Title of Paper: The Gothic Voice of Gaston Leroux’s Le Fantôme de l’Opéra

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Abstract: Before Gaston Leroux’s Le Fantôme de l’Opéra was adapted to the stage to become the longest running show on Broadway,1 the romantic story with music and drama first entertained its audiences as a Gothic novel about a demonized “ghost” haunting the Paris Opera. Leroux’s 1910 novel eclipses its theatrical contemporary with its skillful blend of eighteenth century aristocracy and nineteenth century fin-de-siècle fear of monstrosity and mad science.2 The mix of Victorian tropes and traditional Gothic tension comes alive in one being: Erik. Throughout the novel, Erik functions as a destabilizing force who pervades sensual, musical, and social venues. Erik’s power transcends the text so that the Gothic villain-hero archetype disrupts readers’ sensibilities as well. Despite his classically horrific and destructive nature, Leroux’s protagonist stands apart from his monstrous predecessors by using his torturous voice to manipulate characters’ and readers’ sympathies in a complex combination of admirable genius and terrifying horror. Erik illustrates the clash of French decadence and Gothic terror, and forces the Victorian reader to question his or her own flaws and social contribution to Erik’s atrocities. This paper will examine the ways in which Leroux utilizes Erik’s terror as a means of employing Gothic tropes to expose social culpability. Like Erik’s love Christine Daae, readers remain unsettled in their internal debate of whether to love or hate the Gothic ghost.

Keywords: Gothicism; Victorian; French

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1 See www.thephantomoftheopera.com
The Gothic Voice of Gaston Leroux’s *Le Fantôme de l’Opéra*  

“But it is not really difference the oppressor fears so much as similarity.”

Before Gaston Leroux’s *Le Fantôme de l’Opéra* was adapted to the stage to become the longest running show on Broadway, the romantic story with music and drama first entertained its audiences as a Gothic novel about a demonized “ghost” haunting the Paris Opera. Leroux’s 1910 novel eclipses its theatrical contemporary with its skillful blend of eighteenth century aristocracy and nineteenth century *fin-de-siècle* fear of monstrosity and mad science. The mix of Victorian tropes and traditional Gothic tension comes alive in one being: Erik. Throughout the novel, Erik functions as a destabilizing force who pervades sensual, musical, and social venues. Erik’s power transcends the text so that the Gothic villain-hero archetype disrupts readers’ sensibilities as well. Despite his classically horrific and destructive nature, Leroux’s protagonist stands apart from his monstrous predecessors by using his torturous voice to manipulate characters’ and readers’ sympathies in a complex combination of admirable genius and terrifying horror. Erik illustrates the clash of French decadence and Gothic terror, and forces the Victorian reader to question his or her own flaws and social contribution to Erik’s atrocities. This paper will examine the ways in which Leroux utilizes Erik’s terror as a means of employing Gothic tropes to expose social culpability. Like Erik’s love Christine Daae, readers remain unsettled in their internal debate of whether to love or hate the Gothic ghost.

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3 Moraga, Cherrie. "La Guera."
4 See www.thephantomoftheopera.com
Le Fantôme de l’Opéra exhibits a distinctive blend of Victorian Gothicism and French literary decadence. In the Introduction to Gothic Literature: A Gale Critical Companion, Jessica Bomarito describes the Gothic’s transitive merit:

[T]he English Gothic tradition influenced French authors, including Gaston Leroux, and Russian authors, including Fyodor Dostoevsky and Anton Chekhov. Since its inception, the Gothic genre in literature has undergone numerous changes and adaptations, but its essential role as a means of depicting humanity’s deepest, darkest fears and otherwise unspeakable evils – both real and imagined – has endured. (3)

The Gothic provocation of the anxieties of its readers places the genre in a distinct sphere of awe and apprehension. Le Fantôme’s unsettling elements of fear and evil echo the Romantic Gothicism of an earlier time. The text’s Prologue parallels the frame narration similar to Shelley’s work, but intensifies the circumstance by inserting Leroux as the established historical investigator of events. The Prologue’s subtext refers to the work as one, “In which the author of this singular work informs the reader how he acquired the certainty that the Opera Ghost really existed” (1).

Leroux’s personal appeal to ethos heightens the seeming plausibility of the events, thereby heightening the anxieties of readers. Like foundational Gothic authors, Leroux infuses mystery in the plot to highlight the fantastic elements of the text. The novel’s Epilogue reveals ways in which the supernatural events took place, and relates the novel to the model Gothic literature of Radcliff. However, unlike his

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6 Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein begins with a frame narration providing Watson’s outline of the text.

7 See Anne Radcliff’s novels: The Italian, and The Mysteries of Udolpho.
predecessors, Leroux breaks from the norm by allowing elements of the plot’s fantasy to remain. Even with the Epilogue’s explanations, readers are still left in suspense regarding Erik’s ability to perform his magic. Despite the classical Gothic tropes, the French novelist separates himself from his contemporaries by refusing to fully assuage his readers’ angst.

Gothic literature intentionally evokes discomfort in its readers and distinguishes itself from other genres through its fascination with the supernatural. The phantom’s abilities to reach readers and make them fear him as a dark, supernatural demon, reveals the Urban Gothicism employed within Leroux’s novel.\(^8\) Kathleen Paulson explains, “The change from Gothic to Urban Gothic allows writers to call on the powers of what Henry James […] called ‘those most mysterious of mysteries, the mysteries which are at our own doors’” (Spencer 130). Erik’s haunting of his readers exemplifies the Urban Gothic apparent in the mysteries of the novel’s setting. Leroux’s Paris home was filled with mystery, fear, and unrest – all of which are highlighted in the novel.

Set in France’s epicenter for culture and affluence, *Le Fantôme* employs quasi-epistolary historical fiction to impress upon readers’ fears of the past. In his article, "Toward a History of Gothic and Modernism," John Paul Riquelme traces the development of the Gothic:

[A] fter the French Revolution, the characteristics and issues apparent in Gothic writing of the eighteenth century carry forward into the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, but they are significantly

\(^8\) For discussion on the Urban Gothic see Kathleen Paulson, “Purity and Danger: Dracula, the Urban Gothic, and the Late Victorian Degeneracy Crisis.”
transformed, intensified, and disseminated by interactions with national literatures and political events outside England. Eventually they are affected by the historical development of modernity in wider than national arenas, including colonial and postcolonial situations.

Surrounding *Le Fantôme* is France’s social and political history, which transforms the Gothic themes and intensifies its national desire for security and stability. The French government of the time began swift industrialization to prevent another disaster like it beheld with Napoleon. Under the Third Republic, however, France suffered two major scandals: the Boulanger Affair (1889) and the Dreyfus Affair (1894). New French mass media allowed its public to witness governmental gaffe and spread the information throughout the country. France’s desire and unsuccessful attempt to stabilize carried with it a continued fear of uncertainty and turbulence. In “The Gothic Crosses the Channel,” Jerrod Hogle explains, “In the early 1880’s, when the novel takes place, Erik is thus reusing and helping to demonize the fragmented workings of the Commune that recall the most disruptive and disrupted time in the history of Paris” (218). Leroux’s novel displays the Urban Gothic anxiety of chaos by presenting the disorder that Erik generates as historically accurate.

Perhaps most noteworthy of Erik’s torment of French society is Leroux’s intentional inclusion of the fall of the Opera House chandelier. Leroux writes:

> The house broke into a wild tumult. The two managers collapsed in their chairs and dared not even turn round; [...] the ghost was chuckling behind their backs! And, at last, they distinctly heard his
voice in their right ears, the impossible voice, the mouthless voice, saying:

‘She is singing to-night to bring the chandelier down!’

With one accord, they raised their eyes to the ceiling and uttered a terrible cry. The chandelier, the immense mass of the chandelier was slipping down, coming toward them, at the call of that fiendish voice. Released from its hook, it plunged from the ceiling and came smashing into the middle of the stalls, amid a thousand shouts of terror. (107)

Erik’s perceived influence in the dropping of the chandelier illustrates French society’s inability to tame his destructive force. The literary repetition of “terrible cry,” and “chandelier,” “immense mass of chandelier,” illustrates the affective impact of the event. Leroux’s depiction of the scene is instrumental to his claims of the events being real. In fact, in 1896, the Paris Opéra’s chandelier did fall as a result of what was claimed to be an “electrical defect” (Hogle, “Gothic Crosses the Channel,” 207). Leroux purposefully blends the historical facts with fiction to present a petrifying scenario. In this way, he utilizes the Gothic genre as a means of delving deeper into social discourse. The Gothic medium allows Leroux this latitude and models what Kathleen Spencer notes as essential to the Gothic:

The characters react with fear and revulsion at encountering what is not only unexpected, but unnatural according to the laws of the world they inhabit, and readers usually respond with the same feelings, not only because we identify with the characters, but because the world the characters initially inhabit is our own world. (129)
Leroux’s outline of the chandelier scene is far more startling because Erik shocks readers as he transcends his “Othered” capacity and enters their world through historically contextualized events. Leroux depicts the interplay of the fantastic and the realistic through Erik. Erik is a fantastically monstrous “hallucination” who shocks readers as he enters their “real” world.

Erik is the most complex character of the novel, and I would argue, one of the most complex characters of all Gothic literature. He evokes all of the psychological fear and apprehension that a reader would expect to find in a Gothic romance. His powers seem supernatural, almost vampire-like, as he glides through the hidden hallways and staircases enclosed within the secret depths of the Paris Opera. Yet, his intimidating qualities are offset by his seemingly immature, childish behavior and misunderstanding. Erik sleeps within a coffin in an attempt to “get used to everything in life, even to eternity” (169). His deathly décor and eerie inclinations mirror Stoker’s earlier Gothic vampire who is also underdeveloped with a childish brain:

“Look at his persistence and endurance. With the child-brain that was to him he have long since conceive the idea of coming to a great city” (Stoker 307). Like Dracula, Erik is juvenile. As his “clumsy childish hand” suggests, he is immature cognitively and emotionally (46). But despite his childish tendencies, Erik’s actions are complex and calculated, which demonstrates higher-level intellect than that of a child. For example, although his deformity makes him a grotesque Other who is outcast from society and forced to dwell beneath the Opera – a symbol of his city’s acclaim – Erik powerfully asserts himself with threats: “if you wish to live in peace, you must not begin by taking away my private box” (48).
Erik is the perfect model of Gothic duplicity and doubling as evinced in his description as “the Angel of Music, alias the Opera ghost” (241). He is akin to the Devil and is both dead and undead, human and unhuman in his appearance. Leroux’s infamous character is crucial, as he blends two vital aspects of Gothicism: monstrous horror and terror. Ruth Anolik describes the disparities between horror and terror in her text, *Demons of the Mind and Body*: “Horror thus depends on the visible spectacle, the realized experience, to provide fear. The iconic figure of horror is the monster. Terror, on the other hand is the *frisson* that is provoked by the invisible, by what lurks unseen in the dark” (8). Erik is essential to the Gothic genre because he is horrifying in appearance and uses this to intentionally terrify Parisians.

Leroux’s protagonist is horrifying due to his facial deformity. His visible disfigurement leads to his social torment and rejection. Joseph Buquet, the scene-shifter whom Erik later kills, details the ghost’s appearance:

He is extraordinarily thin and his dress-coat hangs on a skeleton frame. His eyes are so deep that you can hardly see the fixed pupils. You just see two big black holes, as in a dead man’s skull. His skin, which is stretched across his bones like a drumhead, is not white, but a nasty yellow. His nose is so little worth talking about that you can’t see it side-face; and the absence of that nose is a horrible thing to look at. All the hair he has is three or four long dark locks on his forehead and behind his ears. (11)

Leroux’s intentionally dark and detailed account of Erik represents popular thoughts
about criminals’ physiognomy, much of which is mirrored in Erik’s appearance.\(^9\)

Leroux’s description parallels the Victorian physical characteristics associated with criminals. In the popular Victorian crime text, *The Criminal Man*, Cesare Lombroso asserts, “In general, thieves are notable for their expressive faces and manual dexterity, small wandering eyes that are often oblique in form, thick and close eyebrows, distorted or squashed noses, thin beards and hair, and sloping foreheads” (51). The “black holes” and lack of hair and nose correlate to Lombroso’s claims and represent Erik’s external and internal shortcomings. However, Leroux intensifies the appearance’s horror as Erik’s lack of these and other physiognomic characteristics frightens his onlookers twofold in both their appearance and deficiency. Although Erik self-consciously partitions his face with a mask, the hidden half of his profile haunts his viewers and further adds to his terrifying traits. As Buquet explains, it is, in fact, the “absence” of the ghost’s nose that is most terrifying. Erik’s anomalous traits heighten the horrifying faculties and epitomize the terrifying Gothic fear of ambiguity and the unknown. Despite the self-awareness and social othering that Erik’s deformity causes, he resolves to manipulate his appearance to shock society and outcast himself further.

Erik’s does not view his deformity as a disability; instead, he is empowered uses it to drive his actions and increase his solitude. His ability to interact with the Opera guests despite his exile evinces his ingenuity and power. He is transitive, liminal, and ghost-like as he floats and drifts in and out of his underground lair. The proclaimed witness of the story, the “Persian” explains, “He commands the walls, the

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\(^9\) For analysis of Victorian criminal sketches and studies, see Cesare Lombroso, *The Criminal Man*, (1876); translated into French in 1887.
doors and the trapdoors. In my country, he was known by a name which means the “trap door lover” (245). Erik’s ability to move within his Gothic landscape goes beyond typical Gothic backgrounds. The walls “obey” him because he built them and employs them in his illusions and sabotage (245). He surfaces only to haunt the guests and stalk and mesmerize his Gothic damsel lover, Christine. His existence alone panics the Opera socialites because his appearance and transient movements “others” him from their social realm. Just as Buquet is terrified by his “absence,” so too are the Opera patrons haunted by his phantasmal qualities. Erik haunts the Opera House and murders Buquet and Comte de Chagny. After threatening revenge on Carlotta, the dramatic and ornery Opera star, he magically causes frogs to expel from her throat: “There was consternation on Carlotta’s face and consternation on the faces of all the audience. The two managers in their box could not suppress an exclamation of horror. Every one felt that the thing was not natural, that there was witchcraft behind it” (Leroux 104-105). Erik’s existence is not “natural” within the aristocratic Parisian society. The protagonist’s contempt for the Opera elite is evident throughout the text and Leroux is never reserved when describing the ways in which Erik intentionally lurks, looms, and hovers around the socialites:

Yes, the ghost was there, around them, behind them, beside them; they felt his presence without seeing him, they heard his breath, close, close, close to them! …They were sure that there were three people in the box…They trembled…They thought of running away…They dared not…They dared not make a movement or exchange a word that would have told the ghost that they knew that he was there! (106)
Leroux’s intentional pauses evinced in the ellipses depict the angst of the managers and transmits their sentiments to readers. The repeated phrase, “dared not,” suggests the managers’ overwhelming submission to Erik’s torments. Erik’s presence overpowers them and demonstrates the Opera ghost’s dominance. As Hogle asserts in the *Cambridge Companion to the Gothic*, “The Gothic is thus continuously about confrontations between the low and the high” (9). Erik’s influence in the aristocratic sphere reveals his transitive ability to move within the physically low depths of the Opera House and the high class venue he haunts. However, it is through his interactions with the Opera patrons that Erik transforms into the “Opera ghost” and “Phantom.” Dwelling beneath the Opera, Erik is able to exist as a musical genius. But amongst the Paris bourgeois, he is an evil and looming presence. Throughout the novel, Leroux pays almost meticulous attention to illustrating the characters’ class distinctions. When describing the Persian and Christine’s lover Raoul, he states:

The Persian and Raoul were both, of course, in dress-clothes; but whereas Raoul had a tall hat, the Persian wore the astrakhan cap which I have already mentioned. It was an infringement of the rule which insists upon the tall hat behind the scenes; but in France, foreigners are allowed every license: the Englishman his traveling-cap, the Persian his cap of astrakhan (241).

This Romantic Victorian literary description exposes both the influence of aristocracy and foreigners in France. Leroux intentionally illustrates the class dichotomy in order to further illustrate Erik’s irregularity. Erik is able to be both Opera ghost and Angel at once. He is a deformed outcast but an expert musician. He is both a high class
The Victorian aristocrat who occupies Box V, and a low class Other dejected to the city’s dregs.

Erik’s influence in the patrician sphere is at no point more apparent than at the masked ball where he appears as “Red Death.”

When Erik attends the Opera’s masked ball, he epitomizes the differences between the lower and upper classes. In this scene, Raoul is mortified by having to attend the ball in disguise: “Men of the world do not go to the Opera ball in fancy-dress!” (120). Contrastingly, Erik attends adorned in ostentatious dress. His disregard for expected aristocratic attire demonstrates his embodiment of Gothicism’s disruptive influence within French decadence culture. As he enters, Parisian Opera guests stare in amazement:

A person whose disguise, eccentric air, and gruesome appearance were causing a sensation […] It was a man dressed in all scarlet, with a huge hat and feathers on the top of a wonderful death’s head. From his shoulders hung an immense red-velvet cloak, which trailed along the floor like a king’s train; and on his cloak was embroidered, in gold letters, which every one read and repeated aloud, ‘Don’t touch me! I am Red Death stalking abroad!’ (122)

Erik amplifies his torment of Paris’s high society when he appears as Red Death. He relegates himself not just in his ostentatious dress – seemingly unconventional for men as evinced by Raoul’s quote earlier – but also in his warning to not be touched. His kingly appearance “stalks” through the ball, drawing the frightening attention that he seeks. Although his appearance is terrifying to guests, when Erik begins to sing his voice reveals its enchantment:
Raoul had never in his life heard anything more absolutely and heroically sweet, more gloriously insidious, more delicate, more powerful, in short, more irresistibly triumphant. He listened to it in a fever and he now began to understand how Christine Daae was able to appear one evening, before the stupefied audience, with accents of a beauty hitherto unknown, of a superhuman exaltation. (129)

Raoul’s reaction is noteworthy because just as Christine is charmed by Erik’s voice, it is in this scene that readers realize that Raoul finds his voice appealing as well. The haunting elements Erik vocally expels coincide perfectly with Leroux’s transatlantic allusion to Poe’s grotesque tale. When Erik enters as Poe’s protagonist, he embodies the same potency of the unnamed character; he acts as a leveling of class structures because he (like Red Death) affects and effects all through his imposed malaise. Even Raoul, Erik’s evident foil is temporarily charmed by his voice.

Leroux increases Erik’s powerful violence when he depicts the sabotage of Raoul and the Persian within the self-built torture chamber. In this scene, Erik’s actions are remarkably wicked and jeering. As he tortures the Persian and Raoul, he taunts Christine with their delirium: “‘Well, what did you see? Think! You saw branches! And what are the branches?’ asked the terrible voice. ‘There’s a gibbet!’ That is why I call my wood the torture-chamber!... You see, it’s all a joke. I never express myself like other people. But I am very tired of it!’” (298). Erik views his torture as a means of self-expression – a guise he has grown tired of upholding. Although he takes pride in creating the “gibbet,” he considers it all to be a farce. Like

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Edgar Allan Poe, “The Masque of the Red Death” (New York, 1842)
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a child, he uses his antics to gain attention from Christine without fully grasping the consequences of his harm. Erik’s cruelty towards the Persian and Raoul projects his own suffering as he expects the men to survive the torture just as he endured his childhood torments. In his emotional rage, Erik divulges his hatred of having to play the part of the evil Opera ghost, openly recognizing that if having been given the social latitude, he would have preferred to be like everyone else. However, Erik’s physical disfigurement coupled with his evil brilliance prevent him from social acceptance and lead to his demise.

Throughout the story, Erik is likened to a mad genius, “the greatest ventriloquist in the world” (299). Yet, although he uses his powers for malevolent trickery, readers are still compelled to pity him. It is explained, “He was guilty of not a few horrors, for he seemed not to know the difference between good and evil” (346). Thus, even in the cruelest of scenes, Leroux skillfully evokes readers’ sympathy for Erik by describing his seeming innocence in all of his horrific deeds. Despite the indubitable villainy of the ghost, readers (alongside Erik’s love Christine), are forced to feel a sense of compassion for the seemingly misunderstood monster.

*Le Fantôme* presents duplicitous questions: Is Erik’s evil a product of social misunderstanding and troglodytic tendencies? Or are his sinister actions inherently manifest within the phantasmal being? Hume discusses the ambiguity of the Gothic hero-villain:

But with the villain-heroes of horror-Gothic we enter the realm of the morally ambiguous. […]characters are] men of extraordinary capacity whom circumstance turns increasingly to evil purposes. They are not
merely monsters, and only a bigoted reading makes them out as such. (285)

Hume’s assertions, by extension, reveal readers’ inclinations to internally sympathize with Erik and consider how his life would be different if the Parisians had treated the Other with compassion rather than disgust. Erik’s evil could simply be a projection of society’s evil. As Ruth Anolik explains, “In a society that dehumanizes deviation, this diagnosis amounts to diagnosing deviance as inhuman, as monstrous” (6). Erik’s monstrous qualities are socially imposed due to his deformity. His abilities to torture and to haunt are caused by his social rejection and the mental and physical torture he has endure. Erik’s Otherness is reflective of the social discriminations he faces. Readers’ realizations of society’s potential responsibility in shaping Erik’s actions adds to the shock of the novel. Donna Heiland explains, “They [monsters] function as uncanny doubles of our societies, reflecting back to us images of everything that we have cast out as undesirable or threatening to the status quo, and forcing us to face that which we would prefer to leave hidden” (100). Christine describes this horrifying blend of monstrous humanity:

The voice was there, spoke to me with great sadness and told me plainly that, if I must bestow my heart on earth, there was nothing for the voice to do but to go back to Heaven. And it said this with such an accent of human sorrow that I ought then and there to have suspected and begun to believe that I was the victim of my deluded senses. (Leroux 156)
It is perhaps Erik’s humanity that frightens readers the most. He not only upsets the desired stability of upper French society, but he also disturbs the Parisian’s conceived identities. Cyndy Hendershot explains that “Gothic bodies disrupt stable notions of what it means to be human” (9). Erik’s revelation to Christine that he belongs back in Heaven adds to Christine’s and readers’ internal conflict regarding Erik’s humanity. The “sadness” in which he reveals his love for Christine evinces his human suffering and the “Angel” worthy of Heaven. Still, a more cynical reader may view this passage as evidence of Christine’s naïveté and Erik’s ultimate manipulation. Like Christine, readers must grapple with their own ethics in response to Erik’s treatment. Hume explains: “Believed Gothic works were written in a way that allowed readers to make a connection because the crimes are crimes that the reader can imagine him or herself committing” (285). Readers wonder if they too would react as Erik if they also had a deformity and were allowed only partial human existence.

If readers are able to accept Erik as a misjudged Other who is a victim of fate and its circumstances, then Erik’s terror carries with it a sense of pain and pity. This combination of terror and pain plays out in what Edmund Burke defines the sublime: “Whatever therefore is terrible, with regard to sight, is sublime too, whether this cause of terror, be endued with greatness of dimensions or not” (112). Opera guests are terrorized by Erik’s antics, but they also manifest an equally moving feeling of pain towards the situation and towards the dejected Other. Readers are internally conflicted and must contend with Christine’s question of whether Erik is the angel of music or the threatening face of death.

Much of Erik’s strength emanates from the angelic supremacy of his musical
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gift. This is where his sexual allure lies for listeners, especially Christine. Erik’s voice and songs mesmerize and hypnotize Christine so that she becomes his willing victim and confused lover. Erik’s music releases his passion that overflows into Christine in an almost orgasmic state. When she sings under his influence she describes her feelings: “I felt myself fainting […] I closed my eyes” (157). Then, as she hears Erik’s music, she is taken under his spell:

And then the voice began to sing the leading phrase, ‘Come!
And believe in me! Whoso believes in me shall live! Walk!
Whoso hath believed in me shall never die!…’ I can not tell you the effect which that music had upon me. It seemed to command me, personally, to come, to stand up and come to it.
It retreated and I followed. ‘Come! And believe in me!’ I believed in it, I came…I came.’ (159).

In this scene, Leroux mixes the Biblical Plaint of Lazarus with Erik’s orgasmic/hypnotic control. Like Christ, Erik manifests the voice of the Redeemer throughout Christine’s “coming.” However, Leroux interlaces Gothicism into the scene as Erik distorts his image of heavenly savior and leads Christine from her safe dressing-room to his underground lair. Using his voice to manipulate his victims, Erik is able to impair their judgement and execute his schemes.

Erik’s vocal talent manifests a deeper significance to the novel and the time period. In Realism, Representations, and the Arts in Nineteenth Century Literature, Alison Byerly asserts, “the association of individual characters with specific arts produces a moral hierarchy in which visual art is exposed as a detached and static
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simplification of reality, theatrical art is linked with a dangerous deception of self and others, and music alone is capable of representing truth” (10-11). Erik’s music offers a truth about himself and his listeners’ selves. His audiences are psycho-emotionally moved by his music as Christine’s reaction to the Opera ghost’s voice exemplifies:

The first time I heard it, I thought, as you did, that that adorable voice was singing in another room. I went out and looked everywhere […] I could not find the voice […] And it not only sang, but it spoke to me and answered my questions, like a real man’s voice, with this difference, that it was as beautiful as the voice of an angel. I had never got the Angel of Music whom my poor father had promised to send me as soon as he was dead. […] the man’s voice replied that, yes, it was the Angel’s voice, the voice which I was expecting and which my father had promised me. From that time onward, the voice and I became great friends. […] We were accompanied by a music which I do not know […] The voice seemed to understand mine exactly […] In a few weeks’ time, I hardly knew myself when I sang. I was even frightened. I seemed to dread a sort of witchcraft behind it; […] I waited and lived on in a sort of ecstatic dream (Leroux 155).

Erik’s voice transforms his listeners into participants of an “ecstatic dream.”

Christine explains, “it spoke to me” and “seemed to understand mine exactly.”

Leroux employs the Gothic in his contrast of simultaneous comfort and fright. Listeners are forced to feel “every emotion, every suffering of which mankind is capable,” (173). Erik possesses listeners with his vocal gift and allows his musical
voice to serve as his voice – his humanizing function within society. No longer does he stand as a removed, disfigured Other. Instead, Erik becomes an angelic noise that moves his audiences to deeper feelings and passions.

Readers are susceptible to the attraction of Erik’s music, but the sublime, unsettling quality it manifests leaves an uneasy willingness to fully submit. A bewildered Raoul reveals the internal conflicts of readers and other characters as he criticizes the Persian: “I do not understand you. You treat him as a monster, you speak of his crime, he has done you harm and I find in you the same inexplicable pity that drove me to despair when I saw it in Christine!” (243). Raoul’s detestation of Erik is highlighted in his natural differences. Although Erik is depicted as threatening and ugly, he remains physically and emotionally powerful. Raoul, antithetically, is presented as a naïve boy: “The shyness of the sailor-lad – I was almost saying his innocence – was remarkable. […] He had a small, fair mustache, beautiful blue eyes and a complexion like a girl’s” (25). Raoul’s attractive, yet effeminate characteristics, cause readers to question his ability to protect Christine from Erik’s seeming omnipotence.

Erik’s relationship with Christine points to a deeper understanding of the novel’s Gothic gestalt. Christine offers Erik mercy from an alienated world. She embodies and internalizes readers’ terror, distress, and dread. She serves as a prototypical female Gothic heroine who is tormented by her assailant, but attracted to his sublime lure. Christine remains a virginal female figure victimized by circumstances outside of her control. She, like readers, remains conflicted about the poor Opera Ghost’s fate. Yet, through her continued relationship with Erik, Christine
must decide her own fate and choose Erik or Raoul.

Christine loves Erik in an emphatic and revering way. For her, Erik manifests all that is Gothic uncertainty and terror mixed with all that is pity and love. She mercifully kisses him on the forehead and openly wears the golden wedding ring he bestows her. Rather than reduce Christine’s love of Erik to an Electra complex (and Erik’s love of Christine to an Oedipal complex), Leroux exhibits a far richer connection and intricate bond between the Opera ghost/Angel and Christine. Christine’s love of Erik acts as a symbiotic saving strength. Bomarito claims, “Feminist critics also claim that while women in earlier novels had been portrayed as victims waiting to be rescued, in Gothic novels the roles were often reversed and the male characters were victimized” (109). In Le Fantôme, Erik is a victim of a social difference, and he and Christine rely on each other as a means for him to function within the human, social sphere. Christine and Erik are connected by their involvement in music and the carnivalesque. Erik “frequented the fairs, where a showman exhibited him as the ‘living corpse’” (345). Similarly, Christine traveled with her father “wandering from fair to fair” (66). Like Erik, Christine was born of lower class status and is also considered to be an angel of music: “The people around could not understand the conduct of this rustic fiddler, who tramped the roads with that pretty child who sang like an angel from Heaven” (67). Christine’s relationship with Erik is far more complex than that of a mother. Her connection to his world of music and carnival fairs relate her to him and present them as angelic singers together.

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Christine thinks of Erik as her own, promised angel sent from her father as guidance. Erik’s physical and musical presence takes possession of Christine. Christine is drawn psychosexually to Erik because of his command over music and space. The appeal of such a threatening lover presents Christine in a masochistic manner. As Michelle Massé explains in her book, *In the Name of Love: Women, Masochism, and the Gothic*, “The masochist, then, can rework her enforced helplessness and pain so that, at least in fantasy, she gets the present she was promised for being a “good girl”: recognition and love” (49). Erik provides personal and social recognition and love for Christine. It is through his vocal coaching and sorcery that she is able to share her love of music in a leading role at the Opera. Christine needs Erik to serve as her musical angel, and he needs Christine to express his emotions and function within the Parisian musical milieu. For this reason, Erik must be the angel of Christine’s fantasies; he cannot be “‘like everyone else’” (348) so he must be himself, a half demon/half angel, rejected human.

Readers are filled with an inexplicable, anxious response to the emotional oscillation brought on by the sublime nightmare unfolded in *Le Fantôme*’s Gothic Victorian plot. Leroux’s protagonist reaches a truthful revelation for readers and impresses upon them a lasting mark that leaves readers forever contemplating the Opera Ghost’s complexity in the story’s final passage:

Poor, unhappy Erik! Shall we pity him? Shall we curse him? He asked only to be ‘some one,’ like everybody else. But he was too ugly! And he had to hide his genius or use it to play tricks with, when, with an ordinary face, he would have been one of the most distinguished of
mankind! He had a heart that could have held the empire of the world; and, in the end, he had to content himself with a cellar. Ah, yes, we must needs pity the Opera ghost. (348-349)

Works Cited


Works Consulted


