together on the dreadful page, the cities of the supreme holocaust, the final massacres, the blood, the flames, the tears; they are chalked with the sinister red mark at sight of which the sensitive nerve of association forever winces. If the mere shadow had that penetrative power, what affecting virtue might accordingly not reside in the substances, the place itself, the haunted scene, as one might figure it, of the old, the vast intensity of drama? One thing at least was certain — that, however the sense of actual aspects was to disengage itself, I [James] could not possibly have drawn near with an intelligence more respectfully and liberally prepared for hospitality to it. (272)

This description of Richmond is laden with the Gothicism of blood; sinister reds — bloodshed, flame, and “red mark” — are enumerated one after another. The violence which war madness provokes damages one both physically and psychologically. It can be said that James, who imagines the bloodshed in wartime city areas, shrieks of terror, and raging flames, instantly builds up a mental image of a Gothic landscape: a “haunted scene.” Richmond as “the dreadful page” is a Gothic text by which James as its reader is given synesthesia. Also, it is clear that Richmond as text emphasizes the horror of bloodshed since each of its “holocaust” scenes is full of reds.

It is nothing but the repeated imagery of blood that haunts James and his travel companions — that is, his readers — in Richmond pertinaciously. He summarizes a citizen’s view of this city:

One had had brutally to put it to one’s self after a conscientious stare about: “This then the tragic ghost-haunted

city, this the center of the vast blood-drenched circle, one of the *most* blood-drenched, for miles and miles around, in the dire catalogue aforesaid?" One had counted on a sort of registered consciousness of the past, and the truth was that there appeared, for the moment, on the face of the scene, no discernible consciousness, registered or unregistered, of anything. (272)

James's imaginative grasp of Richmond through his interlocutor's talk represents the Gothic. Fred Botting makes a succinct statement of the internalization of Gothic forms: "If they [Gothic castles, villains, and ghosts] remained, they constituted more as signs of internal states and conflicts than of external threats. [...] Gothic became part of an internalized world of guilt, anxiety, despair [...]" (Botting 10). Such an image as Richmond, the "ghost-haunted city" gives its citizens is the urban area filled with bloodshed. Also, the visit to Richmond—that is, the heart of the Civil War battlefield—becomes a reckless act of self-destruction because this "ghost-haunted city" is situated right in the center of "the vast blood-drenched circle." Richmond does not rise to the surface of a traveler's consciousness at all; however, this cityscape turns to a dreamscape and then comes to possess a powerful capacity to draw him / her into a fantasy world as soon as he / she recalls the shadowy side of history.

Disguising itself as a ghost, war appears to James. Let us look at the scene where the war as specter shows itself:

[...] [T]he slight, pale, bleeding Past, in a patched home-spun suit, stands there taking the thanks of the bloated Present — having woundedly rescued from thieves and brought to his door the fat, locked pocket-book of which that personage appears the owner. (249)

It is the personified “Past” that appears in this scene. The “Past,” the ghost of a Confederate soldier who critically injured, returns to Richmond from a battlefield, is in a position to criticize “the bloated Present,” the incarnation of the Federal Government. The ghost of the “Past” haunts James and then gives him a message, which criticizes the Federal Government for disregarding the support, both material and mental, to the soldiers who fell in war. The “bloated Present” shows off the “pocket-book,” which is “fat” but “locked”; therefore, it is difficult for their bereaved family even to erect splendid tombstones over a grave. The “Past” makes James its spokesman.

Again, we find James’s ambivalence about ghosts, which makes it difficult for us to decide whether or not he sympathizes with them. Sharon Cameron points out about ambivalence in *AS*: “[T]hey [Disparate points of view] are significant because they exemplify the omnipresence of consciousness, identifying it with all points of view, even those in opposition, demonstrating thereby that there is no place in the book where consciousness has not been made to penetrate. [...] [C]onflicts become occasions for consciousness to proliferate, as in a dialogue which would keep going, or keep exchanging, not so much viewpoints held by consciousness as, more simply still, diverse manifestations of it” (Cameron 5). According to Cameron’s theory, James, who thinks that the proliferation of consciousness is of great value, plays with conflicts rather than undergoes them. While he plays with conflicts, James raises a complicated issue concerning hospitality. It seems to me that his conception of hospitality is similar to Derrida’s. Derrida considers hospitality as antinomy: on the one hand we extend our hospitality to our guests without reservation, but on the other hand we tend to hesitate to do so on account of respectability (*De l'hospitalité* 98). It is not clear whether James

gives ghosts hospitality, while it can be said that he aims to criticize violence from specters' points of view.

III. Hauntology in Industrial Society

What is violence in *AS*? It is a force to marginalize the dead. James, who abhors industrial society so deeply that he figures it as a "monster" (59), takes the side of specters marginalized by material civilization. His "The Altar of the Dead" anticipates the criticism of urban violence from specters' points of view, and so it is significant to refer to that supernatural tale. George Stransom laments that the dead are marginalized in city areas: "They [Ghosts] had no organized service, no reserved place, no honour, no shelter, no safety. Even ungenerous people provided for the living, but even those who were called most generous did nothing for the others [the dead]" (59). Stransom comes to care about the dead and then worships them owing to his fiancée, Mary Antrim's death: her death is a force to make the living extend their openhanded hospitality to the dead. "There were other ghosts in his [Stransom's] life than the ghost of Mary Antrim. [...] He had formed little by little the habit of numbering his Dead: it had come to him tolerably early in life that there was something one had to do for them" (59). As is exemplified in this quotation, the word "Dead" is not a common noun but a proper one. What the emergence of the word "Dead" as proper noun means is that Stransom has an addiction to occupy himself with developing rapport with the dead, who tend to be isolated in material civilization; in this sense he can be considered as James's alter ego.

James's rapport with ghosts concurs with Derrida's in responding to them. Let us look at Derrida's hauntology:

To answer for the dead, to respond to the dead. To correspond and have it out with [s'expliquer avec] obsessive

haunting, in the absence of any certainty or symmetry. Nothing is more serious and nothing is more true, nothing is more exact [*juste*] than this phantasmagoria. The specter weighs [*pèse*], it thinks [*pense*], it intensifies and condenses itself within the very side of life, within the most living life, the most singular (or, if one prefers, individual) life. (*Specters of Marx* 109)

For Derrida, the dead are everlastingly alive; he urges us the living to cultivate the memory of them. James, who holds communion with ghosts marginalized in a cityscape like Stransom, finds the afterglow of ghosts in modern city areas.

The main reason why ghosts allow James to see psychic phenomena is that an industrial city is the most serious of threats to the *raison d'être* of ghosts. He suddenly sees a ghost when he visits the White House:

One circled about the place [the White House] as for meeting the ghosts, and one paused, under the same impulse, before the high palings of the White House drive, as if wondering at haunted ground. There the ghosts stood in their public array, spectral enough and clarified; yet scarce making it easier to 'place' the strange, incongruous blood-drops, as one looked through the rails, on that revised and freshened page. (262)

James, who T. J. Lustig supposes returned to America in order to seek its wonders (Lustig 219), might get excited about psychic phenomena. In the White House scene quoted above, however, ghosts do not appear as the representation of horror but as that of what might be expelled by capitalism. The ghosts that dripping their blood, wander through the White House are powerless in front of this building — the center of power and imperialism — whose extension has taken place at great cost.

James compares the extended white wall to a “revised and freshened page,” and the White House, the emblem of the “‘artistic’ Federal city” (262) which emphasizes “symmetries” (262), stands as a force to paint the page, which gives a haunted scene, white. In front of the White House, James feels that ghosts have greater difficulty in getting their own place in capitalistic society, and faces the threat of capitalism which chases away the supernatural in a moment of time.

The confrontation between capitalism and ghosts is evident in Boston as well. While “for business, for a commercial, an organizing energy of the first order, the indications would seem to abound [in Boston] “where it [is] to be suggested to me [James] that their meaning [is] capable on occasion of turning to the sinister” (AS 179), ghosts are marginalized. James conveys what they feel to us:

From the other vision, the sight of the “decline in the social scale,” the lapse into shabbiness and into bad company, we only suffer, for the ghosts in that case either refuse to linger, or linger at the most with faces ashamed and as if appealing against their association.

Such was the condition of the Charles Street ghosts, it seemed to me — shades of a past that had once been so thick and warm and happy; they moved, dimly, through a turbid medium in which the signs of their old life looked soiled and sordid. Each of them was there indeed, from far, far back; they met me on the pavement, yet it was as if we could pass but in conscious silence [...]. (181)

The phrase “From the other vision” at the opening of this passage indicates the viewpoint that we will see ghosts marginalized in industrial society. James attempts to juxtapose the industrial society where commercial values are chosen over any other

one with specters; such a comparison is drawn in terms of such binary oppositions as new / old, noise / silence. Contrary to a noisy commercial area, the Boston ghosts compel respectful silence and then draw James into the past endlessly. Interestingly enough, Ronald Schleifer points out about the Gothic in James that it is the art of silence (Schleifer 27). What James reflects on “in conscious silence” when he prowls the streets is the specters’ criticism of present commercialism from the past point of view.

Ghosts are also associated with “silence” in James’s “The Jolly Corner.” Spencer Brydon, who returns to his hometown, New York after a lapse of about thirty years, prowls through his birthplace every night in order to meet his alter ego that might have been commercially successful if he had stayed there; a deep silence broods in the house contrary to all the noise of the city. Brydon prowls through the house as silently as if the noise were an obstacle to the “ghostly life” (353) of his alter ego. His aim is to raise his alter ego in the “ghostly life”— the life filled by silence — away from street noise. It is only in the stillness of the “mystical other world” (352) separated from the noise of material civilization that he can encounter his alter ego.

The crushing force of capitalism dispels the past as niche for ghosts more and more steadily. As soon as James, who visits an old-fashioned house in Newport which has stood since the War of Independence, is surprised at the influence of industrialization on that building, he also pays attention to ghosts lurking there:

Here [In Newport], alas, cold change was installed; the place had become a public office [...]. For me [James] there were special ghosts on the staircase, known voices in the brown old rooms — presences that one would have

liked, however, to call a little to account. "People don't do these things"; people didn't let so clear a case — clear for sound curiosity — go like that; they didn't, somehow, even if they were only ghosts. (163)

Unlike war, capitalism puts "cold" pressure on specters; instead of shedding blood, it establishes modern equipments everywhere and then tries to isolate the supernatural from modern society. In other words, capitalism suppresses ghosts, who cannot be reasonably grasped, from its consciousness, makes its chief aim to remove them, and occupies itself defining them as outsiders. Ghosts draw James into the "mystical other world" and allow him to criticize the fast tempo of bloated civilization in America.

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