I.

A difficult task for American college applicants is writing a personal essay that defines them, expresses their individuality, and also makes them admissible at the school of their choice. It is, in fact, such a difficult task that more and more high school students seek help in composing these supposedly revelatory words, thus creating job opportunities for talented writers around the world who offer online assistance and even write complete essays, for a fee. This situation forces admissions officers to screen essays carefully for “suspicious language.” That is done with the help of “red-flag” word lists, one of which claimed, in academic year 2016-17, that “if the words ‘labour,’ ‘parlour,’ or ‘phantasmagoric’ show up anywhere in an essay, we know we’re dealing with some out-of-work teacher from Blackpool who just got clocked by Brexit.”

I shall here not be concerned with the British spellings that Webster altered for American usage, but with “phantasmagoric” and “phantasmagoria.” Are they really red-flag giveaways of a writer’s Britishness? To that question, there is a quick answer: according to GoogleNgrams, “phantasmagoric” and “phantasmagoria” appear just about as often in British as in American usage, at least as far as printed books are concerned. But what exactly does the word mean? “Phantasmagoria” is often used in its metaphorical sense of “(vision of) a rapidly transforming collection or series of imaginary (and usually fantastic) forms, such as may be experienced in a dream or fevered state, or evoked by literary description.” In its original meaning, however, it goes back to the French word fantasmagorie, naming a contraption that helped to produce such illusionary forms, especially in theatrical productions and other performances and spectacles. Fantasmagorie “grew out of optical experiments made by its Belgian inventor Étienne-Gaspard Robertson during the 1780s. It was first

presented in Paris in 1798 and later exhibited in London by Paul de Philipsthal in late 1801 and 1802.”

Alide Cagidemetrio has analyzed this invention as a modern technological means of imagining and representing the past. It was employed, for example, by Nathaniel Hawthorne, who was concerned in his historical fiction “with the blurring of the boundaries between illusion and reality.” She shows that in *The House of the Seven Gables* “the constantly shifting phantasmagoria of figures” in Maule’s Well strongly affects Clifford, that, in *The Scarlet Letter*, Hester Prynne’s memories of the past appear as “an exhibition of phantasmagoric forms,” whereas Pearl’s fancy works with a “preternatural activity” and a “wild energy” that resembles “nothing so much as the phantasmagoric play of the northern lights,” and that, in his *Grimshawe*, Hawthorne offered a retrospective definition as he was aiming toward making a scene “very dreamlike and feverish.” Hawthorne writes: “Scenes and events that have once stained themselves, in deep colours, on the curtain that Time hangs around us, to shut us in from eternity, cannot be quite effaced by the succeeding phantasmagoria, and sometimes, by a palimpsest, show more strongly than they.”

Robertson and Philipsthal (who also worked under the name “Philidor”) used a laterna magica that was hidden from the audience as it projected images on glass slides from behind the stage onto a screen of transparent fabric or onto a literal “smoke screen.” The Berlin panorama painter and optician Johann Carl Enslen and his son Klaus Georg used lit physical objects and living persons whose images could be projected through lenses or mirrors onto the stage. There they could appear life-sized, enlarged, or reduced—whatever the theatrical need might be. Cagidemetrio carefully examines the optical device itself that produces effects that are visible only to the audience, not to the other actors:

By making the theatrical space a “camera obscura”, or a “magic box”, phantasmagoria could project a “totality of effects” on onlookers. At the same time the performance was the result of a concurrence of different means, mirrors, slides of laterna magica, live actors and sounds. All these would be invisible to the audience, while the actors in the pit would not see the effects produced by their bodies and movements reflected by the concealed mirrors and projected upon the
stage. Their know-how about the workings of the optical instruments was the substitute for their lack of an actual vision of the stage.\(^7\)

The new term and the invention that it named must have hit a cultural nerve in the wake of the French Revolution. Robertson produced scenes from the Reign of Terror in an abandoned Parisian Capuchin convent as well as performances with “bleeding nuns,” Death with a scythe, and the three witches as well as Banquo’s ghost from \textit{Macbeth}.\(^8\) A French collection of German ghost stories was published in 1812 under the title \textit{Fantasmagoriana}. It gave strong impulses to Gothic fiction, as it was read in a group session in Switzerland by Mary Shelley, inspiring her to write \textit{Frankenstein} (1818), and by John William Polidori, whose creative response was the story “The Vampyre” (1819). Also present at that \textit{Fantasmagoriana} reading was Lord Byron, who, as Paul Martin suggested, afterwards came to see drama “in the phantasmagorical light shed by the modern stage and its association.”\(^9\)

Goethe was fascinated by the new technological medium and the effects it could create in the theater, most especially for productions of his \textit{Faust}. As Marina Warner showed, Goethe wanted the Earth Spirit in Faust’s study to appear in the form of the pentagram, as represented in Rembrandt’s engraving, \textit{A Scholar in His Study ("Faust")}. For an 1829 production of \textit{Faust}, Goethe wished to use the technique of a laterna magica rear projection upon a screen in the back of the stage, on which an illuminated head could appear in gradually increasing size, creating the illusion of coming closer to the audience in the darkened theater. Goethe wondered how to obtain such a mechanism and two-way mirrors through which the vision of Helen of Troy or the first appearance of Mephistopheles as a poodle could be created, and he asked a correspondent: “Could you please find out, as soon as possible, who constructs such an apparatus, how could we obtain it, and what preparations must be made for it?”\(^10\)

Edgar Allan Poe appears to have known the answer to Goethe’s question. As Cagidemetrio notes, Poe recommended that Americans should follow Enslen’s production techniques of \textit{Macbeth} in making a “shadowy figure” appear in Macbeth’s chair. In the play’s banquet scene when Macbeth proclaims, startled to see the ghost of Banquo, whose murder he had ordered, seated in his chair: “Thou canst not say I
did it. Never shake / Thy gory locks at me.” “Speaking of the usual representation of the banquet-scene in Macbeth,” Poe writes that Friedrich von Raumer, “the German historian, mentions a shadowy figure thrown by optical means into the chair of Banquo, and producing intense effect upon the audience. Enslen, a German optician, conceived this idea, and accomplished it without difficulty.”

Martin calls particular attention to the contrast, in producing Macbeth, between an actor’s body playing Banquo and the apparition of Banquo’s ghost, for “the excitement of Philipsthal’s Phantasmagoria, no doubt heightened by its technical crudity and lack of focus, . . . allowed [audiences], albeit momentarily, to forget that these images too were the result of conscious and workmanlike contrivance. . . . Philipsthal demonstrated, in a most spectacular way, that such excitements could be standardized” and his “exhibition offered Gothic thrills as a commodity, and, by presenting spectre-raising as a novel entertainment worth paying for in itself, the Phantasmagoria made the exhilaration of the fantastic a mechanical wonder.” It was a mechanical wonder that also anticipated some of the effects of cinema.

Summoning further examples from De Quincey and Carlyle and highlighting the parallel transformation of the panorama from a new invention into a metaphor, Cagidemetrio invokes Walter Benjamin’s view of the flâneur who abandons himself in the phantasmagorias of the marketplace and who sees Haussmann’s transformations of Paris as emblem of the phantasmagoria of civilization itself. In that passage Benjamin was alluding to the “commodity fetishism” section of Karl Marx’s Capital, in which Marx described the exchange value of objects that, as they enter the marketplace in capitalism, replaces their original use value and transforms physical objects and human relations into commodities that have little to do with the original forms and relations. Marx writes: “Es ist nur das bestimmte gesellschaftliche Verhältnis der Menschen selbst, welches hier für sie die phantasmagorische Form eines Verhältnisses von Dingen annimmt” (It is only the particular social relation between human beings that here assumes the phantasmagoric form of a relation between things). The official English translation unfortunately omits Marx’s reference to phantasmagoria. Whereas Jacques Derrida questioned Marx’s certainty of the prior existence of a pure use-value state, surprisingly without examining the technical apparatus of the phantasmagoria that underlies what Derrida considers Marx’s “conjuring trick.” Tom Gunning has interpreted this passage as follows: “The
Phantasmagoria not only conceals the human agency and technical process involved, but operates directly on human perception. Within this critical tradition, the phantasmagoria appears not only as an optical phenomenon, but as a powerful spectatorial effect. The consumer under capitalism becomes preeminently an audience for a spectacle, a spectator.”

A new technology intended to create spectatorial thrills—whether it worked with laterna magica slides on a backdrop screen or with physical objects and living persons projected right onto the stage by optical means—thus became a metaphor that could aid the historical imagination, serve as an aesthetic inspiration, create Gothic thrills, and illustrate the processes of reification and commodification. Phantasmagoria extended not only to a marketplace that transformed the use value of objects into unreally abstract and ghostlike commodities but also to the reification of human beings themselves.

This is apparent in the case of people who are placed outside the social compact, as was the case for African Americans in U.S. Jim Crow society, and W. E. B. Du Bois may have thought of a nineteenth-century Macbeth production when he cast the Negro in the role of a phantasmagorically imagined Banquo. In a passage of The Souls of Black Folk (1903), he wrote about the aftermath of the end of slavery:

“Shout, O children! Shout, you’re free! For God has bought your liberty!”
Years have passed away since then,—ten, twenty, forty; forty years of national life, forty years of renewal and development, and yet the swarthy spectre sits in its accustomed seat at the Nation’s feast. In vain do we cry to this our vastest social problem:—
“Take any shape but that, and my firm nerves Shall never tremble!”
The Nation has not yet found peace from its sins; the freedman has not yet found in freedom his promised land.  

Cast as the ghostlike reminder of enslavement and the incompleteness of Reconstruction, Du Bois’s allegorical Negro is the nation’s “swarthy spectre,” a Gothic reminder of America’s troublesome past and historical guilt toward the Negro. Its victim now comes to haunt the present and doom the future of a country that speaks collectively, in the first-person plural, and in the voice of Macbeth. The
passage Du Bois quotes comes from Macbeth’s response to the second appearance of Banquo’s ghost:

What man dare, I dare:
Approach thou like the rugged Russian bear.
The arm’d rhinoceros, or the Hycan tiger
Take any shape but that, and my firm nerves
Shall never tremble! Or be alive again,
And dare me to the desert with thy sword;
If trembling I inhabit then protest me
The baby of a girl. Hence, horrible shadow!
Unreal mockery, hence! (III:4)

No wild beast, no challenge to a duel could be as frightful as the reminder of Macbeth’s guilt in the shape of Banquo’s ghost, and in Du Bois’s adaptation of these lines, the “swarthy spectre” plays a political role, disturbing the white feast in a way that is more frightful than any wild animal could be. The association of America with Macbeth trembling at the sight of Banquo’s spectre may also have prompted Du Bois to imagine a contrasting scene and write, “I sit with Shakespeare and he winces not.”

In the following we shall see whether the suspicious word phantasmagoria, its contexts as a theatrical device, and its Gothic and allegorical possibilities might be helpful in a reading of Henry James’s observations in *The American Scene*, especially in the long passages devoted to Ellis Island and New York’s Jewish Ghetto, where James writes of an “ethnic apparition” sitting “like a skeleton at the feast” and arrives at the vision of what he calls a “New York phantasmagoria.”

II.

Here’s a knocking indeed! If a man were porter of hell-gate, he should have old turning the key.

--The Porter in *Macbeth* II:iii
Henry James liked to mark his detachment from the strange American world he returned to in 1904 by putting words in quotation marks. In New York, James wondered whether there could exist an American equivalent for Émile Zola’s “love of the human aggregation, the artificial microcosm, which had to spend itself on great shops, great businesses, great ‘apartment-houses,’ of inferior, of mere Parisian scale.”¹⁹ His answer was a probable no, for “New York was not going . . . to produce both the maximum of ‘business’ spectacle and the maximum of ironic reflection on it” (82).

James visits the immigrant arrival point and quickly sets up a theatrical metaphor for what he sees at “the terrible little Ellis Island, the first harbour of refuge and stage of patience for the million or so of immigrants annually knocking at our official door” (84).²⁰ Reminding the reader of the Porter scene in Macbeth, ²¹ James extends the metaphor: “Before this door, which opens to them there only with a hundred forms and ceremonies, grindings and grumblings of the key, they stand appealing and waiting, marshalled, herded, divided, subdivided, sorted, sifted, searched, fumigated, for longer or shorter periods—the effect of all which prodigious process, an intendedly ‘scientific’ feeding of the mill, is again to give the earnest observer a thousand more things to think of than he can pretend to retail” (84).

Marveling that the hours he spent observing immigrant arrivals “were but a tick or two of the mighty clock that never, never stops” (85), James keeps returning to the process of “assimilation” (124, in quotation marks) with mechanical metaphors, as he likens it to a mill, a clock, and a colossal machinery. He responds strongly to the result of what the machine seems to produce, and to produce en masse, and what he observes in an electric street-car: “The carful, again and again, is a foreign carful; a row of faces, up and down, testifying, without exception, to alienism unmistakable, alienism undisguised and unashamed” (125). In unflattering observations, The American Scene wonders what this “alienism” means for America and what James’s own role as a “restored absentee” (126) could possibly be, reduced to being a mere spectator, but also what their transformation means for the immigrants themselves and his encounters with them.

America was changing and would be changing more and more, as the line between American and alien was more difficult to draw: “Who and what is an alien, when it comes to that, in a country peopled from the first under the jealous eye of history?—peopled, that is, by migrations at once extremely recent, perfectly traceable and
urgently required. They are still, it would appear, urgently required--if we look about far enough for the urgency; though of that truth such a scene as New York may well make one doubt. Which is the American, by these scant measures?--which is not the alien, over a large part of the country at least, and where does one put a finger on the dividing line, or, for that matter, ‘spot’ and identify any particular phase of the conversion, any one of its successive moments?” (124). The English language, the “linguistic tradition as one had known it” (139), would change, too: “The accent of the very ultimate future, in the States, may be destined to become the most beautiful on the globe and the very music of humanity (here the ‘ethnic’ synthesis shrouds itself thicker than ever); but whatever we shall know it for, certainly, we shall not know it for English--in any sense for which there is an existing literary measure” (139).

The ticking clock of new arrivals makes the observer want to flee. “There was no escape from the ubiquitous alien into the future, or even into the present; there was an escape but into the past” (87). James evokes the figure of “any sensitive citizen . . . ‘looking in’” on the drama at Ellis Island and compares him to someone who has eaten from the tree of knowledge: “the taste will be for ever in his mouth.” Continuing to speak about that “citizen,” James explains:

> He had thought he knew before, though he had the sense of the degree in which it is his American fate to share the sanctity of his American consciousness, the intimacy of his American patriotism, with the inconceivable alien; but the truth had never come home to him with any such force. So is stamped, for detection, the questionably privileged person who has had an apparition, seen a ghost in his supposedly safe old house. (85)

The triple reference to “American” in this passage may imply a distance between the figures of the “citizen” and the narrator, all the more so since James also speaks in the first person singular, that is, in a distinctly separate voice from the figure whose imagined reactions he has traced in the third person. “In the lurid light projected upon it by those courts of dismay it shakes him--or I like at least to imagine it shakes him--to the depths of his being; I like to think of him, I positively have to think of him, as going about ever afterwards with a new look, for those who can see it, in his face, the outward sign of the new chill in his heart” (85). And this is one of the points at which James refers to ghosts: “So is stamped, for detection, the questionably privileged person who has had an apparition, seen a ghost in his supposedly safe old house. Let
not the unwary, therefore, visit Ellis Island” (85). The drama between “I” and “him” thus has deepened while “any sensitive citizen” has become “the questionably privileged person” who “looks in” on Ellis Island. This division may be stressed if one wants assign only to the “sensitive citizen” some “undeniably prejudiced” comments, especially toward Jews on the East Side, thus freeing James of that charge. But might it not also suggest the reduction of the fully reflexive first-person singular subjectivity to the role of third-person spectator who reacts with a “chill,” as he would to a Gothic scene? The word “chill” is self-consciously repeated, too (85, 119, 120).

It is true, the comments on the “New Jerusalem” seem to reiterate physiognomic stereotypes that are not made more palatable by the erudite way of referring to big noses as “over-developed proboscis” (131), and by such zoological imagery as “innumerable fish” in “some vast sallow aquarium” (131) “human squirrels and monkeys” in their cage-like fire escapes (134), and “a swarming little square in which an ant-like population darted to and fro” (134). And if James is a spectator, then the sense of “multiplication, multiplication of everything” (135) he experiences on the East Side is also like another theatrical magic show so that “any array of Jews” reminds James of “some long nocturnal street where every window in every house shows a maintained light” (132).

Feeling “the gathered past of Israel mechanically pushing through” (132), James turns to the metaphor of the phantasmagoria, mediated at first through an allusion to Henry Wadsworth Longfellow’s poem, “The Old Clock on the Stairs” (1846), a poem that neatly combines the theme of a hospitable house, a generally Gothic mood, and the image (and rhythm, in the last couplet) of the clock ticking, ticking both time and timelessness, it seems.

In that mansion used to be
Free-hearted Hospitality;
His great fires up the chimney roared;
The stranger feasted at his board;
But, like the skeleton at the feast,
That warning timepiece never ceased,—
“Forever—never!
Never—forever!”

This figure of the “skeleton at the feast” comes to James’s mind as he listens to his guide providing him with ethnic statistics: “The way, at the same time, this chapter of history 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” (132).

The story of immigration has become a ghost story. What is “pushing” on the East Side is the feeling of a Jewish continuity with the past, like “fragments without loss of race-quality,” which “makes the individual Jew more of a concentrated person” (132). And confronted with an America that he finds radically changed and that is still in the process of changing, James rather seems to like, or at least yearn for, continuities. For it is what has “lapsed” that gives James the “chill,” and what has lapsed includes manners that it took history to develop and that have been lost, that are constantly still being lost, in America. As in his metaphor of eating from the tree of knowledge when seeing Ellis Island, he is associating assimilation with the Fall. This is, finally, what the postlapsarian New Jersey scene suggests in which he observes “groups of diggers and ditchers were working, on those lines of breathless haste which seem always, in the United States, of the essence of any question, toward an expensive effect of landscape gardening” (118). Here James contemplates the absence of the kind of rapport that could have been taken for granted between outdoor workers and an “excursionist” elsewhere.

To pause before them, for interest in their labour, was, and would have been everywhere, instinctive; but what came home to me on the spot was that whatever more would have been anywhere else involved had here inevitably to lapse.

What lapsed, on the spot, was the element of communication with the workers, as I may call it for want of a better name; that element which, in a European country, would have operated, from side to side, as the play of mutual recognition, founded on old familiarities and heredities, and involving, for the moment, some impalpable exchange. The men, in the case I speak of,
were Italians, of superlatively southern type, and any impalpable exchange struck me as absent from the air to positive intensity, to mere unthinkable. It was as if contact were out of the question and the sterility of the passage between us recorded, with due dryness, in our staring silence. This impression was for one of the party a shock—a member of the party for whom, on the other side of the world, the imagination of the main furniture, as it might be called, of any rural excursion, of the rural in particular, had been, during years, the easy sense, for the excursionist, of a social relation with any encountered type, from whichever end of the scale proceeding. Had that not ever been, exactly, a part of the vague warmth, the intrinsic colour, of any honest man's rural walk in his England or his Italy, his Germany or his France, and was not the effect of its so suddenly dropping out, in the land of universal brotherhood—for I was to find it drop out again and again—rather a chill, straightway, for the heart, and rather a puzzle, not less, for the head? (118-119)

Worsdworthian cross-class encounters may be impossible in America. Alienism or “the ubiquity of the alien,” then, does not only—and perhaps not even primarily—refer to foreigners entering the United States, but also to what happens to immigrants, and what seems to happen quickly, thanks to the machine of assimilation. In thinking about that process, James develops an extended series of culinary metaphors, moving from the digestive absorption of newcomers into the American body politic to an imagined scene of a feast or a banquet. At Ellis Island, finding the “whole watched drama poignant and unforgettable,” the “drama that goes on without a pause, day by day and year by year, this visible act of ingurgitation on the part of our body,” this apparently never-ending arrival scene provides “amazement beyond that of any sword-swallowing or fire-swallowing of the circus.” The metaphor of the spectacle of America swallowing, devouring, “ingurgitating” the arriving immigrants is the tenor of a great many remarks James makes about the “stew,” the “huge national pot au feu,” and “general queer sauce of New York,” at times with allusions to the notion of the melting pot. Thinking of the “alien,” James wonders: “Is not the universal sauce essentially his sauce, and do we not feel ourselves feeding, half the time, from the ladle, as greasy as he chooses to leave it for us, that he holds out?” (116). Yet James appears to mourn in aliens that the “material of which they consist is being dressed
and prepared... for brotherhood, and the consummation” as America devours what he treasures. His deeper question is not only whether such a complete immigrant transformation in the American digestive system is desirable, but more than that, whether it is at all really possible. James asks:

What does become of the various positive properties, on the part of certain of the installed tribes, the good manners, say, among them, as to which the process of shedding and the fact of eclipse come so promptly into play? It has taken long ages of history, in the other world, to produce them, and you ask yourself, with independent curiosity, if they may really be thus extinguished in an hour. And if they are not extinguished, into what pathless tracts of the native atmosphere do they virtually, do they provisionally, and so all undiscoverably, melt? Do they burrow underground, to await their day again? -or in what strange secret places are they held in deposit and in trust? The “American” identity that has profited by their sacrifice has meanwhile acquired (in the happiest cases) all apparent confidence and consistency; but may not the doubt remain of whether the extinction of qualities ingrained in generations is to be taken for quite complete? Isn’t it conceivable that, for something like a final efflorescence, the business of slow comminglings and makings-over at last ended, they may rise again to the surface, affirming their vitality and value and playing their part?

James’s lament about the absence of “manners” in America, manners that it took Old World “history” to produce, echoes his assessment of Hawthorne’s difficulties of writing in a country with “barely a specific national name.” In that sense, James’s alien is not the “foreigner,” the Italian, Englishman or German James knew in Europe, but the transformed immigrant who has become, in the eyes of the Jamesian “excursionist,” a mere ghostly presence of his former corporeal, historical, mannered, flesh-and-blood being. Perhaps they did not know when they knocked at the door of Ellis Island and its Porter opened that they were entering a shapeless underworld. James does hold out the hope, though, that something of their “vitality and value” might not be extinguished or might reemerge, perhaps modeled on the sense of Jewish continuity that he felt in the New York Ghetto.

III.
The pages of *The American Scene* on which I have focused here have received very good readings in the past. Some interpreters have noted that the “returning absentee” also imagined the life he might have had, had he stayed in America. 27 Thus James could be “both native and alien,” “undeniably prejudiced” at times— but that was “counterpointed elsewhere by his sneaking realization that it is he, in fact, who cuts the discordant figure.” 28 Others have charged James with condescension (or worse) toward aliens. 29 His views of the New York ghetto have been associated with anxieties about mass production, with the figure of the Jew standing “for both the infinite reproducibility of phantasmagoria and the challenge it creates for James’s form of the documentary.” 30 Interpreters have detected in the text a rejection of the individual alien, but an openness toward aliens as an impenetrable mass. 31 They have read James in the context of pragmatism and found him to have a protomulticultural sensibility and a remarkable open-mindedness in “affirming the alien.” 32 James’s extended metaphor of the feast has been read as an allegory for civilization. 33 And the references to ghosts and apparitions in *The American Scene* have been examined in relation to other ghosts in James’s works. 34 Connections have also been drawn between Shakespeare and James 35 and between James and W.E.B. Du Bois. 36

To all these readings I have only attempted to add the intertextual presence of Longfellow and (inspired by Alide Cagidemetrio) the specifics of the phantasmagoric mechanism, as it was used in nineteenth-century performances of *Macbeth*, to which James may have been alluding in *The American Scene*. When lamenting the “lapse” that gives him that “chill,” James may have been searching, with affection, for encounters with the living, historically formed “alien” (the Italian, the Armenian, the Jew) rather than the ghostlike and spectral, assimilated and ingurgitated appearance, while he also wondered how this ghostlike presence changed American language and identity. 37 Phantasmagoria is an illusionary technique that, even though it makes you believe in a ghostly presence on stage, is only an illusion: the bodily actor is, after all, “there,” only he is hidden from view but produces the “apparition” with the help of optical tricks. Jacques Derrida probably would have been as skeptical toward James’s immigrants’ prior communicable state as he was toward Marx’s pre-market use value—even though, in James’s case, that state was not an absolute “origin” but the result of much history. Perhaps everything is phantasmagoric projection, generating only the wish for a real person behind the apparatus and its illusions.
Finally, James’s employment of the metaphor of the phantasmagoria may also point in another direction. Was what for Marx was the original use value that would be replaced, on the stage set of the marketplace, by the merely phantasmagoric exchange value, for James a rich structured social identity in traditional societies that would be devoured by Americanness and transformed into a mere apparition, creating an American phantasmagoria? Were some of the immigrants James observed in 1904, much like phantasmagoric representations of Banquo’s ghost, accusatory reminders of the loss of life they had endured at the hand of the democratic “land of universal brotherhood”? In James’s mind, then, as in Du Bois’s, was America like Macbeth, only with a different victim cast as the ghost of Banquo?

Inspired by this reading one might look at essays ghostwritten for college applicants in a new way: a real high school student, his eyes set on his own exchange value as a future commodity, expresses his individuality through a paid-for essay he acquires on the ultimate marketplace of the internet. The ghostwriters’ choice of the word “phantasmagoric” in such an essay might thus be the perfectly appropriate naming of the situation, and an ironic authorial act of inscription that metes out a form of poetic justice. “Phantasmagorie” is then, indeed, a “red-flag” word.
Notes

2 See <iframe name="ngram_chart" src="https://books.google.com/ngrams/interactive_chart?content=phantasmagoric%2Cphantasmagoria&year_start=1800&year_end=2000&corpus=17&smoothing=3&share=&direct_url=t1%3B%2Cphantasmagoric%3B%2Cc0%3B.t1%3B%2Cphantasmagoria%3B%2Cc0" width=900 height=500 marginwidth=0 marginheight=0 hspace=0 vspace=0 frameborder=0 scrolling=no></iframe>.
4 Loc. cit.
6 Ibid., 6-8. One notices Hawthorne’s British, or old-fashioned spelling of “colours.”
7 Ibid., 17.
9 Philip W. Martin, Byron: A Poet Before His Public (Cambridge; Cambridge University Press, 1982), 125.
12 Philip W. Martin, Byron: A Poet Before His Public (Cambridge; Cambridge University Press, 1982), 122.
Es ist nur das bestimmte gesellschaftliche Verhältnis der Menschen selbst, welches hier für sie die phantasmagorische Form eines Verhältnisses von Dingen annimmt.”
The Soul of Black Folk, in Nathan I. Huggins, ed., W.E.B. Du Bois, Writings (New York: Library of America, 1986), 366. Du Bois employed the metaphor again when describing the 1918 context as a “phantasmagoria of war, race hate and mob law” in Dusk of Dawn: An Essay Toward an Autobiography of a Race Concept, ibid., 743. In Black Reconstruction, he wrote: “The Southern white man is the Negro’s best friend,’ scream all the Southern papers, even today. And this in the face of the open record of five thousand lynchings, jails bursting with black prisoners incarcerated on trivial and trumped-up charges, and caste staring from every train and street car. The whole phantasmagoria has been built on the most miserable of human fictions: that in addition to the manifest differences between men there is a deep, awful and ineradicable cleft which condemns men to eternal degradation.” And in The World and Africa, he returned to the image in another context: “The history of the Nile valley from the time of Saladin to the nineteenth century reads like a phantasmagoria. The promise of high and delicate culture was there; but toward the East rose menacingly the threat of Turkey, forming the right wing of Islam and ready to overwhelm Egypt.” (The World and Africa and Color and Democracy, eds. Mahmood Mamdani and Gerald Horne (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007) 125.


That the association of immigrant arrival with a knocking at the door was not an uncommon metaphor at the beginning of the twentieth century can be inferred from Mary Antin’s pro-immigrant plea, They Who Knock at Our Gates: A Complete Gospel of Immigration (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1914).

In A Small Boy and Others (1913) James mentions a Macbeth performance in Boston by Charles Kean and his wife: “Were he and his wife really not coercively interesting on that Boston night of Macbeth in particular, hadn’t their art a distinction that triumphed over battered age and sorry harshness, or was I but too easily beguiled by the old association? I have enjoyed and forgotten numberless rich hours of spectatorship, but somehow still find hooked to the wall of memory the picture of this hushed couple in the castle court, with the knocking at the gate, with Macbeth’s stare of pitiful horror at his unused daggers and with the grand manner, up to the height of the argument, of Mrs. Kean’s coldly portentous snatch of them.” Henry James, Autobiography, ed. Frederick Wilcox Dupree (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014), 180.


24 In the volume Notes of a Son and a Brother of his Autobiography, James quotes and comments on the letter his mother wrote him in January 1870 expressing thoughts “which seem to give us her last words and impulses.” His mother wrote: “Perhaps I am more than usually subject to extremes of happiness and of depression, yet I suppose everyone must have moments, even in the most varied and distracting life, when the old questioning spirit, the demon of the Why, Whence, Whither? stalks in like the skeleton at the feast and takes a seat beside him.” Henry James, Autobiography, ed. Dupree, 539.

25 Throughout The American Scene James also encounters the ghosts of his own past as the exile returns to the country of his birth, from his “merciless memories” evoked by “Cambridge ghosts” (68) to his melancholy, “ghostly tread” by the “lamentable little Arch of Triumph” at Washington Square (91).

26 James used a phrasing about what Hawthorne did not have to work with that anticipated his comments about immigrants in The American Scene: “It takes so many things, as Hawthorne must have felt later in life, when he made the acquaintance of the denser, richer, warmer European spectacle--it takes such an accumulation of history and custom, such a complexity of manners and types, to form a fund of suggestion for a novelist. If Hawthorne had been a young Englishman, or a young Frenchman of the same degree of genius, the same cast of mind, the same habits, his consciousness of the world around him would have been a very different affair; however obscure, however reserved, his own personal life, his sense of the life of his fellow-mortals would have been almost infinitely more various.” Henry James, Hawthorne (1879; repr. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), 34.


31 Buelens, “Pleasurable ‘Presences.’”

32 Posnock, “Affirming the Alien.”

33 Danova, “Ethnic Ghosts,” 184: “If we resist the initial impulse to interpret this image in light of the ‘melting pot’ idea . . . we can find a possible interpretation for the ‘feast’ at which the ‘ethnic apparition’ sits. It is this ‘great stew’ that the
apparition enjoys, reaffirming James’s warning against all these contemporaries of
him who believed in the creation of a homogenous American nation out of the
immense variety of nationalities….” And: “the ‘feast’ from the initial image is not
just an ordinary feast, but it stands for our own civilization.”

34 See Lustig, Henry James and the Ghostly. In Alide Cagidemetrio’s introduction to
The Jolly Corner / L’angolo bello (Venezia: Marsilio, 2011), she comments on
James’s divided self (“un io diviso”) that is catching for reader and translator:
“Spencer Brydon, the protagonista del racconto, è alla ricerca spasmodica della corporea
apparizione di un vivente alter ego, l’abitante della sua bella vecchia casa di famiglia,
e quel che egli vuole e immagina si trasferisce nella realtà narrativa attraverso
l’invenzione di una straordinaria mimesi dell’ipotetico, che costituisce l’energia che
muove lo stile, mentre l’azione del racconto corrisponde alla verifica dell’ipotesi
dell’esistenza di quell’altro, il newyorchese contemporaneo che l’espatriato Brydon
avrebbe potuto essere se… se non avesse lasciato la patria per l’Europa, non avesse
disubbidito al padre, o condotto un’esistenza di ozi al limite della decenza.” At

Danova, “Ethnic Ghosts,” and Buelens, “Pleasurable ‘Presences,’” also briefly discuss
The Jolly Corner, and Scherzinger, “Lurking Ghosts,” 176, writes: “James, the
‘revisiting spirit’ (71), becomes as vividly drawn, yet as ethereal and impermanent as
the Newport ghosts.”

35 Sergio Peroса, “Shakespearean Voices in Henry James, in Henry James and the
Poetics of Duplicity, eds. Dennis Tredy et al., 20-38, and Amy M. Green, “‘Divine
William’ and the Master: The Influence of Shakespeare on the Novels of Henry

36 Kenneth Warren, Black and White Strangers: Race and American Literary Realism
(Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993) and Ross Posnock, “Affirming the
Alien.” See also the discussion, “Still Reading Henry James?” in Henry James Review
16.3 (Fall 1995): 283-284.

37 See Edwards, “Henry James’s ‘Alien’ New York.” While Edwards does not draw
on the possible allusions to Macbeth and the phantasmagoria, my conclusions come
close to his reading of The American Scene.