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Introduction: The “Near and Familiar” and the “Far and Strange”

The following passage from the preface of *The American* is one of Henry James’s fruitful insights into the great literary works:

Of the men of largest responding imagination before the human scene, of Scott, of Balzac, even of the coarse, comprehensive, prodigious Zola, we feel, I think, that the deflexion toward either quarter has never taken place; that neither the nature of the man’s faculty nor the nature of his experience has ever quite determined it. His current remains therefore extraordinarily rich and mixed, washing us successively with the warm wave of the near and familiar and the tonic shock, as may be, of the far and strange. (*Literary Criticism* 2: 1062)

The words of the “near and familiar” and the “far and strange” are focused on by T. J. Lustig, who recently argues the ghostly in James’s works (2), as the nature of the ghostly is a presence of absence and assumes such duality. This therefore should prove that the passage evidently manifests an aspect of literary imagination of James, who repeatedly treats the ghostly in his works. The reason why he sometimes deals with the ghostly is because its nature is the “near and familiar” and the “far and strange.”
The “far and strange” and the “near and familiar” can thus be a key to the reading of his ghost stories, as well as to an understanding of nature of ghost. As Lustig points out “James's early sense of connection between the supernatural and the natural” (1), James remarks that “[a] good ghost-story must be connected at hundred points with the common objects of life” (Literary Criticism 1: 742). In this case, the natural, or the common objects of life, and the supernatural, or the ghostly, respectively correspond to the “near and familiar” and in contrast the “far and strange” from some point of view. Indeed, James frequently associates the “near and familiar,” or “the common objects of life,” with the “far and strange,” by contrast, or the ghostly; for instances, the ghostly is connected with the rental house in “The Ghostly Rental,” with the old clothes given by the dead sister in “The Romance of Certain Old Clothes,” with the treasure box in “The Third Person,” and with the old house in New York in “The Jolly Corner.”

These “common objects of life” connected with the ghostly are often partly similar to each other: they are somewhat a kind of gift or legacy, which is a gift from an ancestor. Importantly gift is also essentially attributed to at once the “near and familiar” and the “far and strange.” It can build up human relationships, which is “near and familiar,” but, after receiving a gift, become a sort of debt that is “far and strange.” In addition, the gift as a memory frequently indicates a presence of absence. This must be one of the reasons why James repeatedly deals with gifts throughout his career.

Ghosts and gifts, which are essentially similar to each other in some respects, somewhat directly link together in some of James's works from “The Romance of Certain Old Clothes” and “The Ghostly Rental,” some of James's relatively early ghost stories, to “The Jolly Corner” and “The Bench of Desolation,” some of his latest works. With the relationship between ghost and gift, Robert B. Pippin accurately points out:

… successful love … some way is found around the “crudities of mutual resistance,” and something like the reciprocity or right sort of acknowledgement of
dependence necessary for love is finally possible. The usually Jamesean ending, with its renunciations and failure, does not occur. It is avoided largely because Brydon can now give up his obsession with himself, his haunted notion of some determinate real self, his hunt for who he really is or might have been ….

(108–09)

Since gift is normally opposite to egoistic individualism, according to Pippin, reciprocity and dependence, that is, giving and taking a gift, can be an effective way to exorcize some of Jamesean ghosts evoked by modern individualism (108). This may be one of the generally acknowledged opinions on gift, on the ghostly, or on their relation in modern society.

This essay, nevertheless, discovers a more intricate and difficult aspect of relation between ghost and gift in James's works, proves the existence of a kind of catalyst that sometimes connects them by focusing on his early and late short novels, which are alpha and omega of his career and thus should indicate his imaginary direction consistent throughout his career. The catalyst is the market. The noteworthy configuration between the ghostly, the gifts, and the market should make James's works attractive and unique, and thus they deserve a closer and deeper reading.

The Ghostly Gifts and the Market

How do the ghostly and the gifts relate to each other in the works? In “The Ghostly Rental,” the gift is given to a poor old man, Captain Diamond, by the ghost who is his daughter mistakenly killed by him and then haunts his house. It is a rental fee for the residence paid by her in order to save him and thus a sort of forgiveness, but never fills his mind: “[Diamond says] ‘… We have an appointment to meet four times a year, and then I catch it!’ / [the narrator says] ‘She has never forgiven you?’ / ‘She has forgiven me as the angels forgive! That’s what I can’t stand—the soft, quiet way she looks at me. I’d rather she twisted a knife about in my heart—O Lord, Lord, Lord!’” (176) The gifts from the dead usually calls up the memory of the dead,
which is a presence of absence and thus both the “near and familiar” and the “far and strange.” When they turn into a sort of debt, the gifts from the dead cannot fill the living’s mind, possess him or her with deep remorse like a kind of curse, and evoke the ghostly. Concerning ghosts, James talks in *The Portrait of a Lady*: “I [Ralph Touchett] might show it [ghost] to you [Isabel Archer], but you’d never see it. The privilege is n’t [sic] given to everyone; it’s not enviable. It has never been seen by a young, happy, innocent person like you. You must have suffered first, have suffered greatly, have gained some miserable knowledge. In that way your eyes are opened to it …” (64). The gifts and the ghostly sometimes involve grief, and as a result are frequently similar to each other. The “near and familiar” and the “far and strange” then can be not only the attribute of the gifts particularly from the dead, but also that of the ghostly.

The gifts that cause various suffering and evoke the ghostly possess a curious characteristic in some of James’s works: they are sometimes closely concerned with the market, even though gift, according to Mauss, can be considered as the opposite of the market exchange. As a result, the market is crucially concerned not only with the gifts, but also with the apparitions, connects them, and besides can be even a matrix for them in “The Romance of Certain Old Clothes,” in “The Ghostly Rental,” in “The Third Person,” in “The Jolly Corner,” and in “The Bench of Desolation.” For example:

Meanwhile, at Mrs Wingrave’s, there was a greater rustling of silks, a more rapid clicking of scissors and flying of needles, than ever. The good lady had determined that her daughter should carry from home the genteelest outfit that her money could buy or that the country could furnish. All the sage women in the Province were convened, and their united taste was brought to bear on Perdita’s wardrobe. Rosalind’s situation, at this moment, was assuredly not to be envied. The poor girl had an inordinate love of dress, and the very best taste in the world … ("The Romance of Certain Old Clothes” 250–51)
This passage shows that the gift for bridal, which later calls up the double, is not an authentic legacy, but originally the merchandise purchased in the market. The ghost in “The Ghostly Rental” gives also the old man the gift through the market exchange. The ghost in “The Third Person” was a smuggler, whose treasure box as a kind of gift to his ancestors also evokes the ghostly. Smuggling is obviously related with the market. Spencer Brydon in “The Jolly Corner,” who lives on the rent for an old house descended to him in New York, chases the phantom of another possibility, or of the business-oriented man he would have become had he remained in America.

Those things that evoke the ghosts are the merchandise traded in the market; it should imply that the ghosts would represent a sort of mystification of merchandise, as well as the remorse, which precisely corresponds to James’s idea that “[a] good ghost-story must be connected … with the common objects of life” (Literary Criticism 1: 742). The mystification of commodities is exactly parallel to his idea of the rich mixture of “the warm wave of the near and familiar and the tonic shock … of the far and strange” (Literary Criticism 2: 1062). His stories are sometimes full of the mystified “common objects of life” and then their characters are occasionally possessed by the ghostly possessing merchandise.

The Fetishism of Commodity, or the Ghost Haunting the Market

While he defines James’s works as the dramatization and the critique of the rise and embedding of consumerism in American culture, Jean Christophe Agnew reveals the change of James’s view of consuming society: “… ‘consuming vision’ as such appears first as an ambiguous but often sinister theme in his early work, reemerges as a disruptive force within the writing of his middle years, only to end as the constitutive power of his last complete novel” (84). This evidently points out the shift of James’s emphasis from individual events to the “constitutive power,” that is, the comprehensive social system. James’s essay on Émile Zola, which is published in 1903, implies that his thinking focuses on the “constitutive power”:
It was the fortune, it was in a manner the doom, of Les Rougon-Macquart to deal with things almost always in gregarious form, to be a picture of number, of classes, crowds, confusions, movements, industries ….

To make his characters swarm, and to make the great central thing they swarm about “as large as life,” portentously, heroically big, that was the task he set himself very nearly from the first, that was the secret he triumphantly mastered. Add that the big central thing was always some highly representative institution of the France of his time …. (Literary Criticism 2: 877, 883, original emphasis)

The word of “the great central thing they swarm” and that of “in gregarious form” would concisely signify James’s insight into the “constitutive power” and into a sort of social totality respectively, which is the evidence that James can treat society as a whole.

The problem of reality of Jamesean ghosts should imply the consistency and the change of his interest concerning human society. The ghostly in his early works occasionally tends to be interpreted as real; by contrast, the reality of the ghosts in his late ones is relatively indiscernible and then they ought to be actually the psychological, or the visions caused by characters’ neurosis. For instance, the ghostly in “The Jolly Corner” is obviously caused by a sort of neurosis and must be malady brought about by a kind of social problem. This change must be parallel to the shift that Agnew points out: the real apparitions are relatively concerned with a “sinister theme” and the visions sometimes “constitutive power.” The frequent haunting in his late works thus should result partly from his acute interest in society system. When the ghostly, however, is a sign of the sinister related evidently to economic system, it must indicate that James depicts intermittently but consistently economic problems by means of metaphors of the ghostly. (2) Some of ghosts in his late stories would be thus clear manifestations of the latent consistency.

Regarding the strange relationship between the market and the ghostly, Karl Marx discovers that the ghostly haunting in exchange value possesses the commodity,
which leads to fetishism (163–67). In other words, the social structure manifested in exchangeable value mystifies the commodity.\(^3\) Succeeding to Marx’s discovery, György Lukács considers it as a kind of social malady (83–92) and contends that “a man’s own activity, his own labour becomes something objective and independent of him, something that controls him by virtue of an autonomy alien to man” (87), and then Jacques Derrida questions on how men become subjected, in their social relations, to the specters that haunt the social relations among merchandise (245–46). The anguish that evokes the apparitions in the works therefore should occasionally results from a sort of social malady caused by the market: the Jamesean ghosts sometimes possess the total social relations.\(^4\)

Significantly, the merchandise then can be like the mysterious mirror that reflects the doubles in many of James’s works:

… Perdita hastened back to her room, opening the door abruptly. Rosalind, as usual, was before the glass, but in a position which caused the other to stand still, amazed. She had dressed herself in Perdita’s cast-off wedding veil and wreath, and on her neck she had hung the full string of pearls which the young girl had received from her husband as a wedding-gift. These things had been hastily laid aside, to await their possessor’s disposal on her return from the country. Bedizened in this unnatural garb Rosalind stood before the mirror, plunging a long look into its depths and reading heaven knows what audacious visions. Perdita was horrified. It was a hideous image of their old rivalry come to life again. (“The Romance of Certain Old Clothes” 252)

This citation best shows that the doubles can be interpreted as a kind of malady caused by the problematic relationship between human and merchandise, which is concerned with whether ghosts actually appear or whether they are merely the vision that results from a kind of neurosis. Collin Meissner says that “[p]ure exchange economies, which is what James believed America had become, rely, according to Simmel, exclusively on money to ‘tie being and owning together,’ since ‘ownership’
provides an ‘opportunity for the Ego to find its expression in objects’” (274).

The gifts can also be equivalent to such money as Meissner points out, and then be like the mirror that reflects an alter ego. In “The Romance of Certain Old Clothes,” Rosalind envies the clothes given to Perdita’s daughter, because it reminds Rosalind of her lost possibility. She then wears them and identifies herself with an ideal but distorted mirror image, only to die of the possession, which almost seems to be the return of the missed possibility, or the lost wealth for her. In “The Bench of Desolation” the robbed wealth returns as a gift, which is “interest,” with the ghost that compels Herbert Dodd to decide whether he takes the gift or not:

... by a succession of links that fairly clicked to his [Dodd’s] ear as with their perfect fitting, the fate and the pain and the payment of others stood together in a great grim order. Everything there then was his—to make him ask what had been Nan’s, poor Nan’s of the constant question of whether he need have collapsed. She was before him, she was between them [Kate and Dodd], his little dead dissatisfied wife; across all whose final woe and whose lowly grave he was to reach out, it appeared, to take gifts. He saw them too, the gifts; saw them—she bristled with them—in his actual companion’s brave and sincere and authoritative figure, her strangest of demonstrations. But the other appearance was intenser, as if their ghost had waved wild arms; so that half a minute hadn’t passed before the one poor thing that remained of Nan, and that yet thus became a quite mighty and momentous poor thing, was sitting on his lips as for its sole opportunity. (882, original emphasis and emphasis added)

The returned wealth seems to reflect Dodd’s painful past because of the poverty that results from Kate Cookham’s robbing his wealth, and evokes the ghost. In “The Third Person” the discovery of the treasure box of the old women’s ancestor also evokes the ghost: “[t]here was a connection between the finding of the box in the vault and the appearance in Miss Susan’s room” (263). As the ghost is two lonely old ladies’ young and handsome ancestor, the treasure box that is a kind of legacy from him to them
also seems to reflect their desire. Curiously, as if possessed by a kind of mirror image, one of them imitates him and then smuggles a book in order to satisfy him. In “The Jolly Corner” Brydon chases the phantom of his own virtual past, the business-oriented man he would have become had he remained in America. This is also the return of another possibility. When he returns to his old house in New York that yields a ground rent, Brydon supposes that “… it’s only a question of what fantastic, yet perfectly possible, development of my own nature I may n’t have missed. It comes over me that I had then a strange alter ego deep down somewhere within me, as the full-blown flower is in the small tight bud …” (449, original emphasis).

In this way, the apparitions or the doubles, which are a sort of returns as non-self of self and thus the “near and familiar” and the “far and strange,” can be frequently comparable to the return of lost wealth as gift, which is also the “near and familiar” and the “far and strange.” The ghosts and the gifts then can be often signs of or metaphors for each other. The ghostly is a sort of ideal but distorted mirror image and the gifts that are the returning wealth are like a mirror that reflects it, which seems to represent the human nature estranged due to fetishism.

Derrida remarks that commodity becomes the mysterious mirror that reflects distortedly human, and makes him/her into the ghostly in collectives (247–49). The market can change almost everything including gift into the ghostly. For example:

… she [Kate] had now created between them an equality of experience. He [Dodd] wasn’t to have done all the suffering, she was to have ‘been through’ things he couldn’t even guess at; and, since he was bargaining away his right ever again to allude to the unforgettable, so much there was of it, what her tacit proposition came to was that they were ‘square’ and might start afresh. (“The Bench of Desolation” 890, original emphasis)

When he receives the gift from Kate, Dodd seems to surrender to the power of money, as well as that of her love. He sells for the gifted money his right to say “the unforgettable,” that is, his poverty because of her unreasonable reparation suit against
him and his memory of his family who died in the poverty. His receiving the gift, to be important, then seems to overlap with a sort of exchange in a way. This also assumes the “near and familiar” and the “far and strange”: getting something is “near and familiar” but losing something in return is “far and strange.” This property is essentially similar to that of the ghostly. In this way, Dodd becomes the ghostly that haunts in the market exchange, which means even human can be changed into the ghostly through exchange value. What James then attempts to describe should be evident: even gift normally opposite to the egoistic market principle is occasionally influenced and changed into the ghostly by the market in modern market economy.

Gift, or Another Ghost in the Market

Nevertheless, at the same time, James remarkably gets gift concerning the market, even though it is apparently opposite to the market. Significantly, it is then supposed that there should be something that builds the intricate relation between market and gift, or makes the ghostly return as the gifts possible. It is noteworthy that the gifts are originally the rental fee that is paid by the ghost for the house occupied by the ghost in “The Ghostly Rental,” the old house that yields a rental fee in “The Jolly Corner,” and the interest from the money robbed by Dodd’s old lover, Kate in “The Bench of Desolation”: the gifts’ economic source is the profit that surplus value turns into and is probably yielded by the blooming economy, where the robbed wealth in the works frequently gets amplified through the market, becomes the gifts, and returns to the original owners. Even though it is certainly related with the social malady in collectives that leads to the apparitions, or the ghostly returns as gift, the economic source of the ghostly returns is manifestly surplus value. (5)

The surplus accompanies the market exchange and interestingly changes the robbed wealth into the gifts through the market. The gift that is derived from surplus value then can paradoxically surpass exchange value, even though fetishism rules modern society. In “The Bench of Desolation” the interest, namely surplus value, from Dodd’s robbed wealth is gifted to the original owner, Dodd. Indeed, the rela-
tionship between the gift and the exchange is actually complicated, for the gift is not only given, but also exchanged in a way. The following citation, nevertheless, slightly reveals that the surplus value to which the gift is economically sourced enigmatically indicates that the system of gift can potentially operate even on the market exchange:

Her [Kate’s] humility became for him [Dodd] at this hour and to this tune, on the bench of desolation, a quantity more prodigious and even more mysterious than that other guaranteed quantity the finger-tips of his left hand could feel the tap of by the action of his right; though what was in especial extraordinary was the manner in which she could keep making him such allowances and yet meet him again, at some turn, as with her residuum for her clever self so great. (890–91)

The description of “[h]er humility became … a quantity more prodigious and even more mysterious than that other guaranteed quantity” should subtly imply that Kate “bristled with” gifts. If she has not had such mind, Kate would not hold the market exchange that yielded the interest. The surplus value of interest can then indicate the “quantity more prodigious and even more mysterious”; it is a way to show her love. It seems to reveal that assuming surplus value, gift can be sometimes actually brought through the market; surplus value can be a means of gift. Derrida also hints that exchange value is inscribed and exceeded by a promise of gift beyond exchange (254). However influenced by a sort of fetishism and thus however ghostly it is, the gift is the ghostly somewhat otherwise than fetishism is: it is another ghost haunting the market which the gift in this case is essentially. The gift then is a constitutive outside of market exchange, because the surplus value that can be sometimes a gift subsists in the market exchange and makes it possible, but, at the same time, somewhat differs from it. Nevertheless, the market then is actually a matrix of gift.

It is an aspect of modern daily life where the market exchange makes almost everything intricately both the “near and familiar” and the “far and strange,” namely the ghostly. The title of “The Bench of Desolation” is also implicative: the word of
“bench” connotes the “near and familiar and that of “desolation” the “far and strange.” When Dodd receives the gifted money, the surplus value that is the economic source of it apparently changes from the “far and strange” to the “near and familiar.” As he realizes that Kate has also suffered from as much pain as he has, seemingly they are “square,” which would be the “near and familiar”: “[h]e waited a moment, dropping again on the seat …. he looked up at her; with the sense somehow that there were too many things and that they were all together, terribly, irresistibly, doubtless blessedly, in her eyes and her whole person; which thus affected him for the moment as more than he could bear” (895). However, it also solemnly impresses the “far and strange,” for it is an event in the desolated fetishistic world. It is such scene of modern society that James attempts to depict.

Conclusion

Jamesean ghosts sometimes possess commodities, or rather exchange value, and thus represent a kind of the malady of social relationship designated as fetishism. The gifts in his works necessarily involve fetishism, when they are merchandise. In this case, they can be like a sign of lost possibility or a mirror to reflect an image ideal but distorted due to fetishism, and consequently evoke the ghostly. The ghosts and the gifts can be signs of or metaphors for each other, especially when the lost wealth turns into gift through the market and returns to the original owners, which implies the ghostly. In this way, the market evokes the ghostly. This would be one of the reasons why James, who is consistently interested in the “near and familiar” and the “far and strange,” describes gifts and ghosts, both of which are essentially the “near and familiar” and the “far and strange.” Suggestively, when the gifts are given through exchange, the system of gift operates on the market, the evidence of which is that the ghostly return is economically sourced to surplus value. His genius should imagine the possibility of the gift that secretly influences and infiltrates the market exchange. The market then seems to be potentially possessed by the ghostly of gift, which somewhat differs from fetishism. James certainly pierces the prevalence in modern daily
life of such intricate relation between gift and market.

Notes

(1) Gift is, for instance, according to Marcel Mauss, the principle for the social integration and thus can overcome the individualistic market economy particularly dominant over the modern world (266, 274–75).

(2) Indeed, there are various types of Jamesean ghosts, but it should be more practical in this case to read the ghost stories in consideration of their ambiguity between the supernatural and the psychological. This would be suggested by James’s implicative style in which roman and realism mingle together. Above all, James himself challenges the novel/romance opposition (Literary Criticism 1: 54–55) and stresses the significance of hybrid between “air of romance” and “element of reality” (Literary Criticism 2: 1061–62). Charles Feidelson observes that James’s “roundabout realism … is almost indistinguishable from a roundabout romanticism” (336, 343) and also Lustig maintains that “… the criticism which argues that James opts for some static point between realism and romance or a resolved mixture of the two genres seems … unsatisfactory …” (57).

(3) Marx eloquently formulates the fetishism of commodity in Capital:

… the commodity-form, and the value-relation of the products of labour within which it appears, have absolutely no connection with the physical nature of the commodity and the material [dinglich] relations arising out of this. It is nothing but the definite social relation between men themselves which assumes here, for them, the fantastic form of a relation between things. In order, therefore, to find an analogy we must take flight into the misty real of religion. There the products of the human brain appear as autonomous figures endowed with a life of their own, which enter into relations both with each other and with the human race. So it is in the world of commodities with the products of men’s hands. I call this the fetishism which attaches itself to the products of labour as soon as they are produced as commodities, and is therefore inseparable from the production of commodities. (65)
(4) Derrida observes that the multiplicity and number belongs to the ghostly and the relation itself causes the mystery of merchandise (245–46). His penetration is parallel to James’s observation that “[i]t was the fortune … of Les Rougon-Macquart to deal with things almost always in gregarious form, to be a picture of number, of classes, crowds, confusions, movements, industries …” (Literary Criticism 2: 877, original emphasis).

(5) Marx defines surplus value as increment or excess over original value and reveals that “[t]he value originally advanced … not only remains intact while in circulation, but increases its magnitude, adds to itself a surplus-value, or is valorized [verwertet sich]” (251–52). Regarding this mechanism, Marx suggestively adds:

… value is here the subject of a process in which … it changes its own magnitude, throws off surplus-value from itself considered as original value, and thus valorizes itself independently. For the movement in the course of which it adds surplus-value is its own movement, its valorization is therefore self-valorization [Selbstverwertung]. By virtue of being value, it has acquired the occult ability to add value to itself (255).

Marx then considers that the embodiments of surplus value are profit, interest, and rent.

(6) Cf. the citation on this essay from page 882 of “The Bench of Desolation.”

Works Cited


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