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LE FANTOME DE L'OPERA
BY GASTON LEROUX

THE NOVEL'S EVOLUTION
AND ITS THEATRICAL AND CINEMATIC ADAPTATIONS
IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY



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to my daughter Gabriella, actress

*As long as there is Theater, there is hope,
as long as there is hope, there is Theater.*

INTRODUCTION

THE ENCHANTMENT OF THE THEATER

I began this dissertation with a dedication to my daughter Gabriella, a professional actress, and with a reflection: *As long as there is Theater there is hope, as long as there is hope there is Theater*. My inspiration to carry out this research finds its roots in a longtime love for Theater passed down to me by my beloved maternal grandfather, Achille Baldini, who devoted all his free time to the creation of a Theatrical Company, working as artistic director, lead actor, director and performing the works of Pirandello, Shakespeare, Goldoni and Chekhov for his family.

I wasn't too surprised, therefore, when my daughter Gabriella announced, right after her high school graduation, that she intended to be an actress. I encouraged her because I am convinced that, if one has a passion in life, one must follow it, even at the risk of being unsuccessful.

Passion for theater is something that comes from deep within one's soul and must not be denied.

I also chose to write this thesis on this French novel by Gaston Leroux, actually quite overlooked by French critics, because I believe that it is an extremely important work as far as theater is concerned. *Le Fantôme de l'Opéra* is in fact a theatrical novel that tells of life, artists, intrigues, loves, compromises, miseries, superstitions, the mysteries of the world of the theater: and the world the Parisian author chose to depict is that of the Theater of the Paris Opera, the world of

ballet painted by Degas, the world of the extraordinary Opera theater designed by Charles Garnier, who defined this magniloquent construction as «un théâtre qui chante et qui danse».

In this novel, every character, every line, every detail *s'intéatran*o, «make themselves theatrical», as Streheler described *King Lear*. Charles Garnier's building, that sings and dances, is a building that makes itself theatrical. Gaston Leroux wrote a novel that is a long love letter to the Theater, understood as an art that contains all the arts in itself, in Wagnerian terms.

Le Fantôme de l'Opéra is a multifaceted novel. It is a gothic novel, because it speaks of obscure presences, shadows, ghosts, fate and magic; it is a romantic novel, just as Gaston Leroux's indolence was romantic, leading the author to a certain gloomy and bittersweet melancholy; it is a decadent novel, because its protagonist is a real dandy, theatrical and excessively elegant, who loves to surround himself with baroque furnishings, mirrors, velvet and gold, just as Wilde or Huysmans would have liked; it is a symbolist novel, filled with countless metaphors dear to fairy-tale narrative, such as the key, the ring, the kiss, the lake, the river; it is a surrealist novel, as Jean Cocteau declared, since it tells of dreams, vast and obsessive spaces, as in Louis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*; it is a modern novel that narrates the voyage into the inner depths of ourselves, connected to the world of Psychoanalysis and to Sigmund Freud; it is a detective novel, for the language of investigation that appears in certain passages and for its myriad of mysterious crimes; it is a love story that tells of an unhappy, unrequited passion.

Le Fantôme de l'Opéra is a novel that contains many novels and many styles, and that touches us deeply because it speaks of emotions and feelings. It is a popular novel that tells stories about each one of us, even if these stories seem incredible.

It is an extraordinary novel that inspired many other works: novels, films, television programs, circus performances, ice-skating phantasmagoria. It inspired these from its first appearance in 1910, to this day, and will continue to inspire others in years to come.

I also dedicate this thesis to Gaston Leroux, a writer whom I recently discovered and whose work I intend to study further, because he was a joyous artist, a lover of life, travel, theater, good cuisine, family, amusement, friends, and he saw the world with a subtle

sense of humor veined with irreverent and sometimes blasphemous irony.

With Gaston Leroux, tears mix with laughter and the reader savors the atmosphere of a unique moment in French history, that of the *Belle Époque*.

1.

«LE FANTÔME DE L'OPÉRA» BY GASTON LEROUX

1.1. THE FOUNDATIONS AND ROOTS OF NOVEL

The original foundations and roots of Gaston Leroux's novel *Le Fantôme de l'Opéra* have become ever more mysterious throughout the past century.

Over the course of the past hundred years, the numerous rewritings and various adaptations of Leroux's work have altered, modified or even deleted certain fundamental aspects of the original novel that was published in 1910.

Understanding the cultural roots and primary purpose of this French novel means identifying the motivations that led to the creation of this work, which has become something of a popular myth in Western and particularly Anglo-Saxon culture.

Why has this text constantly been re-adapted and re-presented in countless forms throughout the past century? Why hasn't this story by Gaston Leroux – a sensationalistic journalist in *Belle Époque* Paris and author of numerous mystery and *noir* novels, in accordance with the dominant taste of the time¹ – been forgotten?

¹ One need only recall the great success of Marcel Allain's *Fantômas*. Allain was author of the successful series of novels devoted to the character *Fantômas*, published in Paris in early 1911, with the collaboration of Pierre Souvestre from éditions Fayard. *Fantômas* is a legendary character who made his way into the world of popular mythology. He symbolizes unpunished crime and the genius of evil. In *Fantômas*, we find some sadism and greediness, but mainly the gangster mentality elevated to a form of genius. *Fantômas* does not have a specific nationality; he is

What does this novel hide? For years, critics considered it a novel of secondary importance compared to the literature of that period. Why has it constantly been reread, rewritten and readapted for an entire century, from the first, legendary silent Hollywood version starring Lon Cheney in 1925², to the most recent film produced by English composer Andrew Lloyd Webber, who also wrote the 1988 musical version of *The Phantom of the Opera*³? What has made Western culture continually want to revisit this novel? Why has the Parisian *Phantom* slowly gained the status of other famous gothic monsters, from novels such as Mary Shelley's masterpiece *Frankenstein* (published in 1818), to Robert Louis Stevenson's story *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886), to Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897)?

All of these questions stimulate the reader, since this story about the Phantom hidden in the Paris Opera Theater has continuously been transformed, manipulated and re-elaborated in numerous versions throughout the past century, while still maintaining some of its most significant basic connotations.

Among the common and recurrent elements in the various versions, we find the frightening face of the protagonist, who wears a mask for most of the story until a brutal unveiling reveals his horrible

neither English nor French. We only know that in India, in the Far East – like Leroux's Phantom Erik – he meets Lady Beltham, the young wife of an old aristocrat, and becomes her lover. The author blends the *feuilleton* genre with a taste for Orientalism, following the literary experiences linked to Symbolism, and for exoticism, a trend begun by Gustave Flaubert with the novel *Salammbô*.

² Carl Laemmle, president of Hollywood's «Universal Pictures» – was attracted by Gaston Leroux's novel *Le Fantôme de l'Opéra* after a visit to the «Opera Garnier» in Paris, while visiting the French capital to decide upon a location for his film production of *Nôtre Dame de Paris* (based on Victor Hugo's novel), starring Lon Cheney. The film inspired by Leroux's *noir* went through various treatments and rewritings, since Leroux was not as famous as Hugo and the studios were not as experienced in the production of horror films as they would be in coming years. The final version of the film *The Phantom of the Opera* was released in 1925 and even received some negative reviews, including one by «New York Times» critic Mordaunt Hall, who wrote on September 7, 1925 that the film revealed disunity in its screenplay «as if too many cooks had rather spoiled the broth». This theme will be examined in more detail in the chapter dedicated to the novel's film adaptations.

³ *The Phantom of the Opera*, musical opera performed for the first time in London, 1989, composed by Andrew Lloyd Webber (1948), who also wrote and produced the film *The Phantom of the Opera*, released worldwide in 2004. These themes will also be treated in another chapter.

appearance. The nature of his «deformity» vacillates from one version to another, and there are no obvious explanations for these modifications, if not purely socio-cultural justifications that have changed over the course of the century.

These continuous variations, in fact, seem determined by cultural needs and sociological motivations which have driven various authors to adjust the plot and characterizations of the novel according to the context in which these changes were made.

The reasons behind these changes are psychological, sociological, historical and literary, and respond to ever-changing cultural needs that in a certain sense reflect the challenges and expectations of popular Western beliefs about anything different, deformed, and thus considered monstrous.

It is quite plausible to hypothesize that *Le Fantôme de l'Opéra*, with its history of marginalization, represents the cultural attempt of the nascent bourgeois class to homogenize and «regulate» anything that could disturb the security and balance of the world. In fact, this hypothesis consists in an attempt to recognize, isolate and catalogue the phenomena of diversity, disquieting «subterraneanity» and transgression which began to worry the emerging middle class that was destined to consolidate itself over the course of the Twentieth century – an attempt carried out in the precise cultural space of gothic and horror literature.

Furthermore, in studying this unusual novel, we must not ignore the most significant scientific event of the turn of the century, when Leroux created his phantom: the discovery of the unconscious elaborated in *The Interpretation of Dreams* by Sigmund Freud.

In *Le Fantôme de l'Opéra*, when Gaston Leroux narrates the young protagonist Christine's descent underground in a near trance-like state – accompanied by the Phantom – he is in fact describing an adolescent's astonishment and uneasiness about descending into her own unconscious and down the unknown river of her most distant, repressed desires.

The novel's different adaptations are thus closely tied to their cultural context and interpret both the efforts to affirm the socio-cultural identity that was forging itself through these various expectations, as well as the desires that connote self-determination to resolve conflicts by adapting to new social instances. I am specifically referring to the

problems associated with colonialism and to contact with other cultures; to the emerging issue of social integration; to the awareness of new scientific discoveries, in light of the positivist theories of Darwinian evolutionism⁴ and *avant-garde* medical studies on mental illness and on the influence of the unconscious in psychoanalysis. In this context, it became necessary to put a face – or, in the case of *The Phantom of the Opera*, a mask – to the unknown, hostile, mysterious and consequently monstrous, yet seductive new discoveries. In this fantasy, man finds himself alone and lost in an incomprehensible and thus terrifying world.

This era also saw the beginning of research on criminology and physiognomy, rooted in the scientific work of the Italian scholar Cesare Lombroso⁵ – a contemporary of Gaston Leroux – who elaborated his own theory of atavism.

An avid reader of such essays, Leroux must have certainly devoted his attention to Lombroso's theories on atavism and crime and their close link to physiognomy, an ancient discipline connected to the theories of social Darwinism that were extremely popular at that time⁶.

Leroux's Phantom possesses the characteristics of this kind of crime theory, as his face evokes a skull similar to that of the brigand cited by Giuseppe Villela in his eponymous study.

Furthermore, Gaston Leroux modeled the personality of his monster on Max Nordau's theories on «Genius and Madness», since Erik is in fact emblematic of genius contaminated by folly.

⁴ Charles Darwin, *The Origin of Species, by Means of Natural Selection*, London, John Murray, 1858.

⁵ Cesare Lombroso (1835-1909), criminologist.

⁶ Atavism: theory elaborated by Cesare Lombroso according to which criminals possess anti-social characteristics from the time they are born, by way of heredity. Today, this affirmation is considered unfounded. This theory may have inspired the deformity of Leroux's Phantom, born flawed and thus inclined to crime and transgression. Lombroso wrote this essay in 1870, a year before the publication of Darwin's *On the Origin of Man* (1871). In 1898, he inaugurated a museum of psychiatry and criminology in Turin, later named the Museum of Criminal Anthropology. A famous discovery thought to support his theory is Giuseppe Villela's (1803-1872) *Il teschio del brigante*, the skull of a brigand studied by Lombroso and still preserved at the Turin museum. Leroux, in fact, describes his Phantom Erik's face as a skull.

Max Nordau⁷, a sociologist contemporary to Leroux, also wrote many texts that raised heavy criticism such as *The Conventional Lies of our Civilization* (1883) and *A Degeneration* (1879).

In the latter essay, Nordau declares that both contemporary society and human beings themselves have degenerated, and that this degeneration is both reflected and influenced by art. The author identifies this degeneration as a *fin-de-siècle* phenomenon and as a direct consequence of Decadent culture.

This is the cultural climate in which Gaston Leroux elaborates his *Le Fantôme de l'Opéra*, the novel that represents a *summa* of the discoveries and aesthetic theories that placed the monstrous and different at the center of comprehensive and controversial scientific research.

1.2. BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

Gaston Leroux was a Parisian writer and journalist whose work became representative of the French mystery story of the first quarter of the last century. Generations of devoted readers have in fact set him apart as a classic author of the detective genre, mainly for his most successful novels *Le mystère de la chambre jaune* (*The Mystery of the Yellow Room*) and *Le parfum de la dame en noir* (*The Scent of the Woman in Black*), which made their young protagonist, the journalist Joseph Rouletabille, into a veritable celebrity. Jean Claude Lamy⁸, author of the only biography of Gaston Leroux published to this day, states that Joseph Rouletabille was none other than Leroux himself,

⁷ Max Nordau (1849-1923): sociologist, Zionist, author of many widely discussed and provocative essays on genius and madness and on the degeneration of art caused by Decadent culture.

⁸ Jean-Claude Lamy, journalist and writer who lives and works in Paris, has published numerous essays and biographies including *Arsène Lupin, gentleman de la nuit* (1983), *Prévert, les frères amis* (1997) and *Mac Orlan, L'aventurier immobile* (2002). A graduate of the «Institut d'études politiques» in Paris, he has also been editorial director at the publishing companies Larousse, Médialogue and Nathan. A lover of cinema, he co-authored the *Dictionnaire mondial des films* (Larousse) with Bernard Rapp, and also co-produced some important films such as *Dancer in the Dark*, directed by Lars Von Trier (2002).

who drew inspiration from both real-life *noir* stories, crime news and his own imagination to give life to the investigator's daring adventures.

Gaston Leroux, author of the neo-gothic novel *Le Fantôme de l'Opéra*, has proven to possess some notable narrative talents in the literary genre of fantasy as well. The author breaks into the dimension of fantasy with original skill and almost gets the reader lost in the underground twists and turns of the Paris Opera Theater, a place that fascinated him immensely, as his friend Henry Jeansen recounted in a 1928 article from «Paris Matinal», which portrayed Leroux both melancholically and nostalgically nearly one year after his death:

You should have seen him walking along the boulevards, cane in hand, with his conqueror's hat [...]. His eyes sparkling with pleasure behind the glass of his spectacles [...]. When he arrived in front of the Café Neapolitan, he walked by quickly to not succumb to temptation, but, having arrived at the Opéra square, he turned back suddenly, retraced his footsteps, and sat down at a table at the Neapolitan [...]. He was sensitive and sentimental.⁹

With these few words, the journalist describes his friend and colleague, who became a leading figure on the Parisian journalistic scene by inspiring thousands of readers with thirty or so novels of incomparable verve. If the majority of the era's *feuilletons* have been forgotten, Gaston Leroux's stories have escaped the sands of time and his novels continue to interest new readers who appreciate the rich fantasy of his plots. Gaston Leroux's talent is intact, and he has not yet ceased to be a model for budding journalists who are irresistibly fascinated by what they believe to be the last truly adventurous career. These young, aspiring reporters feel like Rouletabille, in hopes of becoming like that *flâneur salarié*, a character that perfectly suited Leroux himself, to the point that he quit journalism to devote himself entirely to becoming a writer.

In examining this author's life, it is interesting to note how he was attracted by cemeteries and all that surrounded them. He loved the silence of the necropolis, which spoke to him not only of the dead,

⁹ Jean Claude Lamy, *Gaston Leroux ou le vrai Rouletabille*, Paris, Du Rocher, 2003, p. 19.

but of the living, who came to those places to reflect and pray. The cemetery underscored details about human beings that escaped him in everywhere else: to gain insight for his novels, he only had to closely observe people from every social class as he visited his departed loved ones. For Leroux, this was a kind of «language of chrysanthemums», a language of the flowers which only bloom in times of mourning. The to-and-fro movement of the living seemed to him like a macabre dance and provided a precious source of inspiration. Gaston Leroux loved to evoke the bittersweet atmosphere of cemeteries in his works – as in the story of *Le Fantôme de l'Opéra* – which he would describe to add a pathetic tone to the novel's plot, though he would affirm: «I tend to see drama everywhere [...] therefore, more often than not, there is nothing but comedy!»¹⁰.

The paradox of Leroux's life occurred at the moment of his own untimely death; that is, when the cemetery he often visited, Le Château in Nice, could not accept his coffin because of overcrowding on April 15, 1917, the day he died. Though fascinated by death, Leroux hadn't thought about his own burial. However, the local authorities were required to find a place for him in that cemetery, following a «press campaign» that wouldn't leave them in peace. The cemetery director found a tomb for the eternal rest of Gaston Leroux, perhaps also in order to avoid infuriating all those ghosts and phantoms that filled his novels.

Gaston Leroux, the last of the romantics? Or the first of the Surrealists? From the imagination of the elder Alexandre Dumas to the visions of André Breton, Leroux takes his place in the margins of a dynamic, surprising kind of literature that granted a noble status to the popular novel, according to Filomène Farré's comment in the June, 1970 issue of «Europe»:

Announcing Surrealism through the exaltation of daily magic, Leroux opens up different visions to actual fantasy – a Fantasy that deconstructs the dialectics of folly-society and myths-desires and becomes the exploitation of every possibility.¹¹

¹⁰ *Ibidem.*

¹¹ *Ibidem.*

The art of Gaston Leroux is that of knowing how to manipulate language within a plot full of *coups de scène*, yet which is always tied together by a guiding thread. The dimension of the awesome and fantastic belongs to the visible world, and it is sufficient to stick to the logic of fact to decipher the enigma. Jean Cocteau understood this quite well in his preface to Gaston Leroux's novel, *Le mystère de la chambre jaune*, where he noted:

For a long time, I sought refuge against poetic or realistic literature in books where the author ignores that poetry and truth carry him below himself and, I would say, below the disgust that he has for a genre he imagines unworthy of its writing; he fools himself by living much too high.

Apollinaire and I had proof of this when the authors of *Fantômas*, astonished by our enthusiasm, let us know that they were capable of writing less naïve works. Now, these less naïve works were of a disconcerting naïveté. They showed us, once again, the supremacy of a geniality similar to that of childhood, a geniality that badly educated people from the college of the muses confuse with clumsiness and simple luck or chance. There is nothing of this sort in Gaston Leroux. He was modest, in the real sense of the word, and never expected to grind away with his left hand in order to surprise us with masterpieces written with his right.

In this artistic family, what counts is neither intrigue nor «suspense», but a shadow of dreams, a malaise that characterizes heroes' dwellings, a nocturnal orchestra that accompanies the story we tell without the slightest bit of arrogance. From the absence of arrogance, there results a marvelous authenticity, a solid balance between the enigma that is proposed and one's ability to solve it.¹²

1.3. LIFE AND WORKS

Gaston Leroux was born illegitimately in the tenth *arrondissement* of Paris on May 6, 1868. His Norman mother Marie Bidaut married his father, Dominique Leroux, on June 13, 1868, a month after Gaston was born. After the wedding, the couple settled in Fécamp, where

¹² *Ibidem.*

Dominique was employed by a public works company at the town port.

Gaston Leroux was always influenced by his social *status* (perhaps also because of his illegitimate birth) and could trace his family tree back to Pierre Le Roux, son of William the Conqueror, declaring himself of Viking descent; most likely, his constant love for adventure and wide open seas derived from this fact. It was his literary vocation that stopped him from becoming a sailor in search of exotic adventures, but his imagination certainly led him much farther than any exciting voyage onboard a full-sailed schooner could. His character Rouletabille, in fact, strongly felt the same calling toward the unknown and the faraway and became a journalist, exactly like his creator Gaston Leroux. Rouletabille met the author in person at the old port of Marseilles, in the literary world, namely in the novel *Le parfum de la dame en noir*. Here Leroux becomes a character of his novel, thus carrying out a process of association between the author himself and his literary work. To this effect, Leroux declared that a true journalist should possess the following seven characteristics: seeing, listening, remembering, becoming, selecting, writing and being read.

Leroux was a sensationalistic journalist who often drew inspiration from his investigations around the world to enliven his legendary heroes. He was convinced that no matter how outrageous and creative a writer's imagination could be, it must be linked to a real occurrence, and it is for this professional «deformation» of his – from meticulous reporter strictly tied to real facts, to writer of novels – that Leroux firmly declares in the prologue of *Le Fantôme de l'Opéra*: «The Opera Ghost really existed»¹³. Inserted under the heading of *avant-propos*, the following lines explain his intent:

In which the author of this singular work informs the reader how he acquired the certainty that the Opera Ghost really existed.¹⁴

In the text of this prologue, Leroux continues to list reliable sources regarding the real existence of a mysterious presence in the underground tunnels of the Paris Opera, which had all the characteristics

¹³ Gaston Leroux, *Le Fantôme de l'Opéra*, Paris, Brodard & Taupin - Groupe CPI, 2004, p. 7.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*.

of a ghost or a specter. When asked about the origin of these strange inventions, Leroux affirmed:

So I tell you: it isn't while I hear the nightingale sing. It's while I sleep! Yes, I fall asleep with an idea that is still embryonic [...] and then, knock-knock [...] it wakes me up. What? What? I don't know [...] but the idea has been found [...] the problem solved [...]. There is nothing left to do but write.¹⁵

Writing and literature were the author's daily companions from early childhood. In grammar school, Leroux would pass the time by writing comedies and tragedies, demonstrating an avid passion for the theater, for which he would compose many successful works. As a young man, Gaston Leroux became close friends with a distinguished schoolmate, Philippe d'Orléans, son of the count of Paris, who lived at the castle of Eu (where the Leroux's father was working on a restoration project). In boarding school at Eu, Leroux lived happily and carefree until the death of his mother suddenly cast a veil of sadness over his adolescence. This emotion was evoked in many of his works and clearly emerges in the desolate experience of the Phantom of the Opera, where a deathly atmosphere is connoted in the entire narrative framework with descriptions of ghosts, tombs, skulls and caverns that suggest the chill of a crypt.

Leroux's father did not survive his wife long after her death, thus leaving Gaston, the firstborn, as head of the family, a responsibility that the young writer took upon himself reluctantly but which allowed him to avoid five years of mandatory military service thanks to a special permit that exonerated orphans from this duty. After completing his *baccalauréat* with a top score, Gaston Leroux moved to Paris to begin law school. As soon as he arrived in the capital, Leroux went to Faubourg Saint-Martin to see the house where he was born, but was met with a disturbing surprise: on the ground floor, where his home used to be, Leroux found a mortuary. Life and death merged in the author's reality once again, just as they would in his literary works. With his distinctive sense of humor, Leroux would later remark: «There, where I sought a cradle, I found a coffin [...]»¹⁶.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*.

¹⁶ Lamy, *op. cit.*, p. 31.

Gaston Leroux graduated in law and was sworn in before the Appeals Court of Paris to begin his career as an attorney on January 22, 1890. He held this occupation for three years, during which he had the chance to closely observe the judicial world. In reality, that position at the court served as a means for him to break into the field of journalism and, more specifically, of judicial reporting. The opportunity presented itself when the «Vaillant case» broke out, namely the case of the anarchist who planted a bomb at the House of Representatives on December 9, 1893, and was guillotined the following year. Throughout his life, Leroux fervently supported the abolition of the death penalty and was certainly opposed to the cruelty of that sentence, openly declaring his dissent in the following statement: «C'était débiter par une rude affaire»¹⁷.

After a few months, Leroux was hired by «Le Matin», the Parisian newspaper founded ten years earlier by Alfred Edwards (who intended to not make it a political newspaper). Concurrently, Leroux cultivated his passion for theater and wrote various theater reviews for «L'Écho de Paris». In the meantime, the author inherited a considerable sum from his father, which he would ultimately expend in just three years with his extravagant lifestyle and his particular vice of gambling. After he used up his paternal inheritance, Leroux's only source of income was his work as a reporter. Leroux dedicated some of his novels to his great passion and vice, such as *Le trois de trèfle* (*The Three of Clubs*)¹⁸, a story about gambling and about how this dependency can change a man's destiny.

Leroux's romantic life was quite tumultuous. After his marriage to his first love, Marie Lefranc, which ended in divorce, in 1917 he married Jeanne Cayatte, member of an upper-class family from Lorraine, with whom he had fallen in love at first sight. Theirs was a tormented relationship that ended in marriage after years of Jeanne's forced concubinage because of the author's previous romances. In St. Petersburg, where Leroux traveled as a special correspondent for his newspaper to report on the Russian Revolution, Jeanne gave birth to a son, Gaston, nicknamed *Milinkij*, which means «my little treasure» in Russian. This nickname would later become the name of a

¹⁷ *Ivi*, p. 33.

¹⁸ Gaston Leroux, *Le trois de trèfle* (1921), Paris, Robert Lafont, 1993.

street in Nice, which still holds that name in honor of the writer. After Russia, Gaston Leroux was transferred to Morocco and, nearing his fortieth birthday, began to dream of a more stable life, considering retiring from journalism to devote himself entirely to literature. He thought of his Rouletabille, narrating episodes about the adventures of this imaginary reporter, the successful character that would allow him to write novels without abandoning the world of journalism.

In 1907, Gaston Leroux was also involved in investigations surrounding cases of certain mysterious deaths in the cellars of the Paris Opera, deep and labyrinthine vaults that once hid cells where prisoners were held during the Paris Commune and the Revolution. It was certainly during these investigations that the author began to develop his idea for the monstrous character of Erik in the *noir* novel *Le Fantôme de l'Opéra*.

Leroux devoted himself to writing and to the character of Rouletabille, his double. He also began to write for the theater, composing works connected to his experiences in the courthouses and to the theme of justice – or better, the injustice of justice, as in the play *La maison des juges* (*The House of Judges*)¹⁹, performed at the «Odéon» in Paris, which deeply struck the theater's director, the legendary Antoine, for its strikingly current themes and daring content: it was the era of the *Dreyfus Affair*, which aroused Zola's and all of the general public's opinion in Paris. In this dramatic work, the author wanted his audience to *think* more than be entertained, an unusual fact for a writer who loved to fascinate and amuse. Leroux had the gift of biting irony and seemed to take nothing seriously; this is why his grim dramatic work did not gain the critical success that it deserved. Regarding his decision to write for the theater, Leroux declared:

When one solves the difficult problem of amusing or generating interest hundreds of thousands of readers with different personalities, temperaments and opinions, in just a column and a half, one must be able to amuse and interest a whole theater that can seat only a few hundred spectators.²⁰

¹⁹ Gaston Leroux, *La maison des juges*, performed at the «Odéon» in Paris on January 27, 1907 and dubbed «a fiasco».

²⁰ Lamy, *op. cit.*, p. 47.

Along the same lines of modern social themes, Leroux composed a second theatrical opera related to the women's rights movement entitled *Le Lys (The Lily)*²¹, reviewed for «Le Matin» by drama critic Guy Launay. The play dealt with the futility of marriage for a couple's happiness and put forward the idea that a woman should have exactly the same rights and responsibilities as a man. These matters hit home for the author, who was born outside of wedlock and who himself experienced the psychological difficulties of belonging to an «irregular» couple, since he could only wed his second wife after years of living together due to his prior marital ties.

After moving to Nice in 1907, Leroux never stopped writing, whether it was theatrical dramas, *feuilletons* or novels. While writing, Leroux followed his own guidelines to beat common laziness, forcing himself to work for at least four hours a day to complete twenty or so pages. The writer created complex characters and plots by drawing upon his countless professional experiences as a journalist, his travels, his imagination and personal life. Leroux's life was affected by another grim loss: the death of his beloved brother Joseph (the name of Detective Rouletabille was that of his younger brother), who passed away in Paris at the premature age of thirty-nine with Gaston at his side. When he returned to Nice, the author found consolation in the love of his wife Jeanne, son Miki and the youngest child Madeleine. His family helped him overcome this tragedy and to give him the strength and inspiration to continue writing.

Leroux had a melancholic temperament but also loved life and all that it offered; he had a great passion for cuisine and for the long morning walks he would take every day before sitting down at his desk to write. His son Miki, who became a journalist despite having studied engineering, lovingly described Leroux with the following words:

I cannot remember my father without having a spasm of happiness rise up in me. The dark feeling of sadness which is suitable to have arise when one remembers those who are no longer with us, does not suit him at all. He really left us with a luminous image of himself. His gaze with a touch of mischief. The slight smile on his lips. The round and

²¹ *Ivi*, p. 53.

warm corpulence he would show off with the same spirit that Cyrano had in presenting his nose. Winking his eye at the good life: smelling good, wearing his heart on his sleeve, with his pipe and the freshly scented cologne he would spray on after his morning shower, just how he appears to me every time I look for him by my side. And he was happy, imaginative, young ... young in spirit, young in laughter [...] really. Then again, he would call me «grandpa» ...

How did he write his novels? By God, with joy [...] with the sunshine of Nice as his accomplice. Thirty books in around twenty-five years. He didn't work nonstop. Of course, I knew his recipe. I saw him carrying it out for twenty years, and always with the same happiness [...]. But there wasn't simply a method. There was imagination, inspiration, knowledge, a whole mess of things that can't be ordered. When I would read the secret of his «measurements», there would still lack that diabolical blessing without which of the union of a chicken, a dash of cream, a layer of asparagus tips, a drop of white Porto and a touch of Indian pepper wouldn't create the «starry» chicken of Ali Baba, but an ordinary chicken with sauce – the kind which it wouldn't be fair to reproach someone who doesn't care much about the art of cooking *en flambé*, dressing, thickening, chopping, browning, roasting, simmering or dicing. Please excuse this culinary image; my father was a fine gourmet.

What's more, forever creating works full of drama and mystery, without having one's character become distressed and losing one's composure, calls one back to a natural state of crudeness, of the «a propos», of good humor – an indulgent confidence in life and in mankind, eliminating all ignorance; and finally, a critical attitude that is always right-on, but tempered with a sense of humor. My dad had loads of it.

With these reservations having been expressed, I can finally focus on his method: he would carefully take one idea and one year. The Idea had usually popped up a long time before, *hop là!* No matter where, no matter when. Preferably at night. A leap out of bed, then the time to put it down on paper *grosso modo* in ten lines, and it already had ten of its sisters in a special file where it would grow softer like wine in a cellar [...] and no one would speak of it again. Then, one fine day, having valiantly endured the quarantine, it would return to light by the grace of a thousand unexpected events. It was the same which he would treat in 300 pages that year. The year that was cut into three parts: four months of reflection, four months of drafting, four months of rest. Since my father was wise, he would regularly begin the cycle with four months of rest. These four months passed quickly. He would take care of it: no need for details [...]. It was the happy time before and after the other war.

The period of reflection was different ... it had a stratospheric nature, one might say: the novel of adventure, the characters, the tricks and consequences would collide with each other behind a single facade, until the moment in which, little by little, everything was harmoniously conveyed, fit together, tied up with no cracks, and a perfect ensemble was finally realized. The only plaster he would use was logic, and the most probable event was accepted on the condition that it did not go against «the good end of reason»: it's simple – an explanation never ought to be shaky [...] a conclusion never ought to be deceiving. This exercise absolutely disconnected my father from this world: he would come from pacing along the *Promenade des Anglais* at sunrise and spend the rest of the day in bed, unless he wouldn't have to raise an ace with a full house or to get off the train at his destination.

One day, when I had cut school and failed to take the simple precaution of avoiding the crowded avenue *de la Victoire*, I found myself face-to-face with him: he was returning by carriage from his daily outing around town, during which he would let his future heroes jump around in plain daylight. I stood frozen on the sidewalk like an obvious lighthouse, it seemed to me. Taken by surprise, the blood suddenly rushed to my heart. I lifted my hat and said hello with a broad gesture, bowing my head, and he returned the favor. He hadn't recognized me at all and wouldn't have recognized anyone [...]. He was chatting with some phantom of the Opera. I told him about the incident later [...] after my *baccalauréat* [...].²²

What else can one add, to become better acquainted with the author, to what his son wrote to explain how his father Gaston Leroux worked and lived in another world while creating his novels? The author was so taken with the ghosts that inhabited the vaults of the Paris Opera Theater as to not recognize the voice of his own son, and Miki describes him in such detail, as only one who lived by his side every day could. It is very interesting to be able to enter so deeply into the author's private life and understand the force of his deep inspiration. The phantom of the vaults, the theater, the ballerinas and singers were all already in Leroux's mind on that sunny morning in Nice, in such an intense way that he couldn't even recognize his son Miki. Considering this intensity, we may explain the undying success

²² *Ibidem.*

of the works of this author, who continues to fascinate readers with the gothic novel *Le Fantôme de l'Opéra* a century after its first edition.

After retiring from journalism, Gaston Leroux often traveled to the *Midi* area of France, particularly to Nice, attracted by its mild climate and by the casinos close by. He moved there permanently in 1908 after a brief stay in Mentone, making his new home in a large apartment in the famous «Palais étoile du Nord». The house was lavishly furnished with various objects collected by the author during his numerous visits abroad. That sumptuous, baroque universe would have become the dwelling of the Angel of Music, namely the phantom of the opera Erik, whom Leroux situated in a lavish vault that was a veritable museum.

The author would travel to Paris three or four times a year to visit his friends at the «Café Neapolitan» by the Opera, where he would entertain himself with Catulle Mendès²³, who would often frequent the café surrounded by a circle of friends. Leroux enjoyed discussing the theater with the famous critic, son-in-law of the legendary Théophile Gautier. Perhaps it was in that stage-like environment, surrounded by the ballerinas and divas of the *Opéra Comique* that Gaston Leroux began to give life to his theatrical novel, *Le Fantôme de l'Opéra*.

Gaston Leroux was more than just a man of the theater. In fact, in 1918 the eclectic author discovered the magic of cinema, the latest gadget to arrive from the United States, and founded a production company, «La Société des Cinéromans»²⁴. The company made its debut with two great successes, *Tue-la-mort* and *Il était deux petits enfants*, in which Leroux's daughter Madeleine was lead actress. Leroux received some encouraging reviews for this new pursuit, in which he certainly would have become successful had he not met such an untimely death.

After his death, *his* phantom of the Opera instead came alive and met the undying success of new transformations in other novels, numerous films, plays, musical operas, and circus and ice performances.

²³ Catulle Mendès (1841-1909), critic, poet, animator of Parisian literary life and fervent occultist.

²⁴ Lamy, *op. cit.*, p. 86.

He, Gaston Leroux, man of seeming Cartesian rationalistic convictions, had made a pact with his wife to visit her from the afterlife after his death, despite the fact that he considered himself a bitter enemy of occultism and declared:

Absolutely, absolutely no occultism, no spiritism; to include the slightest bit of it is to risk distressing oneself. There is one thing, there is certainly one thing [...] but WHAT? We have neither the right nor the possibility to know ... Nerval, Maupassant, died insane from it [...] and many others.²⁵

It has been said that Gaston Leroux's spirit visited his wife, who incredulously narrated the occurrence to her daughter. Madeleine later explained the bizarre event with Cartesian logic, mixing reality and fantasy, just as her father had done, with the following words:

It was only afterwards that she understood that she had been, before her friend, the victim of fumes of jasmine. Having in mind the memory of Gaston Leroux, both of them unconsciously endured his presence that was suddenly materialized under the effect of the perfume, which acted as a drug. And, in their incensed spirits, this hallucination was born.²⁶

1.4. THE SOURCES

The sources of this unusual novel are rooted in the literary tradition of the gothic genre and in the iconography of ancient incisions that date back to the medieval period, such as those from 1485 titled *Danse Macabre*²⁷, found in the Cloister of the Innocents in Paris. These were printed by two Parisian editors, Guyot Marchant and Verand, and subsequently circulated throughout Europe. The only remaining exemplar of this publication is found at the Library of Grenoble. These macabre dances underline the vanity of social differences – a theme

²⁵ *Ivi*, p. 70.

²⁶ *Ivi*, p. 72.

²⁷ Gaston Leroux, *Le Fantôme de l'Opéra*, Paris, Brodard & Taupin, 2000, p. 25. Reference to the *Danse Macabre*, musical opera by Saint-Saens inspired by medieval iconography.

dear to Gaston Leroux – which destiny scoffs at, decimating both the potent pope and the poor priest, the emperor and the lansquenet. In these incisions, Death, the central character, rises up among the living as a symbol of the inseparability of life and death. This is a classic medieval theme that represents the meaning of one of the most ancient works of medieval English theater, by an unknown author. This work is *Everyman*, whose central theme is so modern that the play continues to be performed in London's theaters. The same theme of death that is omnipresent in the life of every man is elaborated by the philosopher Montaigne, who declares in his *Essays* that «Philosopher c'est apprendre à mourir [To philosophize is to learn to die]».

These themes certainly inspired Gaston Leroux's Phantom, Erik, who is masked with a *tête de mort* but who also possesses great musical talent; he is thus a deadly yet deeply passionate character, who both charms and terrorizes his victim Christine as well as the reader. Erik is a tragic and contradictory character, son of the silent darkness and lover of melodrama; he is the theatrical representation of the paradox of human existence and carries the symbols of death within himself from the moment of his birth. The phantom created by Gaston Leroux is a touching, vital and erotic character, with his skull-like mask, a symbol of the inseparability of life and death, two faces of the same coin.

Another source mediated by the visual arts that could have inspired Leroux's phantom is the famous painting by English artist James Ensor, which represents a skeleton at work at his canvas: the *Skeleton Painter* (1896). Moreover, another essential source for Leroux's theatrical novel is the series of paintings by Degas dedicated to the ballet and dancers of the Paris Opera.

Painting was not the only inspiring source for *Le Fantôme de l'Opéra*: Leroux also drew upon music, literature and theater.

The theater is, in fact, the main character of this novel, the very essence of this narrative which may also be considered a theatrical novel, rich with descriptions of life behind the scenes and with dialogue that is full of disenchanting irony²⁸. Theater is the protagonist, as described at the beginning of the second chapter of the novel.

²⁸ *Ivi*, p. 25.

The other abstract character of this novel is music, which Leroux speaks of throughout the plot with numerous references to the various concerts, musicians, singers and ballerinas²⁹ who gave life to an unforgettable season for the Paris Opera.

Regarding this, it is important to recall that Gaston Leroux was also a drama critic and playwright of some highly successful works³⁰.

Gaston Leroux was a great admirer of the American author Edgar Allan Poe, whose works were introduced in France through Charles Baudelaire's translations in the second half of the Nineteenth century. Poe fascinated an entire generation of writers who dedicated themselves to the *noir*, detective and gothic genres. In his novel, Leroux alludes to a citation from Edgar Allan Poe's story *The Mask of the Red Death*, in which the American author describes the kingdom of Prospero – also citing Shakespeare's *The Tempest* – in this way:

The external world could take care of itself [...]. The prince had provided all the appliances of pleasure. There were buffoons, there were <improvisatori>, there were ballet dancers, there were musicians, there was Beauty, there was wine. All these and security were within [...].

[...] Prince Prospero entertained his thousands friends at a masked ball of the most unusual magnificence.

[...] He had directed, in great part, the moveable embellishment of the seven chambers, upon occasion of this great <fête> and it was his own guiding taste which had given character to the masqueraders. Be sure they were grotesque. There were much glare and glitter and piquancy and phantasm – much of what has been seen since in *Hernani* [...] there was much of the beautiful, much of the wanton, much of the bizarre, something of terrible and not a little of what might have excited disgust!

[...] And yet all this might have been endured or approved, by the mad revelers around. But the mummy had gone so far as to assume the type of the Red Death. His vest was dabbled in blood – and his broad

²⁹ *Ivi*, pp. 25, 60, 64, 122.

³⁰ Gaston Leroux, *La maison des juges* (1904), *L'homme qui a vu le diable* (1911), successfully performed at the Parisian theater «Grand Guignol» – *Le mystère de la chambre jaune* (1912), quite unsuccessful in its run at the «Théâtre de l'Ambigu», *Alsace* (1913), performed at the «Théâtre Réjane».

brow, with all the features of the face was besprinkled with the scarlet horror.³¹

Erik, the phantom of the Paris Opera, is dressed like Poe's Red Death, and his cape reads: «Je suis la mort qui passe». This message however does not appear in the subsequent theatrical and cinematic adaptations of Leroux's novel.

The Red Death wreaks terror in the middle of the lavish party hosted by Prospero, the prince who took refuge in his palace with the illusion of escaping from the «red death» (the plague that was killing the population of his feud) together with a thousand privileged friends.

The description cited above presents us with the same theatrical and decadent atmosphere that evokes the phantom's baroque dwelling in the vaults of the Paris Opera. Like the Shakespearean magician, Poe's and Leroux's protagonists have staged a true theatrical scene that makes clear reference to the courtly «Masques» of the Elizabethan theater and the «Fêtes» of Louis XIV. This is a grotesque masquerade, with a biting tone that is at once disquieting and luxurious, and possesses the *magnificence* of the ephemeral, courtly productions of the Renaissance and Baroque periods. A spectral feeling envelops the party, described as «bizarre and terrible» by Edgar Allan Poe, and which Leroux himself revisits with a sense of mysterious terror. Erik, in fact, is dressed in scarlet red and his mask resembles a skull.

Edgar Allan Poe invented the detective story by unifying the following elements in his famous tales, which later influenced the French author of *Le Fantôme de l'Opéra*:

- *mysterious crime*;
- *difficult solving of the case*;
- *deductive and investigative abilities*;
- *unmasking*³².

In Poe's tale *The Murders of the Rue Morgue*, the assassin is a thuggish gorilla who has arrived from Paris on board a ship. The monster reaches his destination through the «water» element, as in Bram

³¹ Edgar Allan Poe, *Opere scelte*, Milano, Mondadori, 1972, p. 514; *The Mask of the Red Death*, New York, Ballantine Books, 2005.

³² Leroux, *op. cit.* (ed. 2000), p. 23.

Stoker's gothic epistolary novel *Dracula* as well as in *Le Fantôme de l'Opéra*, in which Erik glides along the underground river on board a macabre vessel. Evil arrives by ship, through the «water» element, and has a non-human form; in Poe, evil is represented by a gorilla, while in Leroux it is a masked skeleton.

The French anthropologist and sociologist Roger Caillois³³ states a theory according to which «the fairy-tale is a wonderful universe that is set against the world without disturbing or destroying its coherence. The fantastic instead reveals a scandal, a laceration, an unusual and nearly unbearable invasion in the real world. In other words, the fairy-tale world and the real world penetrate each other without collision or conflict [...] with fantasy, we have a new kind of bewilderment, an unknown panic».

In the fantasy story, as in the case of Leroux's novel, man finds himself alone and lost in an incomprehensible and thus terrifying world. Indubitably, both Poe's stories and Leroux's novel describing a monstrous, enamored phantom may be ascribed to the genre of fantasy, and this is further proof of the affinities that tie the work of Leroux to the novels of Edgar Allan Poe, which the French author read avidly.

The other important author who inspired Gaston Leroux is Victor Hugo, with the gothic novel *Han d'Islande* (1823) and with the character of Quasimodo in *Nôtre Dame de Paris*, the hideous hunchback who falls in love with the gypsy dancer Esmeralda.

Han d'Islande is an early work by Victor Hugo, who began writing it in 1820, at eighteen years of age, with the intention of publishing it serially in «Le Conservateur Littéraire». The novel was completed following the author's marriage to Adèle and the birth of their first child in 1823, most likely for financial reasons. Persan published one thousand copies of the work in an anonymous and economical edition. Hugo received 500 francs for *Han d'Islande*, the novel which caused Persan to go bankrupt, according to certain sources. The novel received both good and bad reviews and, given its horror-fantasy

³³ Roger Caillois, born in Reims in 1913, anthropologist and sociologist, introduced and made the work of Borges known in France. Among his works: *Nel cuore del fantastico*, Italy, Abscondita, 2004; *Dalla fiaba alla fantascienza*, Italy, Theoria, 1991.

themes, it has been said that Victor Hugo copied the work of Walter Scott about monsters and vampires, skulls and dead bodies, the same themes that inspired Gérard de Nerval, who adapted the text of *Han d'Islande* for the theater in 1829.

During the performances of Hugo's *Hernani*, Gérard De Nerval, would entertain himself in Parisian restaurants by holding a skull-shaped goblet and ordering «sea water», the favorite beverage of *Han d'Islande*'s protagonist³⁴. The main character of Hugo's novel evokes certain characteristics of Leroux's phantom, Erik, especially regarding his appearance and his dwelling. In fact, Han has a terrible posture that makes him look like an evil dwarf, and he is also a cold-blooded assassin who plots intrigue and crime during the conflict between Norway and Denmark. Hugo describes Han as a tiny, repulsive monster with a face marked by ferocious, ape-like features. We cannot forget the other thug that Leroux liked so much: Edgar Allan Poe's. Hidden by his black cape, the monstrous Han guards his beloved goblet, shaped like a skull, and lives in the underground grottoes of Waldenhog. Legend has it that, in this remote area, Han was buried in a glass coffin to allow others to contemplate his skull-like mask; Hugo instead narrates how the monster was burned alive and how all that remained of his body were two skulls, his own and the one on his macabre goblet.

These elements inspired Leroux's phantom; in fact, just as Han represented otherness and difference for his fellow Norwegian citizens, so Erik the phantom, was considered an outsider by fellow residents of Paris.

The themes of monstrosity and strangeness connect Leroux's character to other monsters in Hugo's works. The first is Quasimodo, the medieval hunchback who lives segregated and hidden from the world in the Parisian Cathedral of Nôtre Dame and who falls desperately in love with the beautiful Esmeralda, who repays him with compassionate affection. The same feelings are experienced by Christine Daaé, the heroine of Leroux's novel, toward the phantom. The second inspiration for Erik is the unhappy protagonist of *L'Homme qui rit*.

³⁴ Bombart, *Victor Hugo and the Visionary Novel*, Cambridge (Mass.), Harvard University Press, 1984.

Monstrosity, deformity, diversity, masks, skulls, underground vaults, forbidden loves: these are the themes which link *Le Fantôme de l'Opéra* to these famous novels of the gothic-horror tradition.

Other significant sources for Gaston Leroux were some famous works of the rich *noir* genre: *Dracula* by Bram Stoker and *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, by R.L. Stevenson.

The author was inspired by the first text mentioned for its deadly aspects, such as the black cape, the ability to modify one's appearance, living underground and navigating along waterways. Leroux also connects his novel to the second text by Stevenson for the dual personality of Erik, who is a monster and a musician, an assassin and a pitiable lover; both characters have two faces, a split personality that stirs indignation and scorn but also pity and tenderness.

Another source for Leroux was *Trilby*, an undoubtedly less famous novel than those cited above but no less efficient in its representation of the protagonist's monstrosity. *Trilby* is the second novel by G. Du Maurier, an English citizen born in Paris³⁵, who narrates the story of a poor, sensual model, Trilby O'Farrell, who is transformed into a diva by a spell cast by the evil magician and musical genius «Svengali».

Here we find analogous themes to those of the Phantom, namely those of musical creativity, song, the charm of the theater, the transformation of the young and naive protagonist into a star of the stage – the same themes treated in *Le Fantôme de l'Opéra*.

When his novel was first published, Du Maurier was quite flattered by the triumphant response toward the novel, which became a best seller in the United States. George Du Maurier was the grandfather of the famous writer Daphne Du Maurier, author of *Rebecca the First Wife*; another unique fact is that George Du Maurier was also the grandfather of the famous Llewelyn-Davies children, who in 1904 inspired playwright James Matthew Barrie's *Peter Pan*.

Speaking of inspiring sources for Leroux's phantom, we must not overlook the tale *La Belle et la Bête* (*Beauty and the Beast*) by Jeanne Marie Leprince De Beaumont (1711-1780); Mozart's *Don Giovanni*;

³⁵ George Du Maurier, who was born in Paris in 1834 and died in London in 1896, was also the illustrator of his novel *Trilby*. A lover of art and pupil of Gleyre in Paris, he was forced to quit painting because he lost his vision in one eye.

the story of the double, *Le Horla*, by Guy de Maupassant. These works narrate the dark side of their protagonists, about the unknown and disquieting side that each human being possesses, about the terror experienced by these characters in front of their reflections. De Beaumont's *Bête* is an arrogant prince who has been transformed into a beast as punishment for his boastfulness. Only a true love can free him from the spell. He is a prisoner of his monstrosity, just as Don Giovanni is imprisoned by his own wickedness, which prevents him from becoming good and repenting for his licentious life even before the gates of Hell. Maupassant's character *Le Horla* perhaps represents the author himself, who suddenly had to face his own double and who remained terrified by this fantastic self-projection. Doesn't Leroux's phantom represent the «sublime» element of music, the art of playing the violin, as well as the «monstrous» side of ferocity and capacity to kill?

Leroux was also familiar with and admired the Irish author Walter Scott, as well as the literary tradition of the gothic novel in both English and American culture, which also inspired Victor Hugo for his mysteries and gothic novels. Leroux also drew inspiration from certain authors who may be considered the pioneers of gothic narrative, such as Matthew G. Lewis (*The Monk*, 1796), Charles Brockden Brown (*Wienland*, 1798) and Ann Ward Radcliff (*The Mystery of Udolfo*, 1794; *The Italian*, 1797).

Continuing this analysis of the sources that inspired Gaston Leroux for his Parisian phantom, I will cite the text that is still considered a sort of bible for the horror genre, *The Castle of Otranto* by Horace Walpole.

The Castle of Otranto was, in fact, the first narrative work to have the inscription «A gothic tale» appear under the title in the 1765 edition. These words indicate the Medieval and gothic trend, already mentioned by Pope, which would proliferate throughout the 18th century. The first traces of this Romantic sensibility may be found in the elegy *Eloisa to Abelard* (1717), with descriptions of the heroine's «deep solitudes» and «awful cells».

This wandering in a surreal and absurd world also inspired Lewis Carroll for his *Alice in Wonderland*, when Alice crosses the mirror. Mirrors are in fact quite present throughout Leroux's novel. Erik has access to Christine's room and may observe her through a mirror;

Christine passes through a mirror to enter the phantom's secret underground domain.

As will happen in later years for other narratives of this genre (for example, *Ossian* by the Scottish writer Macpherson), Horace Walpole employed the pretext of the «rediscovered ancient manuscript» – a device still used today by gothic authors – to grant credibility to his incredible tale, thus making it more terrifying and disturbing. In the text, Walpole narrates the discovery of a volume from the Italian Renaissance, which itself referred to a more ancient codex dating back to the Crusades and which recounted a series of events that could be «real». Leroux worked in the same way to give life to his phantom, undoubtedly employing his imagination for the greater part of the plot, but skillfully inserting a series of actual events and real places with the intention of granting the novel a semblance of reality. In fact, the scenario chosen by Walpole was undeniably a real castle, just as Leroux set his novel in the real theater of the Paris Opera.

Horace Walpole's castle may still be considered an exhaustive example of the stylistic elements of the gothic genre, and is inspired by the villa that the extravagant writer had built at Strawberry Hill, west of London, following the standards of the contemporary «carpenter's gothic» style. To modern eyes, this tendency is reminiscent of the Rococo era; all the elements of the author's castle, in effect, appear as a bizarre variation of Rococo style and architectural syncretism, following the taste for hybridization which dominated at that time and which tended to mix gothic and Asian elements, for instance.

A century and a half later, Erik's dwelling also represents an eclecticism of styles with a Rococo background, which had become contaminated with the whole baggage of Orientalism that Decadent culture had brought with it and that clearly connoted theatrical scenery, especially that of the opera – exactly like Walpole's castle.

The reader will find numerous elements in the Parisian setting of Leroux's novel that can be traced back to Walpole. Like Christine, the Castle of Otranto's heroine Isabella, for instance, is tormented by the invisible master of the castle, Manfred, and this persecution will lead her to the palace's underground vaults, a dark labyrinth in the most remote area of the manor. In those hidden vaults, the young lady has visions of phantoms who repeatedly emerge in the land of the living as well. Among these ghosts of darkness, Isabella also meets

the specter of an old hermit whose face resembles a skull, exactly as Leroux describes his phantom, Erik³⁶:

Was all of it real? The truth is that the vision of the skeleton was born of the description of the ghost given by Joseph Buquet, the chief scene-shifter, who had really seen him: he had run into the mysterious character – one couldn't say «face to face» because the phantom didn't have one – on the small stairway near the ramp which takes one directly «underground»: he had seen him for a second – for the phantom had fled – and had kept an unforgettable memory of this vision.

And here is what Joseph Buquet said about the Phantom to anyone who cared to listen: «He is astonishingly thin and his dark cloak hangs on a skeleton frame: his eyes are so deep that one can hardly distinguish his fixed pupils. In a word, one cannot see anything but two large black holes, as in a dead man's skull. His skin, which is pulled tight across his bones like a drumhead, is not white, but a nasty yellow, and the *absence* of that nose is something terrible to *behold*. All the hair he has is three or four long brown locks on his forehead and behind his ears».

In vain, Joseph Buquet had followed this strange apparition. It had disappeared as if by magic and the boy could no longer find any trace of it.³⁷

And why? Because he had seen the phantom coming towards him, at the level of his head, but without a body, a head of fire.³⁸

The ghost had several heads, which he changed about as he pleased.³⁹

At that moment, we were – the shadow and I⁴⁰ – just in front of the high altar; and the moonbeams fell straight upon us through the stained-glass windows of the apse. As I did not let go of the cloak at all, the shadow turned round; and I saw a terrible death's head, which darted a look at me from a pair of scorching eyes. I felt as if I were face to face with Satan himself; and, in the presence of this unearthly apparition, my heart gave way, my courage failed me and I remember nothing more until the moment in which I regained consciousness in my little room at the hotel of the Setting Sun.⁴¹

³⁶ Leroux, *op. cit.* (ed. 2004), p. 15.

³⁷ *Ivi*, p. 16.

³⁸ *Ibidem*.

³⁹ *Ivi*, p. 17.

⁴⁰ In this passage, the young Raoul De Chagny describes the ghost.

⁴¹ *Ivi*, p. 86.

The story of Walpole's sinister specter has a denouement that does not differ too greatly from the experiences of Leroux's phantom. Both have obscure and tragic births; both must confront the young, handsome fiancée of the two heroines, Theodore for Otranto's Isabella and Raoul for the Opera singer. Both Isabella and Christine feel a perverse, transgressive erotic attraction toward their horrid, spectral suitors. Moreover, Erik's story seems to follow the standards for the gothic genre that were elaborated by Walpole himself in the preface to his novel, in which the author describes the novel's binary structure, a dual level for love stories: the first is controlled by the rules of probability in ordinary life, and the second is led by the imagination toward the world of improbability.

Another element that links the two novels is that of theatricality. Leroux draws on the scenes of Paris's «Théâtre du Grand Guignol», while Horace Walpole pays homage to Shakespeare's theater – as he himself declared – regarding the novel's setting, dialogue and dynamic action. The reader may find Elizabethan echoes in Walpole's castle: there are witches and ghosts (*Macbeth*) and terrifying helmets that emerge from thin air (*Hamlet*). While Elizabethan theater had its Shakespeare, however, the gothic novel, the «tale of terror» did not, though a certain bold critic dared to dub Mrs. Ann Radcliffe «the Shakespeare of romance writers»⁴².

The evil tyrant (*Tieste*), the wife-killing «moor» (*Othello*), the cruelty of crimes (*King Lear*), the sudden invasion of the supernatural into reality (*Macbeth*, *Hamlet*), the conventional superhuman villain (*Richard III*), based on Seneca's tyrant and updated with a tinge of Machiavellian cynicism; the interior monologue inaugurated by Montaigne – with all these important predecessors, Walpole did for the gothic novel what Thomas Kyd did for Elizabethan drama with *The Spanish Tragedy*.

Starting off by examining the treaty *On the Sublime* attributed to the philosopher Longinus (c. 300 A.D.), in his *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* (1757), Edmund Burke investigated a kind of sublimity that was destined to be greatly successful, namely the «sublimity of terror». Why do certain

⁴² Horace Walpole, *The Castle of Otranto*, VI ed., Milano, BUR (Classici Blu), 2004, p. 15, from the preface by Mario Praz.

places and characters stir the kind of emotions which Longinus defined as belonging to the category of the sublime? Long before Rousseau's romantic *Rêveries du promeneur solitaire* (*Reveries of the Solitary Wanderer*), fake ruins and artificial grottoes already figured among these examples of the «sublime». One of the first grottoes (the cavern is a famous archetype that connotes decipherable elements after Freud) had to be Pope's cave at Twickenham, adorned with minerals and mirrors and boasting a magical view of the Thames. How can this help but call to mind Erik's subterranean cavern, loaded with baroque furnishings, adorned with mirrors and facing a macabre underground lake?

Caverns, grottoes, underground vaults, gothic manors – these are the favorite locations of gothic authors. Among the «sublime» characters dear to Burke, a recurrent figure is that of the solitary hermit, who lives in an isolated cavern or in underground passageways. Considering these typical elements, the reader must recall Coleridge's *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, specifically the point at which the hermit appears on the scene – a narrative moment which must have greatly appealed to the poet's contemporaries. Furthermore, that which the Eighteenth century had considered a literary genre of «diversion» began to change and to reveal its dark side, becoming more disturbing and disquieting. Thus, Bibbiena's scenes became Piranesi's *Le Carceri* (*The Prisons*); hermits' caverns became the horrid prisons in which unfortunate damsels and desperate heroes were left to languish; the Paris Opera's vaults became arenas of horror during the French Revolution and the Commune in 1870. At the end of the 1700s, the genre of the «black novel» flows into the underground Acheron, into the river of the Marquis De Sade. The gothic castle becomes the background upon which a melancholy, perverse soul sets his deathly reveries. His characters are no longer Walpole's Rococo-inspired chalk figures, but are transformed into the vampires and nightmares of Goya's *Capricios*. While Eighteenth century horror always contained an element of melodrama (as in Mozart's *Don Giovanni* or in the *Convitato di pietra*) as well as subtle humor, in the Nineteenth century this kind of literature was transformed into the disturbing genre of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, where a real sense of obsession emerges.

To define the most distant foundations of Gaston Leroux's work, one must thus look far back, long before Edgar Allan Poe. *Le Fantôme de l'Opéra* has all the stuff of a true, refined gothic novel.

This kind of gothic literature also has its roots in ancient superstitions and pagan beliefs. Underground vaults represent the archaic superstitions and remote fears that threaten the emotional stability of the young heroines. The naïve protagonists' descent below ground is a metaphor for the slow descent toward a kind of unconscious tendency for self-destruction, toward the crypt of their most obscure and repressed desires.

It is also interesting to consider how Leroux and Walpole share a deep sense of theatricality, as well as an interest in the genre of melodrama, namely the opera. In fact, both authors were avid fans of the opera, and it may be said that the gothic genre reflects certain similarities with that of theater. The operatic protagonist is usually subversive; recall the *Marriage of Figaro* and the reversal of rules that this opera enacts, to arrive at Verdi's *Othello*, where the young Desdemona is fatally attracted to the strange, Moorish hero who will bring about her destruction – an attraction to that which is dark, obscure, transgressive and cruel.

The Fantastic is thus the result of choosing between a natural and unnatural explanation of the unusual. If the Nineteenth century has presented us with a vast range of excellent examples, the Twentieth century also offers interesting and dense literary works such as this unique novel by Gaston Leroux, where the gothic-*noir* genre follows the open paths of psychoanalysis, from the theme of «doubleness» to metamorphosis and folly, to ultimately arrive at Freudian neurosis.

1.5. THE PARIS OPERA THEATER:

«UN MONUMENT QUI CHANTE ET QUI DANSE»

Anyone familiar with the world's major opera houses can confirm that the Paris Opera is an extraordinary theater, a sumptuous architectural creation, a temple of art – the special art that speaks to the eyes, ears, heart and passions, namely the kind of art that engages the whole richness of the human person. This sensory exuberance must be generated in a favorable setting and the abundance of sensation, which finds its roots in lyrical drama, must be made whole by the sense of fullness that emanates from the architecture of this incredible opera house.

In order to build this theater capable of welcoming and expressing art *par excellence*, this temple of total art that speaks to the eyes, ears, heart and passions, Charles Garnier⁴³ understood that he must use instruments capable of accomplishing the feat of forming a sacred union among all the arts and techniques involved in the construction and decoration of a great monument. Considering, from a Wagnerian perspective, that opera represented «the global work of art» and should thus embrace the arts of poetry, music, dance, song and painting under the emblem of Music, and that his Opera should represent the total, unifying opus, Garnier understood that his monument needed to fully encapsulate all the plastic arts under the emblem of Architecture.

How could Charles Garnier accomplish this feat of such artistic synthesis? Convinced that architecture represented the essence of human dwelling, he summed up his aesthetic ideas in a single thought: «It is essence that makes work; everything else is secondary»⁴⁴. With this affirmation, he meant to declare that the essence of his work was the architecture of the theater and that all other arts were secondary compared to that monument. Architecture was like music and thus had to encapsulate its sister arts: painting, sculpture, scene design, color choices. These artistic disciplines were consequently functional to realize the whole monument.

The precedence granted to architecture allowed Garnier to establish firm rules both for painting and sculpture which were closely followed during construction inside the theater, rules which he dubbed «the laws of artistic decoration»: «Sculptors and painters must bow to sacrifice and understand that they must create their works in harmony with the context in which they will be established»⁴⁵. This became a kind of sacred mission for Charles Garnier, a «dictator» of construc-

⁴³ Charles Garnier (1825-1898), French architect, won the *Grand Prix* of Paris's Academy of Science in 1848, an award which permitted him to sojourn in Rome. In 1852, he traveled to Athens. These travels had a great influence on his architectural work. While still an unknown, he won the Competition for the Paris Opera, which remains his most emblematic work and became symbolic of the «Napoleon II» style, characterized by a Baroque temperament with eclectic and embellished decorations.

⁴⁴ Gérard Fontaine, *L'Opéra de Charles Garnier*, Paris, Patrimoine, 2000, p. 26.

⁴⁵ *Ivi*, p. 13.

tion who decreed how and where the various works created by secondary artists should be placed, according to his ideas. The result was that this monument is the only one of its kind to be considered as the work of a single man who, from the first to last brick, envisioned, selected and realized every single detail and who defended the total «fatherhood» of this magnificent, lavish theater.

It is interesting to note these details, since the Paris «Opéra» theater was greatly significant for Leroux as a central character in his novel *Le Fantôme de l'Opéra*, in which the theater, understood as a dramatic space, pulsates with life and, as Charles Garnier declared, is a «monument that sings and dances».

A total work of art that unified artists from every discipline with the single, common aim of the great art of construction: Garnier had this intuition fifty years before Gropius, who would create the «Bauhaus» school in Weimer in 1919.

During Garnier's generation, as empirical science and technology progressed at breakneck speed, architects began to fear the growing power of engineers, who were becoming ever more influential. Understandably, the Universal Exposition of 1899 consecrated the absolute triumph of engineers who created, among other masterpieces, the «Eiffel Tower» and the «Gallery of Machines». For his part, the architect Charles Garnier knew how to keep the pace with the great advancements of the age and make the most of new technology to exploit anything that could improve his work. Thus, he knew how to surround himself with engineers and also how to make use of them. Gifted with a great sense of practicality, Garnier avoided mummifying himself in rigid theory and confining himself in sectarian isolation, by knowing how to unify architecture with the nascent technology of modern engineering.

The deep originality of Garnier's work was received with some hesitancy by his contemporaries. Based on comments made by critics at that time, we can assume that they prudently avoided excessively negative criticism, perhaps due to their puzzlement as to ascribing and classifying this magniloquent, grand monument within traditional canons. They dared to define this work as «typical of the times». Critics admired «Garnier's Opera» for its uncontainable beauty and mainly appreciated the fact that the architect avoided copying La «Scala» in Milano, «La Fenice» in Venice or London's «Covent Garden». The Opera's splendor would have passed on a legacy of the true ideal of

that imperial period. This unique work was in fact considered *avant-garde* for its time and representative of the «Napoleon III» style.

This extraordinary opera house was conceived with love, since Charles Garnier had a deep passion for theater and his greatest dream was to be able to trace the scenes he designed, to direct a major opera and – why not – perhaps also compose one. In fact, Garnier improvised himself as a *librettista* and wrote an operetta with his friend Nutter, *Le Baron Groschaminet*, composed by Jules Durato. He could not take the affair too seriously, however, because he affirmed that he had written a bunch of nonsense and that literature was not a strong part of his family's traditions. Fortunately, Garnier was a talented architect and he carried out this vocation with the same passion he felt for the art of theatrical representation and for theater, understood as a scenic space.

The German poet Hoffmann affirmed that Offenbach had written «the opera of operas», a real masterpiece, *Il Don Giovanni*, while Charles Garnier had created an opus even greater than opera, the enigma called «Le Palais Garnier».

The grand monument was built between 1861 and 1870. Beyond being a great construction site and later a magnificent theater, «Le Palais Garnier» was also the site of heated conflicts and schemes among actors and actresses who would kill to win the most important roles at the great Paris Opera. Once they had obtained what they desired, they would instigate other clashes without restraint to keep the positions they had attained.

The Opera was an enormous establishment that employed over 1500 people and even had its own private stables for the grandiose scenes that required carriages drawn by four black and white horses. Today the Paris Opera Theater still employs more than a thousand individuals and has two permanent ballet schools.

The Paris Opera has always been technologically ahead of its time and was the first theater to introduce gas lamps as stage illuminations for the performance of Isouard's *Aladdin* (1882)⁴⁶ as well as roller skates on stage for *The Prophet* by Mayerbeer⁴⁷.

⁴⁶ Isouard (1774-1818), French musician and composer.

⁴⁷ Giacomo Mayerbeer (1791-1864), musician and composer. He began his career with the successful production of operas in the *grande-opéra* style, which

One of the most important figures in the history of the Paris Opera Theater is undoubtedly the scene designer Ciceri⁴⁸, an expert in creating spectacular special effects such as the nocturnal flights of the *Sylphs*, in which the protagonist appears and disappears through a window, a fireplace, a tree, and the ground.

The Eighteenth century «choreo-drama», filled with mythological and allegorical figures, was by now behind the times. With Romanticism, the *mises en danse* were born, which evoked lunar ambiances, gothic-inspired settings and spiritual sylvan scenes, and recaptured popular traditions in which space was granted to exoticism and the grotesque was legitimized as a distinctive trait of modern art, as Victor Hugo noted in his *Préface de Cromwell*⁴⁹. In fact, in his *Préface*, Hugo wrote that «the stage gives the maximum illusion of reality»; thus, the creation of realistic yet surprising effects became one of the specialties of the Paris Opera Theater. Some of the most famous examples were that of the spectacular eruption of Mt. Vesuvius, which used real stones, or the sumptuous performances of lavishly staged operas like *The Siege of Corinth* by Rossini or Gounod's *Faust*⁵⁰.

The Opera's performances were grandiose productions with sparkling lights and costumes and the artistic participation of the great virtuosos of lyrical music, accompanied by an orchestra selected from among the best and most famous musicians in the world.

Another tradition of the Paris Opera was to include sumptuous ballets at the end of the third act: the reason for this custom was

avored historical drama with intensely theatrical situations and great, lavish scenarios.

⁴⁸ Pier Luc Ciceri (1782-1868), French painter noted for his watercolors, was also scene designer at the Paris Opera.

⁴⁹ In his *Préface de Cromwell*, Victor Hugo codified the aesthetics of Romantic theater in France. He divided literary history into three great, distinct periods: primitive times (harmony between man and nature, thus lyrical poetry), Antiquity (violence and epic poetry) and Christianity (mixing of genres). Hugo establishes the Romantic aesthetic based on six main points: the reproduction of real life (mixing of genres), rejection of classic codes (the rules of three unities, *bien-séance*, and true-to-life situations), search for creative freedom, use of versification and description of «local color».

⁵⁰ Gounod, (1818-1893), *Faust*: opera in three acts, French text by Jules Barber and Michel Carré, based on Goethe. World premiere in Paris at the «Théâtre Lyrique» on May 19, 1859.

rooted in the frivolous yet profitable intent to give young Parisian dandies the possibility to dine comfortably in fashionable restaurants before heading to the theater to admire their favorite dancers. During a performance of Richard Wagner's *Tannhauser*, there was a real insurrection among these young dandies, since the author had dared to add the ballet after the «wrong» act!

Today the Paris Opera Theater offers the same connotations as it had during Gaston Leroux's era. It occupies a vast area of over three acres of land, and one can imagine the dimensions of the theater's interior by the simple fact that the scenic corpus occupies only one-third of the entire construction. The opera house has over seventeen levels, seven of which are situated below stage level. The theater's stables are still in use and a monument to the diva Carlotta can be found inside the theater. Considering Leroux's *Le Fantôme de l'Opéra*, another important fact is that an underground lake still exists today right below the theater.

The Paris Opera Theater is «a monument that sings and dances» and its extraordinary facade is itself a real *mise en scène*.

The sumptuous, magnificent, Baroque creation of the Paris Opera Theater represents a monument that «makes itself theatrical»⁵¹.

⁵¹ William Shakespeare, *King Lear*, Preface by Agostino Lombardo, Milano, Garzanti, 1994, p. XXXVII.

2.

ANALYSIS OF THE ORIGINAL TEXT

For this textual analysis, I am using the recent edition of *Le Fantôme de l'Opéra* published by Brodard & Taupin (Paris) in 2004.

Gaston Leroux begins his novel with an *avant-propos* in which he affirms that «the Opera Ghost really existed» and clearly explains that «the author of this singular work informs the reader how he acquired the certainty that the Opera Ghost really existed»¹.

Leroux thus makes a pact with the reader about the text's veracity, which is supported by a series of names of witnesses and records from the Archive of the Académie Nationale. Leroux also cites the text *Mémoires d'un directeur*, the memoirs of a slipshod director who doesn't want to believe in the phantom's existence, not even when he finds himself involved in the «affair of the magic envelope». Acting as an expert detective and following the literary trend of the detective novel popular at the time, Leroux continues to dissertate on facts, names and real people who were involved in the phantom's story and who are convinced of his real existence. This premise of authenticity together with the list of investigative documents was a well-known sleight-of-hand for fantasy authors who wanted to affirm themselves as narrators of real-life stories. The rediscovered ancient manuscript is the technique used by many gothic authors, *in primis* the father of the genre, Horace Walpole, who starts off the plot of *The Castle of*

¹ Leroux, *Le Fantôme de l'Opéra* (ed. 2004), p. 7.

Otranto following the discovery of an ancient medieval text dating back to the Crusades.

In this respect, Leroux is an extremely skilled narrator who succeeds in melding reality with imagination and leaving the reader with the impression that his fantastic characters really existed. The prologue to the novel concludes with a ceremonial acknowledgement of all those who helped him in his investigative work.

The novel's opening line «It was the evening on which [...]» takes us back to the incipit of Nerval's story *Sylvie*: «I left the theater in which every evening»² and immerses the reader in an unreal, theatrical and fantastic dimension: Leroux's «mystère» effect has many similarities with the «brouillard [foggy]» effect created by Gérard De Nerval.

Every chapter of Leroux's novel includes a subtitle, the first being «Is it the Ghost?». The reader is immediately plunged into the plot, *in medias res*, and already in the first pages finds the first description of the legendary phantom through the story of Joseph Buquet, who will become the first victim of the theater's obscure inhabitant:

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.³

In this first chapter we are thus presented with the disturbing image of the protagonist. The reader experiences a sense of horror and mystery, permeated by a veil of veracity: suspense is created from these first pages.

Moreover, *Le Fantôme de l'Opéra* speaks of ghosts but also of the theater, and its precisely the life of the theater which Leroux renders from the beginning of his novel, with minor details that are nonetheless extremely significant and that reveal the passion that Leroux had for life both on stage and behind the scenes, as in his ironic description of the superstition that spreads among the artists:

² Gérard De Nerval, *Les filles du feu*, Paris, Gallimard, 1972, p. 129.

³ Leroux, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

Sorelli herself, on the day after the adventure of the fireman, placed a horseshoe on the table in front of the stage-door-keeper's box, which everyone who entered the Opera otherwise than as a spectator must touch before setting foot on the first tread of the staircase. And this was done to avoid becoming the prey of the occult power who had taken possession of the building, from the vaults to the staircase!⁴

To link his story to real life, the author continues:

This horse-shoe was not invented by me – any more than any other part of this story, alas! – and may still be seen on the table in the passage outside the stage-door-keeper's box, when you enter the Opera through the court known as the Cour de l'Administration.⁵

During the first chapter, Leroux goes on narrating about the «evil eye» with a great sense of humor when he describes how the superstitious Gabriel first touches his keys and then the iron lock on the wardrobe in order to keep bad luck at a distance. Unsuccessful, he encounters a series of misfortunes that cause him to fall down the staircase: after his fall, the unfortunate fellow adds, «Thank you, my God! For having been left for so little»⁶. The great agitation is uncontrollable because he has seen the Persian and the Phantom, the two messengers of misfortune. The author proceeds with the introduction of his characters: besides the Persian, we meet Madame Giry, a custodian of the theater and mother of a young ballerina who is the phantom's accomplice in the theater even if she has never seen him. We then encounter Meg Giry, who explains how the phantom wants stage-box number five all to himself, a place described as «La loge du fantôme». The chapter ends with a mysterious crime: the death by hanging of poor Joseph Buquet, who has had the misfortune of coming across the phantom. The mystery consists in the fact that the unlucky boy was hung, but the cord which killed him has disappeared. This is a key technique of the detective story according to Edgar Allan Poe, namely the crime which has no logical explanation.

In the second chapter, subtitled «The New Margarita», Leroux presents the inexplicable triumph of the young soprano Christine

⁴ *Ivi*, p. 17.

⁵ *Ibidem*.

⁶ *Ivi*, p. 20.

Daaé, who sung «like a nail» only six months earlier. The author conducts his story like a theatrical comedy, with dialogues, *coups de scène* and scholarly musical citations. Then Leroux himself enters the novel, addressing the reader: «And it was that night that revealed to all of Paris, stupefied and inebriated, this Christine Daaé, whose mysterious fate I want to make known in this work»⁷.

Leroux then introduces the reader to Christine's young suitor, the viscount Raoul De Chagny, who recognizes his childhood playmate in the beautiful soprano and is left *enchanté*. Raoul ventures behind the scenes, a world unknown to him; here Leroux describes the theater in all the frenzy that follows the end of a performance, with the bustle of ballerinas, stage designers, extras, singers, seamstresses. The theater is the central character of these pages. Enchanted by her angelic voice, Raoul wants to meet Christine and enters her dressing room, but remains disappointed by the girl's coldness and discovers that he is not her only suitor. The Phantom enters the plot masqueraded as a Voice: Raoul hears him eavesdropping behind the door, when the Voice sternly orders the singer: «Christine, you must love me».

The dialogue between the Voice and Christine is mysterious. Insanely jealous after Christine has left, Raoul cries to his obscure and invisible rival: «I shall snatch off your mask!». The theme of the mask, which recurs throughout the novel, is thus introduced in these lines.

The third chapter is dedicated to the new proprietors of the theater; in fact, its prior administrators decided to resign for unknown reasons. In the foyer, the theater's workers throw a huge farewell party for the retiring administrators. In the middle of the ball, just as in Edgar Allan Poe's *The Mask of the Red Death*, the phantom suddenly and frighteningly appears, only to inexplicably dissolve into thin air, and then reappears out of the blue, inconspicuously seating himself at the head of the banquet table with the other guests (calling to mind Mozart's guest of stone). Leroux's description of this absurd gathering is veined with his typical dark humor:

[...] when the attention of some of the guests was diverted by their discovery, at the end of the table, of that strange, wan and fantastic face, with the hollow eyes, which had already appeared in the foyer of

⁷ *Ivi*, p. 25.

the ballet and been greeted by little James' exclamation: «The Opera ghost!». There sat the ghost, as natural as could be, except that he neither ate nor drank.

Those who began by looking at him with a smile ended by turning away their heads, for the sight of him at once provoked the most funereal thoughts. No one repeated the joke of the foyer, no one exclaimed: «There's the Opera ghost!» [...].

Everyone felt that if the dead did ever come and sit at the table of the living, they could not cut a more ghastly figure [...]. This lean and skinny guest [...] the cadaverous individual [...] this visitor from the tomb [...].⁸

Leroux intrudes, restating his conviction that the facts recounted are true: «I mention the incident, not because I wish for a second to make the reader believe»⁹.

The fourth and fifth chapters are centered on the theme of «Box number five», the loge which the phantom demands for himself at every performance, stirring the anger of the new owners who do not want to believe in the existence of this petulant ghost who even expects to receive a salary of twenty-five thousand francs per month.

In the novel, the pair of new administrators metaphorically represents the new bourgeois class's sense of practicality and attachment to material wealth: a biting satire of the vulgarity of this *nouveau riche* class which deludes itself into thinking it can possess the theater. The owners are two of the phantom's favorite victims, as he embodies the spirit of theater, of creative genius and of the diversity of the theater artists who are deeply intolerant of the greed of the Parisian bourgeois.

In these chapters, permeated with Leroux's cutting irony, the reader finds passages narrated in a refined theatrical tone which emerges clearly in the rhythmic dialogues and stage directions within the text, as if Leroux were essentially «directing» his characters: «Mme Giry coughed, cleared her throat – it sounded as though she were preparing to sing the whole of Gounod's score [...] (with a smirk) [...] (Mme Giry burst into song)»¹⁰.

⁸ *Ivi*, p. 42.

⁹ *Ibidem*.

¹⁰ *Ivi*, p. 58.

In these chapters, the reader enjoys a real *pièce de théâtre*: pages of dialogue veined with humor, stage directions and a quick-paced dramatic tone. A true lover of theater, Leroux skillfully unravels the intricate plot and leaves the reader entertained but also uneasy.

The sixth chapter, «The Enchanted Violin», is a summary of the central themes of Romantic literature: the sense of mystery; the melancholic, poignant music of the violin; the description of the cemetery (a theme especially dear to Leroux); the idea of suspended reality which overwhelms Christine as she visits her father's tomb, while the phantom follows her and plays divine music on the violin; the astonishment of Christine's suitor, Raoul, who pursues his beloved without her realizing and finds her pensive and dreamy in front of her father's grave; the skulls piled up outside the small abbey which seem to laugh at the young viscount; the *coup de scène* when, terrified before the phantom, Raoul faints.

The semantic isotropy of this chapter is typical of Romantic literature, with terms such as: «enchanté [enchanted]»; «épouventé [scared]»; «étrange [strange]»; «effroi [terror]»; «cimetière [cemetery]»; «extase [ecstasy]»; «he lived in a sort of dream which he sustained with his violin»; «l'automne [autumn]»; «la tendresse désolé [sorrowful tenderness]»; «la pâleur cadavérique [deathly pallor]»; «because death was there, everywhere»; «les ténèbres [the darkness]»¹¹.

Here Leroux also introduces *l'ange de la musique*, the angel of music, which represents the angel that Christine's father had promised to send her from the world of shadows and that she believes to be the Voice that taught her to sing so divinely. Christine will lose herself in this illusion which mystifies her and dangerously ties her to the phantom of the Opera. These are clear references to the deep bond a girl can share with her father and to the devastating effects this relationship may have if it is not broken during the girl's adolescence (according to the popular and engaging psychoanalytic theories at the turn of the last century). These complex references are present in *Le Fantôme de l'Opéra* and have certainly contributed to its current popularity and to the will of artists, directors and musicians to revisit this moving story about the human spirit.

¹¹ *Ivi*, pp. 64, 89.

The strange fascination that Christine feels toward the Angel of Music is quite insidious for the young singer who, in fact, falls ill and continues to grow weaker. This is a clear reference to the protagonist of *Dracula*, Lucy, who bleeds to death. The Phantom, like Count Dracula, drains the vital lymph of the woman he loves, who is dangerously attracted by the satanic figure of the monster dressed in black (both Dracula and Erik wear a theatrical black cape).

Who is the Angel of Music? Leroux explains this through a story told by Christine's father, who was an itinerant tightrope walker and an excellent violin player:

And Christine thought that Lotte was very lucky to hear the Angel of Music when she went to sleep. The Angel of Music played a part in all Daddy Daaé's tales, and the children¹² would demand explanations about this Angel; father Daaé maintained that every great musician, every great artist received a visit from the Angel at least once in his life. Sometimes the Angel leans over their cradle, as happened to the little Lotte (Christine), and that is how there are little prodigies who play the fiddle at six better than men at fifty, which, you must admit, is very wonderful. Sometimes, the Angel comes much later, because the children are naughty and won't learn their lessons or practice their scales. And, sometimes, he does not come at all, because the children have a bad heart or a bad conscience. No one ever sees the Angel; but he is heard by those who are meant to hear him. He often comes when they least expect him, when they are sad and disheartened. Then their ears suddenly perceive celestial harmonies, a divine voice, which they remember all their lives. Those who are visited by the Angel quiver with a thrill unknown to the rest of mankind. And they have the privilege of not being able to touch an instrument, or open their mouths to sing, without producing sounds that put all other human sounds to shame. Then people who do not know that the Angel has visited those persons say that they have genius.

Little Christine asked her father if he had heard the Angel of Music. But Daddy Daaé shook his head sadly; and then his eyes lit up, as he said: «You will hear him one day, my child! When I am in Heaven, I will send him to you, I promise!».¹³

Confused by the memory of her father's promise, the young Christine is convinced that both the Voice which taught her to sing and the

¹² Christine Daaé and Raoul De Chagny.

¹³ *Ivi*, p. 70.

Violin played in the cemetery's shadows in front of her father's tomb, both belong to the Angel of Music which has been sent to her from above.

With this parabola, Leroux intends to give his reader his own vision of Musical Genius and presents the idea that his phantom could symbolize the art of music and theater. The director Franco Zeffirelli defines the beauty of the stage as something «monstrous»¹⁴, referring to his 2006 set design of Giuseppe Verdi's *Aida* at the Teatro della «Scala» in Milan.

Monstrous beauty is the oxymoron which must have fascinated Gaston Leroux when he created the character of Erik, the Phantom.

In Chapter VII, «A Visit to Box Five», Leroux guides the reader on an unusual visit of the theater using the third person plural «we» and offering a richly detailed description. Leroux's diction reveals his love for the Parisian theater and tells us about the space where real and unreal mix in a kind of magical spell that only great theaters may cast: «immense vaisseau ténébreux [huge dark bastion]»; «grand silence [great silence]»; «sinister [menacing]»; «astre moribund [deathly star]»; «étranges forms [strange forms]»; «vaguers glauques [funereal wanderings]»; «ordre secret du géant des tempêtes [the secret order of the stormy giant]». Following these images which evoke an enchanting atmosphere, Leroux begins the real description of the theater's interior¹⁵, focusing on the detailed sculptures which adorn the hall and other architectural features. Then Leroux moves from a dreamy description of this magical place, to the detached, analytical linguistic register of a detective story. The language shifts to that of scientific investigation with the following lexicon: «avouer [recognize, confess]»; «il dit textuellement [he said factually]»; «examinant [examining]». With this language of a detective «identikit», Leroux describes the phantom: «la forme [the shape]»; «la tête de mort [the head of the dead man]»; «jouet d'une illusion [he played with an illusion]».

When *Monsieur* Firmin, one of the theater's new owners, investigates the notorious box number five to take a look at the sofa where

¹⁴ Franco Zeffirelli, in an article that appeared in the newspaper «Corriere della Sera», 19 December 2006, Milano.

¹⁵ Leroux, *op. cit.*, p. 87.

the Voice habitually sat, Leroux carries out the *mélange des styles* which Victor Hugo firmly defended in his *Préface de Cromwell*. In a growing climax, the detective-like tone alternates with a satirical register as Leroux describes the Voice that sits on the sofa, followed by the phantasmagorical description of the sculptures that represent a real imaginative parade of the mythological deities that adorn the theater hall: Isis, Amphirite, Hébé, Flore, Pandore, Psychée Thétis, Pomone, Daphne, Clythie Galatée, and Aréthuse. The chapter concludes with a satirical reflection that represents the challenge of the Bourgeois against Art: «Those people are all making fools of us! Firmin Richard ended by exclaiming. It will be *Faust* on Saturday: let us both see the performance from Box Five on the grand tier!»¹⁶.

Chapter VIII: «In Which Mr. Firmin Richard and Mr. Armand Moncharmin Dare to Have *Faust* in a Cursed Hall, and the Terrible Occurrence That Results From It». This is the chapter in which the Erik openly reveals himself, by sending autographed threat letters to the new owners of the «Palais Garnier» in which he introduces and signs himself as «The Phantom of the Opera».

In this chapter, Leroux refers to the famous stables belonging to the theater, the pride of the «Palais Garnier», in which the opera's set designers put various «horse-artists» on scene, who «know the stage well»¹⁷.

During the dialogue that unfolds between the stable guard and the two owners, by now exasperated by the troubles they must face, Leroux offers the reader his own vision of the theatrical world, which he considers completely detached from everyday reality; namely, the vision of a magical, surreal world in which horses are artists in their own right and where César, the great white horse with such an important name, becomes protagonist of Mayerbeer's opera *Le Prophète*, and is mysteriously kidnapped by the Phantom: «The Phantom did it»; «It's surely the most natural thing ...». In the world of illusion, it is perfectly natural that a phantom should kidnap a horse-actor named César. The irony of the Parisian author is exhilarating when he makes Mr. Richard, the Opera director, comment: «'All right, monsieur Lechenal. You may take your leave [...] we will present a griev-

¹⁶ *Ivi*, p. 89.

¹⁷ *Ivi*, p. 91.

ance against the *Phantom ...*. Mr. Lechenal said goodbye and left. Mr. Richard frothed with rage: 'Fix this imbecile'»¹⁸.

The story continues with accents of biting irony, with other menacing letters written by the Phantom and sent to the incredulous proprietors by way of his «assistant», Mme Giry, who is literally thrown out of the administrators' office and terrorizes them with the prospect of sinister retaliations by the invisible Phantom.

The diegesis then shifts to the home of Carlotta, an opera diva, who also receives a threatening letter from the Phantom, forcing her to give up the role of Margarita in *Faust*, in order to let Christine Daaé perform.

Gaston Leroux's description of La Carlotta is interesting in that it illustrates the personality of the «prima donnas» of that era (another curious fact about the world of theater), characterized by unrestrained ambition and cold cynicism:

La Carlotta had neither heart nor soul. She was nothing but an instrument! A marvelous instrument, of course. Her repertoire included everything that the ambition of a great artist would attempt [...]. In brief, the instrument was heard, powerful, and of an admirable youthfulness. But no one could have been able to say to La Carlotta what Rossini said to Krauss, after she had sung «Somber woods? [...]» for him in German: «You sing with your soul, my girl, and your soul is beautiful!».¹⁹

Leroux openly manifests his ferocious criticism of unscrupulous artists like Carlotta, and leads us ever more deeply into the world of the opera, metaphorically, all the way down to the vaults inhabited by Erik: the remote world of ruthless ambition, talent, illusions, performances, games, anonymous letters, white horses kidnapped by the phantom, envy, mystery, superstition. In these pages, the phantasmagorical and diverse reality of the theater becomes the true protagonist, the central character of the novel.

The hearse and the letter persuaded her (Carlotta) that she risked, that night, the most serious danger.²⁰

¹⁸ *Ivi*, p. 93.

¹⁹ *Ivi*, pp. 95, 96.

²⁰ *Ibidem*.

Carlotta, the superstitious and treacherous diva, believes she is the victim of a plot to dethrone her undertaken by the young soprano, Christine Daaé, and thus calls upon her devotees for a counter-offensive:

She gathered her friends and supporters around her and told them that she was threatened, at that night's performance, with a plot organized by Christine Daaé; and she declared that it was necessary to play a trick on that rascal by filling the hall with her own admirers, Carlotta's. She counted on them to keep themselves prepared for any possible occurrence and to keep her adversaries quiet if, as she feared, they created a disturbance.²¹

The narration is pressing, focusing on the theater hall during the performance of *Faust*. The theater administrators occupy Box Five and confront the Phantom face to face; the young Christine has the small role of someone in disguise; and Carlotta plays Margarita, violating the Phantom's epistolary orders.

During the performance, the reader perceives an intense air of suspense, masterfully created by Gaston Leroux. As in his detective novels, the author creates an atmosphere of fear for something that is about to happen, where his characters appear suspended as they wait for a menacing, terrible event. The story shifts from the Phantom's box to the royal boxes, where characters exchange opinions with pressing and quick dialogues that are set against the dramatic action onstage, in a growing, nearly cinematic climax.

Finally, the anticipated misfortune comes to pass, the «event» occurs: there, on stage, the divine Carlotta «swallows a toad», «le crapaud» in Leroux's words, which in theatrical jargon means to sing a wrong note or lose one's voice. Sudden and inexorable, the toad pins the diva to the stage wall, covering her with ridicule.

From that mouth, something had escaped [...] a toad!

Oh! The horrid, hideous, slimy, venomous, foamy, frothing, screeching toad! [...].

How did it get in? How did it squat down on her tongue? With its back legs bent, to jump higher and farther, it came out of her larynx and ... *croak!* *Croak!* *Croak!* ... Oh, the terrible *croak!*

²¹ *Ivi*, p. 96.

Because you readers believe that it is unnecessary to speak of the toad but in the figurative sense. One could not see it but, by God, one could hear it! *Croak!*

The hall was stunned: no amphibian, on the banks of an echoing pond, had ever heard a more frightening *croak*.²²

It is well known that a toad crouched on the tongue, always dishonors a singer. Some have even died from it.²³

The infamous «crapaud», the voice that croaks like a repulsive toad, the worst misfortune that could befall a singer!

In these passages, the critical Gaston Leroux flaunts his talents as a theatrical critic, using the language of a real opera connoisseur:

But no one could admit that a Carlotta, who had at least two octaves in her voice, could have still had the toad.

One could not have forgotten her strident counter-*fa*'s, her exceptional *staccati* in *The Magic Flute*. One remembered *Don Giovanni*, in which she played Elvira and in which she had the most echoing triumph, some evenings, by herself singing the *si-bémol* that her companion Anna could not. Thus, what did this *croak* really mean, for this calm, placid, tiny «solitary voice» that sang in her heart? It was not natural. There was witchcraft behind it. That toad smelt of brimstone. Poor, wretched, despairing, crushed Carlotta!²⁴

The Phantom hides in box five, invisibly standing beside the two theater directors. He is the sinister creator of Carlotta's «toad» and, not yet satisfied about that subtle vendetta for not having been obeyed, he thunders menacingly: «She is singing tonight to bring the chandelier down!»²⁵.

What happens next has made its way into popular legend, and the *coup de théâtre* of the falling chandelier has become a classic of the *noir* genre. This theatrical occurrence, inspired by actual events²⁶, has been preserved in the numerous adaptations of Leroux's novel.

²² *Ivi*, p. 104.

²³ *Ivi*, p. 105.

²⁴ *Ivi*, p. 105.

²⁵ *Ivi*, p. 108.

²⁶ In 1896, a terrible accident occurred during the final moments of the performance of *Thétis et Pelée* at the Paris Opera Theater: following a short circuit, the auditorium's huge chandelier fell from the ceiling onto the audience below, at the

We can surely affirm that the gleaming chandelier that falls from the Opera ceiling (frescoed by Marc Chagall) has become the central symbol of the novel.

Today, at «Her Majesty's Theater» in London, where Andrew Lloyd Webber's *The Phantom of the Opera* has been performed for over twenty years, the audience (including myself) is amazed when an immense crystal chandelier is lifted above their heads before the start of the show, accompanied by a sumptuous organ situated at the rear of the auditorium. This absolutely magical theatrical moment makes the trip to London worthwhile.

The ninth chapter unfolds under the aegis of Christine Daaé's mysterious, inexplicable disappearance during the performance²⁷. She is nowhere to be found, neither inside nor outside the Opera, for fifteen days. Leroux employs the technique of prolepsis when, referring to the singer's first disappearance, he writes: «One must not confuse this first disappearance, which happened without scandal, with the famous kidnapping which, sometime later, would have occurred under inexplicable and tragic circumstances»²⁸.

Then, Leroux again uses a detective-like tone to narrate the investigation that follows the chandelier incident. The adjectives used in these pages represent the atmosphere that hovers throughout the novel: «so far away», «so mysterious», «so incomprehensible».

Raoul is inconsolable and cannot explain the disappearance of his beloved, so much so that he decides to visit Mme Valérius, Christine's adoptive mother. The viscount is intelligent and rational, firmly believes that «two plus two is four», and refuses any hypothesis of supernatural events with the strong resolve to shed light on any mysterious happenings. Raoul is welcomed by Christine's ailing benefactor, Mme Valérius, with whom he initiates a conversation that will leave him completely stupefied and incredulous. The elderly dame speaks of an «angel of music» that Christine has brought with her. The singer has a strong bond with this mysterious, mesmerizing figure and thus can never marry, since she is so dedicated to music and art. Mme Valérius

fourth row on seats 11 and 13, causing many injuries and one death. The mysterious accident caused an uproar in the next day's newspapers.

²⁷ *Ivi*, p. 109.

²⁸ *Ibidem*.

talks about the Phantom as if he were a real presence in Christine's life, though Raoul cannot accept this and believes that the woman is insane: «No, no! ... You know well that Christine cannot get married!»; «The fault of the *Genius of Music!* [...]. He protects her!»²⁹.

At this point, Leroux tests his narrative skills in a dissertation on talent and how this impedes the young singer to lead a normal life. The binary structure of the fantasy story thus reappears: the difficult decision Christine must face between a destabilizing artistic life and the more reassuring prospect of married love.

The chapter concludes in the style of an epistolary novel, a technique often employed in the gothic tradition, namely with the letter that Christine sends to her forlorn lover, setting a mysterious date with him at the Masked Ball that will be held at the Opera³⁰.

My dear, Go to the masked ball at the Opera on the night after tomorrow. At twelve o'clock, be in the little room behind the chimney-place of the grand foyer. Stand near the door that leads to the Rotunda. Do not mention this appointment to anyone on earth. Wear a white domino and be carefully masked. As you love me, do not let yourself be recognized. Christine.³¹

Chapter X, «At the Masked Ball». This event refers to the traditional «masques»³² put on by the English court of the Jacobean period, which involved the performance of plays by important figures such as Ben Jonson and Inigo Jones. The magnificent costumes and ephemeral character of these lavish productions also enjoyed great success in 17th century France, celebrating the splendor of the absolute monarchy and contributing to the fame of the «Sun King» who loved to participate firsthand, often dressed as the god Apollo.

Raoul must face a world he does not understand, which causes him to react: «That monster captured her, and with which arms?»³³.

Describing the masked ball, Leroux writes:

²⁹ *Ivi*, p. 113.

³⁰ *Ivi*, p. 118.

³¹ *Ibidem*.

³² Anna Anzi, *Storia del Teatro Inglese dalle origini al 1660*, Milano, Einaudi, 2001, p. 222.

³³ *Ivi*, p. 119.

This ball was an exceptional affair, given some time before Shrovetide, in honor of the anniversary of the birth of a famous draftsman, a pupil of Gavarni's, whose pen had immortalized the «chicards» and the descent of Courtille; Many artists had arranged to go and meet each other, accompanied by a whole cohort of models and pupils, who, by midnight, began to create a tremendous din.³⁴

This chapter describes a mysterious *ménage à trois*, which is also represented by color symbolism: dominant white for Raoul, dominant black for Christine and a scarlet red cape for the Phantom of the Opera.

There is also a clear allusion to Edgar Allan Poe, as evidenced in the previous chapter on Leroux's sources, when Erik appears at the Opera ball disguised as the Red Death: «Don't touch me! I am Red Death stalking abroad! [...]»³⁵.

The dialogue between Christine and the viscount is mysterious and mournful. The singer confesses her love for Raoul but also vows that she will no longer sing and will never see him again. The young lover, furious and confused, does not understand and thinks the singer is mocking him, challenging her: «May one ask at least to what darkness you are returning? [...] For what hell are you leaving, mysterious lady? [...] or for what paradise?»³⁶. Raoul defines the absurd mystery that has enveloped his lover as *une comédie*, «a comedy», and Christine replies, as she takes off her mask: «It is a tragedy! My friend ...»³⁷. Contemplating Christine's unmasked visage, Raoul realizes the extent of her suffering; «a mortal pallor» covers her face and the fresh colors of the past have lost their fragrance. Her features are tense and tormented and her eyes have an obscure depth, encircled by a frighteningly sad gloom. An ambiance of horror and mystery surrounds the singer, who has become the victim of an obscure evil: the allusion to Count Dracula's victims appears evident, as the Phantom becomes a nocturnal danger, a menacing vampire who sucks the blood and energy from his young victim.

³⁴ *Ivi*, p. 121.

³⁵ *Ivi*, p. 123.

³⁶ *Ivi*, p. 126.

³⁷ *Ivi*, p. 127.

Having arrived at Christine's dressing room, Raoul nearly faints: this is the place where his suffering began. He tries to spy on Christine, who, thinking she is alone, sighs: «Poor Erik!». Momentarily, Raoul thinks he has heard her wrong; perhaps she meant to say «Poor Raoul!». Instead, she softly repeats: «Poor Erik!». Why should Christine sympathize with the obscure phantom Erik, when «poor Raoul» is the only one who truly deserves to be pitied? Once again, he hears persuasive voices singing a faraway melody, «a grave song that seemed to come from the walls ... Yes, one could say that the walls were singing». The Voice becomes clearer and suddenly enters Christine's dressing room, before her eyes, and speaks to her as if it were a real person. «Here I am, Erik – she said – I am ready. You are late, my dear»³⁸. Raoul silently eavesdrops from behind a curtain. Christine's face lights up and a smile stirs her pale lips, as the Voice begins to sing another celestial melody, which makes Raoul understand just how fascinated Christine is by that sublime and pure art. Though angelic and passionate, the Voice is also disturbing, with a note of paganism in its divine music.

«Destiny has chained you to me, with no going back!». Christine is attracted by the Voice and wanders toward it like a sleepwalker. Leroux describes her ecstasy with words that could be attributed to the style of surrealist prose so dear to Cocteau:

Christine walked toward her image in the glass and the image came toward her. The two Christines – the real one and the reflection – ended by touching; and Raoul put out his arms to clasp the two in one embrace.

But, by a sort of dazzling miracle that sent him staggering, Raoul was suddenly flung back, while an icy blast swept over his face; he saw, not two, but four, eight, twenty Christines, spinning round him, laughing at him and fleeing so swiftly that he could not touch one of them. At last, everything stood still again; and he saw himself in the glass. But Christine had disappeared.

He rushed up to the glass. He struck at the walls. Nobody! And meanwhile the room still echoed with a distant passionate singing: *Fate links thee to me forever! ...*

He vaguely felt like an adventurous prince who had crossed the prohibited boundary in a fairy tale, and who should not be surprised

³⁸ *Ivi*, p. 129.

about being the prey of the magical phenomena that he had carelessly braved for love.

Fate links thee to me forever!

To me? To whom? Who is this Erik? – he said.³⁹

The gnawing of desperate jealousy takes possession of Raoul, who cannot rationally explain the surreal phenomena he has just witnessed.

Chapter XI: «One Must Forget the Name of *The Man's Voice*». When the viscount De Chagny decided to return to visit Christine's stepmother, Mme Valérius, he has the unexpected surprise of meeting his beloved Christine, beautiful and glowing, intent on embroidery. The young lover is absolutely overwhelmed and cannot hold back from demanding answers from Christine. The singer does not offer any satisfying explanations, and when Raoul reveals that he knows the name of «her» Voice, she is terrorized and makes him swear to never repeat the name again. Raoul also discovers that Christine wears a gold ring and, ever more obsessed by his rivalry with the Opera specter, asks if it is a token of love. Christine grows more secretive and admits that it is all a terrible mystery, begging Raoul to promise to be patient and no longer eavesdrop at her door.

The story continues, thickening the mystery that ties Christine Daaé to her Angel of Music. Who is this Angel? Where does he come from? Which bond keeps the young singer captivated by that specter of the theater?

Chapter XII is like a fantasy story that brings Christine and Raoul, betrothed on a lark and for just one month (before the viscount's departure on an expedition to the North Pole), to wander backstage, among sets, equipment and sinister trapdoors that lead to the underground vaults. Christine wants to show «her» world, the world of theatrical illusion, to her childhood playmate to make him understand where she comes from and how that world is a universe unto itself, a non-world of eternal magic, where tiny ballerinas from the theater's school, in their white tutus, are transformed into bright dancing sylphs, in hopes of one day becoming great stars of the ballet. This description of the theatrical world is composed by Gaston Leroux in

³⁹ *Ivi*, p. 132.

poetic tones that denote the author's devotion for everything that was the theater.

She said, «See, Raoul, these walls, this wood, these cradles, these images of painted canvases; all this has seen the most sublime loves, because they have been invented by poets who are far superior than ordinary men. Tell me, then, that our love is also there, my Raoul, because he has also been invented, he too, nothing more than an illusion!».

She then took him to the wardrobe and property-rooms, took him all over her empire, which was artificial, but immense, covering seventeen stories⁴⁰ from the ground-floor to the roof and inhabited by an army of subjects. She moved among them like a popular queen, encouraging them in their labors, sitting down in the workshops, giving words of advice to the workmen whose hands hesitated to cut into the rich stuffs that were to clothe heroes. There were inhabitants of that country who practiced every trade. There were cobblers, there were goldsmiths. They would listen to the legends of the Opera, even as, in their childhood, they had listened to the old Breton tales. «*You have shown me over the upper part of your empire, Christine [...]. but there are strange stories told of the lower part [...]. Shall we go down?*».⁴¹

She caught him in her arms, as though she feared to see him disappear down the black hole, and, in a trembling voice, whispered: «*Never! I will not have you go there! [...]. Besides, it's not mine! Everything that is underground belongs to him!*».⁴²

The young and chaste fiancées then run off to the rooftops of the Opera Theater, hoping to not be seen. Yet a shadow follows Christine wherever she goes, a shadow that stops moving when she stops and walks when she walks, a shadow that Raoul cannot see because he only has eyes for his beloved.

Chapter XIII, «Apollo's Lyre», reveals and explains a part of the mystery of the Phantom. Christine, who feels safe high atop the theater's roofs, sure of having escaped the deadly gaze of her obscure lover, confesses her whole strange adventure to Raoul, telling him how the

⁴⁰ *Ivi*, p. 144.

⁴¹ *Ibidem*.

⁴² *Ibidem*.

Phantom captured and led her to his dwelling below the theater, on the banks of a black lake. Christine cites *Othello* and confides in Raoul about how she identifies with the defenseless Desdemona before her assassin. In fact, the Phantom had staged a sinister duet for her, adapted from that tragic opera, a sort of metaphor of their bizarre relationship. Christine narrates that frightening experience, suspended between dream, nightmare and transgression. In this chapter, the reader notices a symbolism of the same three colors which already appeared in the chapter of the masked ball: black, for the dark vaults described as a Dantean circle of hell; white, for the horse César upon which Erik lays the terrorized Christine to transport her to the underground river that leads to his sumptuous dwelling; red, for the light that illuminates the dark vault.

Christine describes Erik's baroque, luxuriously furnished dwelling, narrating how the Phantom of the Opera sleeps in a coffin, and confesses how she was fascinated by the divine music of *Don Giovanni Trionfante* composed by that shadow of the darkness. All the mysterious disappearances, the visit to her father's grave: Christine reveals everything to Raoul, who listens to her incredulously and becomes insanely jealous when he understands the great attraction that the young singer feels toward that terrifying man, asking her the fateful question:

«If Erik were good-looking, would you love me, Christine?».⁴³

Raoul senses the danger of the deep fascination that Christine feels for Erik's musical genius: in fact, Christine is still seduced even after having unmasked him and having contemplated his deadly, skull-like visage, provoking his ferocious rage. This is a typical element of every fairy tale, when the lady breaks the spell to satisfy her foolish curiosity and is punished (in La Fontaine's *Cupid and Psyche*, for instance, or in the legend of *Lohengrin* by Richard Wagner): it is a myth of transgressed boundaries and disobedience that leads to punishment, as occurs in Charles Perrault's tale *Blue Beard*.

Erik falls at Christine's feet and confesses his desperate love for her, saying that, now that she knows his secret, she should share it

⁴³ *Ivi*, p. 178.

with him for all eternity and will thus be forced to sleep with him in his coffin.

The whole novel is suffused by the doubt that the Phantom of the Opera might be a vampire, hovering between life and death, since he escapes light, does not eat or drink, and can assume the form of a giant bat, «an immense night-bird that stared at them with its blazing eyes and seemed to cling to the string of Apollo's lyre!»⁴⁴.

Erik discovers Christine's love for Raoul and feels betrayed by his inspiring muse and protégé, while the Parisian night is filled with his painful sighs, which hover over the two lovers who have organized their escape after Christine's final performance the following evening.

The Phantom has declared war against his young rival Raoul De Chagny in Chapter XII, «A Master-Stroke of the Trap-Door Lover». This chapter marks the re-appearance of the Persian, who mysteriously materializes from nothingness and helps the two lovers flee through a secondary exit as they return from the theater's rooftops: «It is the Persian [...]. What is he doing there? No one knows! [...] He is always inside the Opera!»⁴⁵.

Raoul is unsettled by Christine's stories and realizes just how deeply the young singer is tied to the Phantom, becoming jealous when she affirms that Erik is an extraordinary man:

No, he is not a ghost; he is a man of Heaven and earth.⁴⁶

In this chapter, Leroux cites three important symbols in the Gothic novel and in fantasy literature in general: the mirror, the key and the ring. Through a mirror, Christine enters the fantastic world of the Phantom, which she alone has access to by way of a secret door as well. Erik gives her the key to his subterranean kingdom, together with a ring which she cannot remove as a token of her fidelity. In fact, when she realizes that she has lost the precious gift, she is terrorized by the thought of the Phantom's potential reaction.

The viscount De Chagny is troubled upon his return to the palace. The Phantom's shadow pursues him and he decides to do away with the figure who he defines as «That charlatan!». About to

⁴⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁵ *Ivi*, p. 179.

⁴⁶ *Ivi*, p. 181.

fall asleep, Raoul sees the Phantom's fiery eyes staring at him from the foot of the bed and is terrorized. Then his valiant spirit takes over and, winning his fear, decides to eliminate that shadow and shoots him in between his iron eyes. When they hear the shot, his brother and the servants run to Raoul's room, fearing a terrible accident, and find him deliriously babbling about a ghost he has killed. Philippe, his brother, believes he has gone insane and shows him a newspaper story that speaks of his love story with that «woman of the theater», which is causing ridicule for their entire noble family. Yet Raoul does not listen to reason and informs Philippe of his decision to escape with Christine the next day, immediately following the performance of *Faust*. Leroux's irony and sense of humor are exhilarating, as he makes his stupefied characters cry out: «Raoul, have you gone mad? Wake up!»; «Again! You would do better, my brother, to help me search for Erik [...] because, in the end, it should be easy to find a phantom that bleeds [...]»; «My friend – said the count Philippe – you have shot at a cat»⁴⁷.

Referring to Erik, the viscount De Chagny reflects on his numerous transformations and his incredible ability to change appearance, the same characteristics possessed by the Gothic vampires of the age, asking himself: «Is it Erik? Is it the cat? Is it the phantom? Is it a body or a shadow? No! No! With Erik, one never knows!»⁴⁸.

The night of the performance, which should have been Christine's final act, something terrible and unexpected occurs: at the end of *Faust*, as Christine sings: *Take my spirit to the heavens!* the stage suddenly goes dark and, when the lights go on again, Christine has vanished and the show is interrupted, plunging the theater into total chaos:

Ladies and gentlemen, an unprecedented event has taken place and thrown us into a state of the greatest alarm. Our sister-artist, Christine Daaé, has disappeared before our eyes and nobody can tell us how!⁴⁹

Chapter XIV, «The Singular Attitude of a Safety-Pin». After Christine's mysterious disappearance, Raoul rushes backstage and his air of

⁴⁷ *Ivi*, p. 186.

⁴⁸ *Ivi*, p. 187.

⁴⁹ *Ivi*, p. 192.

desperation proves that he has no idea about Christine's kidnapping. He openly accuses Erik, but cannot find the missing girl.

During a brief narrative pause, Leroux amuses himself by describing how the theater owners must resolve the enigma of the ransom of 20,000 francs demanded by the Phantom, creating a series of misunderstandings. The two administrators place the ransom in an envelope after having substituted it with counterfeit bills. The envelope disappears. The administrators suspect Mme Giry and accuse her of the money's disappearance, but she succeeds in demonstrating her innocence. Then, another mysterious event occurs: various written messages addressed to the owners vanish after having been pinned to Moncharmin's coat. The Police must investigate the cases of the missing ransom and Christine Daaé's disappearance, as well as the investigator's hypothesis – at this point, Leroux once again employs the tone of a detective story – namely, the theory that Philippe De Chagny orchestrated the singer's kidnapping to stop his brother from running away with her. The Persian then reappears to Raoul and reveals himself as a sort of friend of the Phantom, informing him that Christine is Erik's prisoner in the underground vaults of the Opera. He suggests that the viscount take his gun and go to Christine's dressing room, where the Persian shows the incredulous Raoul how the mirror is also a sliding door onto the vault's secret passageways. Thus begins their descent into the darkness, on guard, «hands up and ready to shoot», a precaution suggested by the Persian to counter the mortal effect of the «Punjab Jest», the lethal instrument that caused the death of Buquet. Thus, Leroux also resolves the enigma of that mysterious death, while the mystery of the Phantom grows thicker.

Chapter XIX is a thrilling satire on the police and on the absurdity of the situation, animated by irresistibly comical theatrical dialogues that involve investigators, administrators, noble gentlemen, phantoms and abandoned cemeteries, according to the *mélange des styles* so dear to Leroux. Chapter XX follows the viscount and the Persian on their descent to the vaults. Raoul asks his strange travel companion:

«Is he the master of these walls?».

«He commands the walls, the doors and the trap-doors. In my country, he was known by a name which means the trap-door lover».

«But why do these walls obey him alone? He did not build them!».
«Yes, sir, that is just what he did!»⁵⁰.

Leroux suggests, in between the lines, that the Phantom helped build the «Palais Garnier», planning its underground structures as well as its contraptions and traps.

Chapter XXI, «In the Cellars of the Opera». In these pages, the author opens up the world of the theater's vaults, describing the construction of the «Palais Garnier» and citing its architect:

The corridor was contrived at the time of the Paris Commune to allow the jailers to convey their prisoners straight to the dungeons that had been constructed for them in the cellars; for the Federates had occupied the opera-house immediately after the eighteenth of March and had made a starting-place right at the top for their Mongolfier balloons, which carried their incendiary proclamations to the departments, and a state prison right at the bottom.

At that time, electricity was only used for certain special scenic effects and for sounds. The huge building and the scene itself were still lit by gas and it was with hydrogen gas that one could regulate and modify the lighting of a scene, with a special instrument, called the *jeu d'orgre* for its many tubes.⁵¹

It is down there, which one calls Monsieur X., Y., Z., who devoted an interesting study to Garnier's work; it is down there that he transforms *cocochymes* into beautiful knights, hideous sorcerers into the radiant fairies of youth. Satan comes from below, as does he who buries himself. Their infernal lights escape from there, the choirs of demons take their place [...]. And the ghosts walk through as if they inhabited the place [...].⁵²

Besides these descriptive details about the theater, Leroux adds a parade of fantastical and infernal figures to his diegesis, such as:

A shade, this time carrying no light, just a shade in the shade, passed. It passed close to them, near enough to touch them. They felt the warmth of its cloak upon them [...].⁵³

⁵⁰ *Ivi*, p. 239.

⁵¹ *Ivi*, p. 243.

⁵² *Ivi*, p. 247.

⁵³ *Ivi*, p. 251.

The Persian had hardly finished speaking, when a fantastic figure appeared before them.⁵⁴

[...] a whole figure ... a fiery face, not only two yellow eyes ... a head of fire came toward them, at a man's height, but with *no body* attached to it! Flame-figure [...] this red moon.⁵⁵

And, above all, shut your ears if you hear the *voice singing under the water*, the siren's voice!⁵⁶

Led by the Persian, Raoul descends to the theater's remote vaults, among contraptions, trap doors, fantastic presences, sets, pipes and tubes, mobs of screeching rats, fiery faces, sirens and mysterious shadows. He is armed with a pistol, hands up and ready to shoot at the evanescent shadows and underground demons. Finally, through a rotating trap door, Raoul enters the Phantom's lair, which is situated in the remotest part of the vaults, beyond a vast black lake that resembles the river Styx. Raoul and his strange companion dangerously sneak into a room whose walls are made of mirrors: «We have fallen into the torture chamber!»⁵⁷, says the Persian to the incredulous viscount who faces every sort of danger, like a fairy-tale prince, to free his beloved from the monster's clutches.

The scenario proposed by Leroux is that of a theatrical world that becomes confounded with the world of illusion, fairy tales, horror stories, gothic monsters and detective investigations, leaving the reader perplexed and disturbed. Leroux adds a textual note to clarify how the author, as well as the Persian, will never give a full explanation of the origin of the Shadow⁵⁸ that Raoul and the Persian meet during their descent into the darkness.

The mystery remains a mystery and will never be revealed. Leroux is an author of detective stories as well as horror stories and, as such, he leaves a margin of free interpretation open to each reader.

In Chapter XXI – «Interesting and Instructive Vicissitudes of a Persian in the Cellars of the Opera» – the Parisian author lends the

⁵⁴ *Ivi*, p. 252.

⁵⁵ *Ivi*, p. 253.

⁵⁶ *Ivi*, p. 264.

⁵⁷ *Ivi*, p. 261.

⁵⁸ *Ivi*, p. 251.

narrative voice to the enigmatic character of the Persian, who says that he has known the mysterious inhabitant of the theater for many years, since the time when Erik worked for a wealthy maharaja in Persia as an expert architect and builder of traps and contraptions. The reader is thus informed about the Phantom's past and discovers that he collaborated with Charles Garnier to construct the theater's vaults, where he later settled in his dark lair. The Phantom is thus a human being, but with extraordinary powers and ingenious talents; he is in fact an architect, theatrical director, inventor of scenic machines, illusionist, magician, singer, musician and composer.

The most ingenious of magicians? As for myself [*the Persian is narrating here*], I found it difficult to imagine entering into a duel with a man who is not visible when one sees him and who, instead, sees everything around him, when everything remains obscure to you! [...] a man whose bizarre knowledge allows him to dispose of all natural forces, combined to create the illusion that he loses you for your eyes and ears! [...] and there, underneath the Opera, that is to say in the land of phantasmagoria itself! Can one imagine this without trembling? Can one simply have an idea of what could arrive at the eyes and ears of an inhabitant of the Opera, if one were locked in the Opera – in its five basements and twenty-five loges – a Robert Houdin⁵⁹ ferocious and comic, one minute he kills, the next he laughs ... Think about this: «Dueling against the trap-door lover?» – My God! Here, in all our buildings, he has built these astonishing pivoting traps, the best of their kind! Dueling against the lover of traps in the land of traps! [...] ⁶⁰

The Persian also reveals to Raoul that he knows about the strange relationship shared by the Phantom and Christine⁶¹ and about the monster's amorous passion for the girl. The Persian says he has warned the poor, deformed Erik against deluding himself about Christine's love and against the dangers he might encounter if he should continue to pursue this impossible obsession.

⁵⁹ Robert Houdin, the famous illusionist named «Houdini the magician», popular during Leroux's time.

⁶⁰ With these words, Gaston Leroux defines both the Phantom and the theatrical world, called «pays de la fantasmagorie [land of the phantasmagorical]» or «pays des trappes [land of traps]».

⁶¹ *Ivi*, p. 267.

Raoul and the Persian continue their perilous descent but suddenly realize that they are trapped inside the torture chamber: «And my red lantern continued to turn around the torture chamber ... I could recognize it ... I recognized it ...»⁶².

«In the Torture Chamber», Chapter XXXII. The two explorers of the Opera's vaults have almost reached the Phantom's lair and can hear his voice as he proffers marriage to the poor Christine. Raoul would like to intervene, but must remain quiet in order to not give himself away. By now, Erik is out of his mind and asks the young singer to become his wife, declaring his desire to emerge from the vaults and lead a normal life, far from his dark refuge: at this point, he is delirious with passion.

In Chapter XXIII, we find Christine, terrorized in her prison, who runs from one room of Erik's lair to the next and attempts to please him and calm his rage. Unfortunately, the Phantom hears some cries coming from the torture chamber and understands that the viscount must have gotten trapped, and thus suddenly illuminates the room with one of his contraptions. Raoul feels disoriented and overwhelmed by the strong beam of light. Forced by Erik to look through the small window inside the room of mirrors, Christine says she cannot see anyone and tries to gain time, while the Phantom continues his angry tirade about wanting to live like other men, to have a normal home and a wife with whom to take walks on Sunday afternoons. He wants to be loved, and Christine will learn to love him in time. The extraordinary magician, the genius of music desires a normal bourgeois life, yet continues to terrorize the unfortunate girl with his ventriloquism and magic tricks, inviting her to choose between two jewel boxes, that of the scorpion or that of the grasshopper: if she chooses the wrong one, there will be deadly consequences. Christine implores him to stop playing games and complains that she is hot. The reader understands that, in the torture chamber, the diabolical Phantom has orchestrated one of his spells by recreating the high temperatures of Congo, thus causing the viscount De Chagny and the Persian to suffocate from the heat. Raoul begins to beat against the wall and cry out in desperation and the Persian cannot restrain him. Raoul hears an

⁶² *Ivi*, p. 279.

argument in the next room; then a total silence falls, as the tropical heat slowly kills him.

Chapter XXIV – «Barrels! Barrels! Any Barrels to Sell?» – is the chapter dedicated to magic, Erik's great talent of creating imaginary worlds («illusions mortelles», mortal illusions) and living nightmares which his victims experience as if they were real, leading them to madness. In the hall of mirrors, the Phantom has recreated the tropical world of the African jungle with an infernal magic spell, plunging the two men into the illusion of actually living that reality. Leroux enjoys playing with dreams and nightmares, and the young viscount seems to be a victim of these frightening visions, while the Persian fears for his mental stability. What could be more ferocious torture for a man than to be thrust into his deepest fears?

In this novel, Leroux plays with theater, horror, detective investigations and psychoanalysis. The events in this chapter allude to the distorted, imaginary worlds in which Alice loses herself, in Lewis Carroll's novel *Alice in Wonderland*.

The conclusion of the Persian's long story comes in Chapter XXV: «The Scorpion or the Grasshopper: Which?». Descending into the depths of the Phantom's cave, the Persian has discovered that it is full of barrels of gunpowder. The Phantom had told him of his intention to destroy the theater if anyone would have dared to attack him in the vaults where he hid his monstrous appearance.

Both the Persian and Raoul suddenly understand the meaning of the riddle put forward to Christine, «Scorpion or Grasshopper?» – «Yes or no! If it is no, then everyone is buried alive!». Everyone would have been submerged under the rubble of the Paris Opera Theater. How can he orchestrate such a horrific plan? What will happen at eleven o'clock, in just a few hours, according to Erik's threats to Christine? The rhythm of this chapter is as quick as a desperate escape, a battle against time and fear.

Raoul and Christine are finally able to communicate through the walls, but where has the Phantom gone? The Persian warns Christine to not touch the scorpion, or the theater could explode. Then the Phantom arrives, stunned that Raoul and the Persian have survived the torture of the tropical jungle. Another climactic moment, a true *coup de théâtre* ensues: the torture chamber is filled with water, their escape is made ever more difficult; all is silent, Christine does

not answer Raoul; the water rises, the Persian invokes his «friend» the Phantom. The water overwhelms them all. At this point, the Persian's long story comes to an end and the reader has reached the novel's final chapter before the epilogue, which narrates «The End of the Phantom's Love Story».

Gaston Leroux takes over the narrative voice once again: «Here ends the story that the Persian left to me»⁶³. Leroux says that he has gone to visit the Persian, whose name is finally revealed – Daroga – to discover what really happened after that terrifying watery adventure.

The mystery is revealed by the now elderly Daroga, who tells how he was saved by the Phantom himself. In order to save Raoul's life, Christine had promised Erik to become his wife and had let the Phantom kiss her. The kiss is another symbol of fantasy literature: one need only recall the kiss that awakens the sleeping beauty; or the kiss that re-transforms the Beast into the handsome yet arrogant prince; the kiss that revives Snow White from death. In the tale of the Phantom, the kiss achieves the miracle of making the monstrous Erik cry, and his tears mix with Christine's as she shows sincere affection toward him for the first time. She sees him as a woman «alive», that is as a woman in flesh and blood sees a man and allows him to experience the infinite sweetness of the kiss that even his mother had deprived him of since childhood. The miracle happens and the Phantom decides to free Christine. He confesses to the Persian that he did not kill Raoul's brother, whose body has been discovered on the banks of the dark lake. Erik liberates the viscount De Chagny, who can finally be reunited with Christine and marry her. The Persian tells the novel's author that he has learned all of this from the Phantom himself, who had visited the Persian to ask him one last favor before dying, since he could not survive losing Christine.

Erik, the Phantom, the magician, the musician, the lord of darkness, is dying of a broken heart. These pages are extremely melancholic and perhaps hold the secret to the eternal success of this incredible novel, which strikes the chords of human emotion since no reader can resist the fascination of a monster that dies from a broken heart.

⁶³ *Ivi*, p. 320.

Erik dictates his last will to Daroga and, three weeks after their encounter, the headline of the newspaper «L'Époque» reads: «ERIK IS DEAD».

With these lapidary words, *Le Fantôme de l'Opéra* concludes.

The epilogue that follows the narrative conclusion represents Gaston Leroux's intention to grant a tone of veracity to the entire story. As in a detective investigation, the author states that all narrated events correspond to reality. Then Leroux loses himself in the dreams of a visionary artist, affirming that perhaps one day he will also escape far away, toward the North, to track down the two lovers who might have finally found the peace and happiness that eluded them in Paris, after all the bizarre events that they experienced: Christine's kidnapping, the death of count Philippe, the disappearance of the young Raoul.

Leroux toys with the reader and urges him to visit the Paris Opera Theater, to enter without the official guide, head directly to box five and knock on the enormous pillar that separates it from the proscenium: the pillar will be hollow. The author believes that one day someone will discover the secret passage in that pillar, which allowed the Phantom of the Opera to enter his box.

The epilogue concludes with a biography of Erik who, according to the Persian, was born in Rouen, the son of a building contractor (like Gaston Leroux!). Having escaped at a very young age since his family could not tolerate his monstrosity, Erik then began to perform at fairs all across Europe, making his ugliness a circus attraction, as the impresario describes him as «living death». Then the details of Erik's life take a mysterious turn with the gypsies, from whom he most likely learned the art of illusion, magic, song and music. Gifted with extraordinary intelligence, Erik reached Samarkand after many vicissitudes, where he met Daroga. He left horrific traces on his way, since Erik did not know the limits of good and evil. He built a palace full of secret passageways for a great Persian king who, worried that Erik knew too many secrets, cruelly ordered the young man's execution. Erik thus wandered across all of Asia and, when he returned to Europe, became a building contractor and is hired to assist in the construction of Charles Garnier's Opera Theater. When Erik found himself in the vaults of such a vast theater, his artistic, fantastic and magical disposition took over once again and, since he was obsessed

with his monstrous appearance, Erik dreamed of creating a secret dwelling that would have kept him protected from the cruel stares of men.

Leroux concludes the epilogue with the following passages:

Yes, I am sure, quite sure that I prayed beside his body, the other day, when they took it from the spot where they were burying the phonographic records. It was his skeleton. I did not recognize it by the ugliness of the head, for all men are ugly when they have been dead as long as that, but by the plain gold ring which he wore and which Christine Daaé had certainly slipped on his finger, when she came to bury him in accordance with her promise. The skeleton was lying near the little well, in the place where the Angel of Music first held Christine Daaé fainting in his trembling arms, on the night when he carried her down to the cellars of the opera-house.

And, now, what do they mean to do with that skeleton?

Surely they will not bury it in the common grave? [...] I say that the place of the skeleton of the Opera ghost is in the archives of the National Academy of Music. It is no ordinary skeleton.⁶⁴

⁶⁴ *Ivi*, p. 343.

3.

CINEMATIC AND TELEVISION ADAPTATIONS

3.1. THE CINEMATIC ADAPTATION STARRING LON CHANEY, «THE PHANTOM OF THE OPERA», 1925

During the summer of 1922, the American producer Carl Laemmle, the «little big genius» of «Universal Pictures», was vacationing in Europe. Carl was at the peak of his success in the newborn film industry and his popularity was constantly on the rise. The tenth of thirteen children of a Jewish family from the German town of Laupheim, Laemmle immigrated to the United States in 1884 and, after having done various odd jobs, founded the «Independent Motion Picture Company» in 1906. It was Laemmle who created the American *star system*, coining the nickname «America's Sweetheart» for the famous Mary Pickford. In 1915, he founded «Universal City», a cinematic metropolis that covered an area of 235 acres near the unknown town of Lankershim near Southern California's San Fernando Valley, thus employing every member of his numerous family.

During that trip to Europe, Carl Laemmle met Gaston Leroux. The two spoke as «movie men» and the Californian producer confessed to the Parisian author how intensely he had been struck by the sight of the Paris Opera Theatre built by Charles Garnier. Sensing that it might have been of interest to his American friend, Leroux gave him a copy of his novel *Le Fantôme de l'Opéra*. Legend has it that that night, Carl never slept a wink, engrossed by the novel and, the next day, decided to adapt the unusual text for a film to be shot in Hollywood and not in Paris: at that time, in fact, it was less expensive

to reconstruct the Opera Theatre and its vaults on a studio set rather than transfer an entire film troupe to Paris.

Laemmle's company had already bought the rights for the film version of another famous French novel, *Nôtre Dame de Paris* by Victor Hugo, and the grandiose set included the reconstruction of the Parisian cathedral. The protagonist of the story of Hugo's hunchback, Quasimodo, was the famous Lon Chaney, who had already become legendary for his ability to transform himself into cinematic monsters. He was a master of disguise and makeup. His fans loved to call him «the man of a thousand faces» and he succeeded in captivating a vast audience despite the fact that he portrayed grotesque monsters, gaining so much success that «Metro Goldwyn Mayer» («MGM») stole the horror star from Carl Laemmle's company. Laemmle was forced to negotiate Chaney's transfer to get permission for him to star in the film, since, according to the farsighted producer, Lon Chaney would have been the only actor talented enough to perform the role of the Phantom of the Opera.

Enervating negotiations ensued between «Universal» and «MGM», between the «nemeses» Carl Laemmle and Louis B. Mayer, to transfer Lon Chaney to «Universal». The actor was happy to go back to work for his old production company, what's more with a great paycheck. Everyone thought that the Phantom of the Opera would have been Chaney's most important and significant role.

In the meantime, the producers decided that the main film set would be the Opera Theatre, and so began the construction of the replica of the sumptuous theatre at «Studio 28» of «Universal Studios». It was the first Hollywood building to be constructed from steel and cement, with real foundations. The structure was then covered with wood and iron. The construction was so solid that visitors today can still admire that perfect copy of the Paris Opera, which was used as a set for many other films including the 1943 version of the *Phantom*, as well as Alfred Hitchcock's *Tom Curtain* (1966) and *The Sting* (1973) starring Robert Redford. The tour of «Universal Studios», one of Hollywood's greatest tourist attractions, still includes a visit to «Studio 28». This pilgrimage represents a permanent link with the «Old Hollywood» of the golden silent film era. A huge basin was built to simulate the novel's subterranean lake, as well as the theatre's entire behind-the-scenes scenario, where most of the action takes place. The

Opera's rooftops were also faithfully reconstructed, including the famous statue of Apollo, a life-size reproduction. Another spectacular reproduction on the film set was that of the theatre's foyer, setting of the masked ball, one of the film's most magnificent scenes.

Shooting for *The Phantom of the Opera* began in the second half of 1924. The director was Rupert Julian, who emigrated from New Zealand in 1913 and began to work in the film industry as an actor before directing various B-list films. Rupert Julian had an uncompromising personality and had enormous friction with «MGM», causing him to resign. The new direction of *The Phantom of the Opera* alongside the demanding Lon Chaney became a thorny challenge, given the arrogant personalities of the two artists. Mediators were necessary for almost the entire duration of the film's production to facilitate communication between the director and lead actor, who were on non-speaking terms by the end of shooting. The role of the young soprano Christine Daaé was destined for Mary Philbin, a 21-year-old beauty queen who had already starred in «MGM»'s *The Merry-Go-Round* and who fell back into the shadows with the advent of sound. Norman Kerry played Raoul de Chagny, John Sainpolis starred as Philippe De Chagny and Arthur Edmond Carene played the mysterious character of Ledoux, which replaced the role of the Persian, Daroga. Ten weeks after shooting began, the staff of «Universal Pictures», headed by Carl Laemmle, protested that shooting was moving too slowly due to the constant quarrels between the director and lead actor. Laemmle thus decided to replace Rupert Julian with the more docile Edward Sedgwick.

After the first private viewing of the film, which took place in Los Angeles in January 1925, the screenwriter was requested to add a sub-plot to the main story. The second viewing for the *Phantom*'s crew was held in San Francisco on April 26, 1925 and new changes were made to the film, which was presented again in New York a few weeks later before the premiere of the final version. In fact, the screenplay remained patchy since so many changes were made to the original script. Some sequences, such as that of the ballet and the masked ball, were shot with bi-colored film in *Technicolor*, a technique that required special photography and intense lighting. The rest was shot in black and white.

The film was a great success (despite issues with the script and the photography) thanks to a sensational performance by Lon Chaney.

The actor ably prohibited the circulation of any photographs of his screen makeup before the film's premiere. He wanted to surprise and terrify the audience, which he perfectly succeeded in doing. The scene of the Phantom's unmasking by Christine, revealing his horrifying face, was so realistic that the owners of many cinemas began a vast publicity campaign to have smelling salts ready in theatres in case of fainting ladies during the projections. Chaney's disguise was not only a mask, but real makeup that was applied to his face and required the expert work of artists and took many hours to apply. A cord was inserted into his nostrils to give his nose the terrible appearance of a «missing nose», according to Leroux's text. Plastic disks were also applied inside his cheeks to change his facial structure, and special eye drops made his eyes look as if they were bulging out of their sockets. Thus Chaney was transformed into the astonishing Phantom of the Opera, a veritable icon of silent film.

Lon Chaney was a great silent film star because, as the son of a deaf-mute mother and father, from a very young age he had developed a particular ability to make himself understood with gestures and facial expressions. For this portrayal of Leroux's Phantom, Lon Chaney was inspired by the German Expressionism of the film *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*¹, directed by Robert Wiene, which premiered in Germany in 1919 and was released in American theatres in 1921.

During his career, Lon Chaney starred in only one talking picture, shortly before his death in 1930. His appearance as the Phantom remained nearly inimitable: only James Cagney succeeded in nearly matching that model in the movie based on Chaney's life, filmed in 1957: *Man of a Thousand Faces*, shot at the legendary «Studio 28» in «Universal City», the original set of the 1925 *Phantom of the Opera*.

The set designers' concept for the Phantom's famous resting place, similar to a coffin, and Christine's bed, in the shape of a vessel, was used in later cinematic adaptations including the most recent film from 2004. As for the Phantom's costumes, the Hollywood designers were inspired by an 1893 poster by Toulouse De Lautrec, which

¹ Howard Hogle, *The Underground of the Phantom of the Opera*, New York, Palgrave, 2002, p. 138.

portrayed the singer Aristide Bruant wearing a black cape and a wide-brimmed hat².

Erik's story was modified with respect to Leroux's original text: in fact, he was no longer a magician from the Far East, but a fugitive from Devil's Island, where he had been imprisoned during the days of the Paris Commune in the Opera's vaults. Ten years later, Erik still lived in those dark underground tunnels and fell in love with the young soprano Christine, becoming her mysterious maestro of music, hidden behind the vanity mirror in her dressing room. The end of the film is also different from the text: the Phantom does not free Christine, but kidnaps her with his carriage and flees through the streets of Paris. Christine falls out of the carriage and is saved by Raoul, while the Phantom is involved in an accident and the furious crowds kill him, maiming his body and throwing him into the Seine. The screenwriters modified Leroux's text, as they were convinced that the American audience of that time could not fathom a «wicked monster» that could be redeemed with a single kiss. In fact, to fulfill the expectations of the newborn horror genre, the screenwriters preferred to keep the villain a villain until his total destruction.

The film was widely advertised throughout Europe, especially in England, where the daily papers reported the news of audiences waiting in endless lines at American cinema box-offices to see *The Phantom of Opera*.

In the first cinematic version of this novel, the performances were typical of silent film, with exaggerated gesturing and a «marionette»-like style of recitation, while the female protagonist was literally overshadowed by Lon Chaney's charisma. The actor was a true scene stealer, who magnetized every viewer's eye as soon as he made his entrance on screen. The director also added a subtle touch of eroticism in the film's first scene, in which the ballerinas appear on the Opera stage: this was an added modification with respect to Leroux's original novel.

The Phantom's first appearance on screen is deliberately delayed in order to create anticipation and suspense for the audience. In the first version, his appearance consists in the sudden projection of a

² *Ivi*, pp. 143, 145.

shadow on the walls, or an evanescent figure that appears and disappears in stage-box number 5, while his later apparitions are gauged to stir wonder and terror in the audience. This is evident when Christine first descends to the theatre's vaults and is led by the monster through a long maze of mysterious corridors, to then be hoisted onto a saddle and finally ferried across a sort of underground Styx, the black lake.

Another striking scene is represented by that of the Phantom's dramatic entrance in the middle of the masked ball, when he appears at the top of the foyer's grand staircase. At this point, the ball's guests are awestruck and the ballerinas epically separate into two columns, as in the Biblical scene where Moses divides the Red Sea. The Phantom is dressed in red velvet, wearing his skull-like mask and a large hat decorated with feathers, holding his skull-topped cane like a scepter.

The rooftop scene, when Raoul and Christine declare their eternal love, is similar to that described in the book by Gaston Leroux, as it represents the Phantom hidden behind the statue of Apollo, sighing melancholically at the sight of the two young lovers.

The policeman Ledoux, a new character created entirely for the film and inspired by the original figure of the Persian, in fact wears a strange *astrakan* hat and is always dressed regally, just like Dagora. At one point, he is even suspected of being the Phantom of the Opera. Instead, when he guides the two young lovers away from the rooftops – as in the novel – he informs them of being on the Phantom's heels for many months, but that he hasn't succeeded in preventing the tragedy of the fallen chandelier. The film also contains the scene of the hall of mirrors, the torture chamber, described by Leroux.

The scene of the Phantom's lynching by the mob is a purely cinematic invention which does not appear in Leroux's text. It has been said that it was added in order to use the set built earlier for the film *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*. The film ends with a shot of the Phantom's body floating in the Seine.

Two years after the premiere of *The Phantom of the Opera*, «Warner Brothers» produced *The Jazz Singer* starring Al Jolson, and thus began the revolution of «talkies».

In fact, 1930 saw the addition of the soundtrack to the film *The Phantom of the Opera* starring Mary Philbin and Norman Kerry. Both the soundtrack and musical effects were added to the original reel. Certain singing scenes were dubbed with the music from *Faust*,

though these remained quite rudimentary since the technique of dubbing was still being developed. Lon Chaney's voice was also dubbed by another actor, since his contract did not stipulate talking pictures and, unfortunately, the actor died that same year.

Despite the fact that only one third of the film contained scenes of singing and dancing, the movie poster publicized: «Talking! Singing! Sound Effects! Music! Colors!»³. Thus the first version of *The Phantom of the Opera* made use of a new life.

3.2. OTHER CINEMATIC AND TELEVISION ADAPTATIONS

The next edition of *The Phantom of the Opera* came to life in 1943, when «Universal» decided to meet the competition of «MGM», «Warner Brothers» and «Paramount Film» which were producing huge blockbusters with sparkling musicals starring the likes of Fred Astaire, Ginger Rogers, Ann Miller, Gene Kelly and Bing Crosby.

«Universal» had made a name for itself at that time with the series of *Sherlock Holmes* films starring Basil Rathbone and Nigel Bruce. Yet the majority of its productions had to settle for less than sensational successes.

Things went differently for the new version of the *Phantom*. The film was conceived with a much more consistent production budget, despite the tendency to save money due to the war in Europe. It was produced in *Technicolor*, with an estimate of nearly two million dollars, a considerable sum at that time. The money was mainly spent for the actors' high paychecks, lavish costumes and a series of «musical theatre» scenes which required colorful scenes and rich choreography. Thus, it may be asserted that the opera and the musical enjoyed greater success than the actual *Phantom*, which was completely altered compared to Leroux's original character.

Initially, this version of *The Phantom of the Opera* was meant to be a «musical extravaganza», a pretext to showcase the singing sensation Deanna Durbin in the role of Christine. The film was directed

³ George Perry, *The Complete Phantom of the Opera*, New York, Henry Holt and Co., 1987, p. 55.

by Henry Kostner and starred Broderick Crawford as the Phantom, who unfortunately had to give up the role because he was recruited to fight in Europe. The part was thus offered to the famous English actor Charles Laughton, who had already successfully starred in William Dirtele's adaptation of *The Hunchback of Nôtre Dame* in 1940. There were delays in the organization of the new cast, so the original troupe was broken up.

At the start of 1943, the heads of «Universal» stated that the new version of *The Phantom of the Opera* was to launch a new star, the popular tenor Nelson Eddy, alongside the young singer Susanna Foster, who had made her debut in the film *The Great Victor Herbert* (1940) when she was only fifteen. Eddy was already quite famous for his musical coupling with the soprano Jeannette Mac Donald, «America's Singing Sweetheart», from 1933 to 1942, when the pair split after their last film together, *I Married an Angel*.

«Universal»'s new producer George Wagner hoped that he could recreate Eddy and Jeannette's success with the new couple cast for the *Phantom*. The film's direction was assigned to Arthur Lubin, who was seasoned in the genre of romantic comedies. Universal most likely chose him because he was one of the few directors left working after the army draft.

Gaston Leroux's novel was completely altered and very little of this second cinematic version remains faithful to the original text. In fact, in this adaptation, the Phantom, the mysterious musical genius who inhabits the vaults of the «Palais Garnier», is transformed into a poor violinist at the end of his career. His name is Eriquer Claudin (performed by Claude Rains) and, with his meager savings, he secretly pays for singing lessons for the young soprano he loves, named Christine Dubois. The singer is completely unaware of her secret benefactor and is also courted by both a young tenor, Anatole Garron, played by Nelson Reddy, and the official assistant of the *Sûreté*, Raoul D'Aubert, played by Edgar Barrier⁴.

Claudin is a pity case, having been fired from the orchestra. At the twilight of his career, he attempts to sell one of his violin concerts to an editor. While he awaits a meeting with the editor, he hears

⁴ *Ivi*, p. 57.

the notes of his concert in the next room and suspects that he has been robbed of his only possession: his music. Blind with rage, he attacks the editor as the secretary attempts to defend him from the aggressor, splashing acid on the violinist's face and disfiguring him. The musician succeeds in escaping from the police and hides in the sewers of Paris. As time passes, the theatre's administrators begin to realize that certain robberies have been committed in the Palais and rumor spreads that a dark phantom is hidden in the vaults. Christine begins to hear a voice that speaks to her and gives her singing lessons, while the Opera's *prima donna* is found assassinated in her dressing room.

The theatre's administrators then receive a note that asks them to grant the leading role to the young Christine Dubois. Instead, following the request of the inspector Raoul D'Aubert, the role is given to another singer. Furious, the Phantom cuts the chain that holds up the magnificent Opera chandelier, making it come crashing down on top of the audience and causing many victims. In the midst of the chaos that occurs following the accident, the Phantom drags Christine down to the theatre vaults and, having arrived in his secret lair, plays her concerto on his piano and makes her sing to him as she reluctantly accepts. Raoul and Anatole follow Christine through the underground corridors, guided by her voice.

The scene of Erique's unmasking by Christine, who sees his horrendously disfigured face, occurs as her rescuers Anatole and Raoul arrive in the Phantom's lair. A gunshot is heard, and the Phantom is killed by an enormous rock that falls on his head.

Finally, the two suitors try to win Christine's love, though she is more interested in her singing career than in marriage. She takes leave of the two young men who finally wander melancholically through the streets of Paris.

This weak and essentially absurd plot has nothing to do with the force and intensity of Leroux's novel. The screenplay written by Eric Taylor and Samuel Hoffstein works to transform *Le Fantôme de l'Opéra* into a spectacular musical, rather than recreate the theatrical, sulphureous atmosphere of the novel.

Gounod's *Faust*, a central theme in the original text, never appears in the screenplay. In its place, various musical pieces taken from Chopin and from Tchaikovsky's Symphony n. 4 were inserted.

Nothing remains of Gaston Leroux's theatrical novel and little evokes the gothic-horror elements of Lon Chaney's 1925 version. In fact, the violinist's escape from the editor's office after his disfiguration has nothing scary about it. The spectacular collapse of the great chandelier is totally copied from the Chaney film, while the Phantom's unmasking is dull when compared with the terrifying scene from the 1925 version. More than a mask of terror, in this 1943 film the Phantom appears to be a poor, unfortunate has-been with a disfigured face.

The reviews were quite indifferent and biased against this new version of *The Phantom of the Opera*, which insisted on comparing itself with the silent film masterpiece. Audiences, on the contrary, welcomed the film with great favor. They appreciated its scenic richness and the magnificence of *Technicolor*, and the film also received some nominations for the *Academy Awards*.

Seen today, the film cannot compete with the 1925 version, an authentic masterpiece of its kind. The screenplay is weak, banal and almost ridiculous. The whole plot has no pathos; the artist's touch is missing; the reality of the world of the theatre is made banal; Erik's inner conflict as a perverse and desperate musical genius is reduced to the sob story of a fanciful, mediocre violinist and composer; the theme of artistic genius is non-existent; the gothic component of the living dead is nowhere to be found. Basically, the film tells another story that has nothing to do with Leroux's novel.

The Phantom is played by Claude Rains, the famous and unforgettable policeman from the film *Casablanca* (1942), who was quite perplexed as to whether he should accept the role of the Phantom in this musical remake. He agreed only after having considered the high financial standard of the production.

In 1962, *The Phantom of the Opera* saw another cinematic adaptation, this time in London for the company «Hammer Films», which had made a name for itself with the production of a series of low-budget horror films. Terence Ficher directed and the role of the Phantom was granted to Herbert Lom, while Heather Sears played Christine⁵.

Perry, *op. cit.*, p. 60.

This version is more a remake of the 1943 film rather than of the historic version of 1925. In this edition, *Faust* is not included in the screenplay, which instead could boast an original soundtrack by the composer Edward Astley. We are in the Victorian age and the plot unfolds in London. The film was entirely shot at the «Wimbledon Theatre»⁶.

It was at the same theatre in Wimbledon that another version of the *Phantom* premiered in 1975: a theatrical performance that was much more faithful to the original text by Leroux. This performance saw Sharon Duce in the role of Christine, Keith Drinkel as Raoul and finally Edward Petherbridge as Erik, the Phantom of the Opera.

There were then other films inspired by the adventures of Leroux's novel. In 1960, in Mexico, Fernando Cortès directed an adaptation of the *Phantom* with the Spanish title: *El Fantasma de la opereta*, a comic revisiting of the original text for a low-budget production that had little media coverage and left hardly a trace⁷.

In 1974, a television movie was produced in the United States entitled *The Phantom of Hollywood*⁸, directed by Gene Levitt. The story took place not in an Opera theatre, but in a television studio. The Phantom was an old, disfigured actor, played by Jack Cassidy, who lived secretly in the studios for over thirty years and was about to be evicted from his lair by bulldozers. The idea could have been a good one, but the screenplay was not adequate enough to support the film. The theme had certain analogies with the current situation at that time, when «MGM» had ordered the demolition of many film studios in Culver City, California. Many stars participated in the film to protest against this decision, including Broderick Crawford, Peter Lawford, Corinne Calvet, Jackie Coogan and John Ireland.

Another television production by «Universal», *Phantom*, was launched in the U.S. by the network «CBS» in January, 1983⁹. This version was so far from the novel by Gaston Leroux that the name of the Parisian author was left out of the credits. The film was shot in Hungary, using the basement of an old beer factory as the main set.

⁶ *Ibidem*.

⁷ *Ibidem*.

⁸ *Ibidem*.

⁹ Hogle, *op. cit.*, p. 239.

The theatrical scenes were taped inside a theatre in Kecksmet, since the Budapest Opera House was not available. The German actor Maximilian Schell played the Phantom, while Jane Seymour starred as Christine and a young Michael York played Raoul De Chagny. Robert Markovitz directed and Sherman Yellen wrote the screenplay.

The story consists in the misfortune of an orchestra director who, on the night of his wife's singing debut, is involved in an accident: his wife dies, while he remains disfigured as a result of having accidentally poured acid on himself in an attempt to extinguish the flames that have surrounded him and his wife. Disfigured, he escapes the flames and takes refuge in the sewers, wearing a mask to hide his horrific face and swears revenge upon those whom he deems responsible for the tragedy, namely the theatre critics. Later, he meets a singer who is the double of his lost wife, and this appears obvious to the viewer since this young woman is also played by Jane Seymour, the same actress who portrays the dead wife. The Phantom orchestrates a diabolical plan to eliminate those responsible for his tragedy and to give his new protégé the success that had been denied to his wife.

The screenplay is quite dull and very far from the winning plot of Leroux's novel.

Another version of *Le Fantôme de l'Opéra*, much more interesting than those cited above, is the rock version written and directed by Brian De Palma, 1974's *The Phantom of Paradise*.

The composer Paul Williams appears in this version in the role of Swan, a Machiavellian musical impresario, with the actor William Finley in the role of Winslow Leach, the unknown composer from whom Swan steals the music written for a new version of *Faust*, used by Swan for his house of rock, «The Paradise». Winslow gets caught up in a drug affair and is sent to «Sing Sing» prison, but succeeds in escaping and, having gone to Swan's factory to get revenge, ends up under a disk press and remains completely disfigured. To hide himself, Winslow wears a mask and black cape, choosing «The Paradise» as his new home. Swan then convinces him to complete the new version of *Faust*, which should be performed in his venue. Winslow agrees, provided that Swan give the leading role to Phoenix, the actress Jessica Harper, with whom he is infatuated. Swan instead assigns the role to a gay singer who later gets killed by Winslow, who then discovers that Swan has made a pact with the Devil and has a

plan to kill Phoenix during a coast-to-coast tour. In the final conflict between Swan and the television fans of rock, the audience witnesses the spectacular death of the fans.

This version is a fusion of two legends, that of *Faust* and that of *The Phantom of the Opera*, even if the final result could have been more satisfying.

The film has a certain energy, but it lacks coherence and decision, wanting to be a rock opera and an outrageous story at the same time. Wanting to be too much, it ends up being nothing at all; in fact, it was never a success, despite the efforts made by the producers to support it with a huge promotional campaign. Today it is considered a cult movie with frequent screenings in American cinema classes, where De Palma studied to become a celebrated director of horror films such as the classic *Carrie*.

It is interesting to observe how, in all the adaptations of *Le Fantôme de l'Opéra* (whether the text is faithful to the original or uses it merely as a pretext), the screenwriters pass over the basic element of Leroux's novel: namely, the fact that Erik is a person gifted with extraordinary qualities; a deformed creature who nonetheless possesses great intelligence; who decides to live underground to hide his monstrous appearance and also to support his determination to live in a world of his own, where he can be his own master.

The writers who adapted Leroux's text instead opted for the solution of the ghost-man, born normal but deformed by an accidental occurrence. In this way, the Phantom's obsession is simplified, yet presents some serious inconsistencies (how can these other improvised Phantoms recreate their underground kingdom, furnish it lavishly with precious antiques, a piano, and even a great organ?).

Leroux gave his Phantom many years to create his empire, but he also endowed him with a great knowledge of architecture which he gained during his years in the Orient, spent building the palaces of kings. Leroux also gave his protagonist the merit of having designed the Paris Opera together with the architect Charles Garnier, supervising the reconstruction of the theatre's vaults. Gaston Leroux's Phantom was also a *dandy*, an elegant gentleman who knew how to act in social situations.

In fact, the moving story by Leroux continues to survive because it is a work written by a real artist and lover of the theatre, whose tale

inspires audiences today as it did a century ago. The various adaptations which have proliferated throughout the decades are destined to be forgotten without Leroux's spiritual touch.

The story told by Gaston Leroux is the eternal fairy tale of *Beauty and the Beast*, and every respectable theatre needs its own Phantom. Therefore we thank Gaston Leroux, who has given an unforgettable one to his beloved Paris Opera, telling the world the timeless and romantic story of an unrequited love, of an enduring legend that speaks of the secret magic of the theatre, the fascination of song, the perfection of music and the great mystery of talent and genius: a unique and ever modern story, a universal story for which Theatre and Cinema must be eternally grateful.

It took almost a century, eighty years to be exact, to find a new version of *Le Fantôme de l'Opéra* equal to Gaston Leroux's novel, if not superior in certain ways. This version is enriched by the magic of an original, beautiful score, intended and written for the Phantom and for all that it represents. I am referring to the theatrical masterpiece written by the English composer Andrew Lloyd Webber, which has been on stage at «Her Majesty's Theatre» in London for nearly twenty years, boasting a *sold out* house for each performance!

4.

«THE PHANTOM OF THE OPERA» BY ANDREW LLOYD WEBBER IN ITS THEATRICAL AND CINEMATIC VERSIONS

4.1. THE THEATRICAL VERSION BY ANDREW LLOYD WEBBER, LONDON, 1986

Contrary to popular belief, Andrew Lloyd Webber was not the first composer to attempt a musical adaptation of Gaston Leroux's theatrical novel. In fact, there were many attempts made to do so, especially in the United States, and in 1984 a musical version of the original text premiered at the «Royal Theatre», in Stanford in East London. The show contained many musical pieces taken from composers such as Verdi, Gounod and Offenbach and had a set design inspired by the «Grand Guigol» Theatre in Paris. For the part of Christine, the director contacted the young singer Sarah Brightman, who would soon become Mrs. Lloyd Webber and had to decline the offer, as she was tied up with other theatrical contracts.

At that time, Andrew Lloyd Webber was busy with the triumph of *Cats*, and only after many months asked his friend, producer Cameron Mackintosh, what he thought about an original musical production of the French novel *Le Fantôme de l'Opéra*. His friend replied that it was a good idea, and from that conversation the legend of the best-loved and most widely seen musical of its kind was born: *The Phantom of the Opera*. The show premiered at «Her Majesty's Theatre» on October 9, 1986, and since then, every performance has been *sold-out*.

This magical musical continues to thrill thousands of spectators of all ages, in a theatrical version that the author of this thesis has had the pleasure of admiring twice in London, nearly ten years apart,

with a different cast of actors yet with the same deep emotion for the set design, beautiful music, skilled acting and, mainly, for the mystery of that novel written by Gaston Leroux in 1910, whose charm never dies.

Andrew Lloyd Webber called his friend Alan Jay Lerner¹ for the theatrical adaptation of Leroux's text. Lerner replied that they wouldn't have to face many obstacles in doing so, since the text was already written with the theatre in mind and only a few structural expedients were necessary to adapt it for the stage. He also said that Leroux's was an extraordinary text that could stand on its own and had the ideal dramatic structure for a theatrical version. Their collaboration was unfortunately interrupted by Lerner's untimely death. Consequently, the text to be accompanied by Webber's beautiful music was completed by Charles Hart, who was particularly enthusiastic about the project for its powerful love story, which told of a young and talented singer attracted by three male figures: her father, a famous violinist and acrobat; her young suitor, the Viscount Raoul De Chagny; and the Angel of Music, the mysterious teacher whom she has never seen and who speaks to her from an unknown dimension: the Phantom of the Opera, a sort of occult and metaphorical incarnation of creative genius.

Despite the fact that this version of Leroux's text is the most faithful to the original of all the earlier versions, certain changes were made to make a stronger and more effective dramatic impact on the audience. The most delicate issue was that of the Phantom's unmasking: the impact needed to be strong and equally felt by every corner of the audience. It was thus decided that the unmasking would take place not only in front of the young singer, but before the entire theatrical audience present at the premiere of the Phantom's new opera, *Don Juan Triumphant*, with a perfect scene of «theatre within the theatre».

Another change made to the original text was that of centering the plot of the love triangle, while eliminating the narrative thread of the Persian.

The ballet choreography was carefully controlled so that the dancers would be standing erect with legs turned outwards, accord-

¹ Alan Jay Lerner, author of the theatrical versions of *Brigadoon*, *My Fair Lady* and *Camelot*.

ing to the rules dictated by nineteenth-century classical dance which had been taught by the strict school of Russian ballet. The ballerinas' tutus were also meticulously designed according to the iconography of paintings by Degas.

The cast was auditioned with great attention and the choice for the young Christine fell upon Webber's new wife, the soprano Sarah Brightman. The singer Michael Crawford was cast as the Phantom for his great stage presence as well as his powerful voice. Crawford was already well-known among the crew and the general public for his role alongside Barbra Streisand in the musical film *Hello Dolly*, directed by Gene Kelly. The choice proved to be perfect for Crawford's acting talent and powerful presence that could be felt even when he didn't appear on stage, like the true Phantom. The singer later declared that taking part in the theatrical masterpiece of *The Phantom of the Opera* was one of the greatest and perhaps unrepeatable experiences of his artistic career. For the casting of Christine, Webber never hid the fact that his wife Sarah Brightman was chosen for her great musical talent and stage presence. Many singers were auditioned, however, and when Brightman left the show in 1987, the young Claire Moore superbly took her place.

Among all the roles written by Lloyd Webber, the role of Christine was one of the most difficult to interpret since it required not only a strong musical talent to sustain such a long and demanding performance, but also certain ballet skills for the first scene in which Christine dances *en pointe*, as well as a voice pure and angelic enough to bewitch the Phantom.

Christine's ability to move from singing to ballet required Sarah Brightman to use her great talent in both arts. «It was very difficult – Sarah explained – since the way I use my muscles to dance is very different from the way I use them to sing»².

Given the difficulty of the show, the contract stipulated only six consecutive performances to be alternated with a rest period. This created the issue of the alternate cast, since it was especially hard to find a talented singer that could also double as an expert ballerina.

² *Ibidem.*

The part of Raoul was given to a young actor named Steve Barton, who had had a small role in the musical *La Cage aux folles*³.

The choice of the London theatre was particularly fixed. Ideally, Lloyd Webber wanted the «Palace Theatre», a purely Victorian building that was occupied by the production of *Les Misérables*, which would have gone on for many years. The choice thus fell upon «Her Majesty's Theatre», which had hosted Leonard Bernstein's musical *West Side Story* for a long time. The theatre was authentically Victorian, the only venue in London to have all of its original antique equipment, a detail that was in perfect harmony with the show's romantic atmosphere.

Special attention was paid to the design of the famous chandelier, one of the show's «main characters». The scene opens with the auction held at the Opera Theatre for the sale of its decorative furnishings. The old crystal chandelier lies on the theatre floor like a pile of old knick-knacks, but suddenly rises above the audience, transformed into a sparkling crystal triumph. The audience is taken back to the golden age of the Paris Opera Theatre. This is a special effect that can only be seen in the theatres especially designed and set up for the performances of this musical, in London, New York and now also in Las Vegas.

The scene of the chandelier's final collapse stirred a few worries for the theatre's security agents, who feared that the spectacular fall could cause a real accident.

Hal Prince, the show's director, had a series of scale models built for the set design in order to visualize and perfect each detail. He also asked Webber to compose a powerful score that would pulse within the heart of each spectator; in many moments of the show, in fact, this is truly the incredible effect that the music creates. Another element that was dealt with more deeply in this version and which does not appear in Leroux's original text, is that of the strong sensuality and eroticism created between Christine and the Phantom.

After the first performance, various criticism and myths were constructed around the show, which is an incredible theatrical phantasmagoria. The Crawford-Brightman duet ended up being very com-

³ Perry, *op. cit.*, p. 73.

elling. Crawford's stage presence seemed endowed with the gift of ubiquity, with a charisma that pervaded the whole show even when the actor did not appear onstage. His smooth, almost hypnotic voice, imprisoned in a disfigured visage, conquered the audience with magnetism similar to that felt by Christine toward her mysterious Maestro. Brightman triumphed in the role that her husband had thought up especially for her and received positive reviews for her clear, perfectly tuned voice as well as her dancing talent. As in Gaston Leroux's novel, Webber's production did not leave out the plot's ironic and comic tones: the satire of the ill-tempered *prima donna*, La Carlotta, with her moody disposition and mediocre talent; the clumsiness of the tenor that supports the petulant soprano, Carlo Piangi, who is tricked by the Phantom during the scene of the masked ball; the avidity and mercantilism of the theatre's new owners, a delicious satire that Leroux had delivered against the rich Parisian bourgeois class. All these elements are present in Webber's version and contribute to its dynamism, rhythm and theatrical richness.

This is a show that leaves the audience flabbergasted when the curtain goes down and the lights come up, today just as it did twenty years ago. The spectator leaves the theatre humming the captivating melodies of *Music of the Night*; *All I Ask of You*; *The Point of No Return*. It takes hours before one can snap out of the theatrical magic put on scene with the same magnificence of years past.

The greatest difficulty in producing the stage version of the *Phantom* was that of the makeup. One of the greatest Hollywood makeup artists, Christopher Tucker (who had created John Hurt's appearance in *The Elephant Man*) was hired to do his magic. Half of the Phantom's face had to appear deformed, and that deformity had to be visible even to the spectators sitting farthest from the stage without, however, disaffecting their compassion toward the unhappy character. The Phantom's appearance needed to evoke horror and eroticism, pity and fear: a rather demanding task, to be sure!

A major obstacle was that of studying a mask that could divide the Phantom's face in half. This element was not supposed to impede Crawford from singing and having a convincing facial expression. Moreover, his ears could not be covered too much as to make singing difficult. Tucker attempted to adopt the makeup used in Lon Chaney's silent film, namely the insertion of latex cushions above Crawford's

cheekbones to alter his handsome appearance. This was not possible, however, since this kind of makeup also would have made it hard for the actor to sing and perform. It was quite challenging for the protagonist to act with the mask and heavy makeup, especially since he had to perform the show twice a day. With time, Crawford became accustomed to the task and reduced his time in the makeup chair to only three hours. Crawford's efforts were rewarded by the emotion that he stirred at each performance, for each spectator, who would find himself crying with the unfortunate Erik in the final scene, as he sets his beloved Christine free.

Christine's makeup also required much time and effort to grant her the dreamy, «pre-Raphaelite» image that characterizes her.

Moreover, the show's scenic mechanisms were also extremely complex. Every detail had to be carefully checked at each performance: the double stage, with the insertion of the Shakespearian *inner-stage*⁴ for the mirror scene in Christine's dressing room; the majestic Opera staircase, setting of the grand masked ball; the Phantom's lair, the black lake and the vessel that ferries Christine through the lavish, Baroque grotto, home of the mysterious tenant of the Opera Theatre's vaults; the trap door, where Christine and the Phantom disappear at the end of the show; the hall of mirrors; the Opera's rooftops: a fantastic set, with extraordinary lighting effects created by the phantasmagorical candlesticks that emerge from the Phantom's lake and are incredibly lit with real candles. Each time that everything ran smoothly, at the end of each performance, the entire production team could heave a sigh of relief.

A greatly important element of this London version from 1989 were its costumes. They were designed by Maria Björnson, a brilliant collaborator of the «English National Opera and Royal Shakespeare Company» who tried her hand at musicals for the first time with this version of the *Phantom*, with absolutely sensational results.

Large part of the huge, lasting success of this version of *The Phantom of the Opera* was determined by the extraordinary fusion of talent for its production, with music, lyrics, acting, the screenplay,

⁴ Anzi, *op. cit.* p. 56. *Inner-stage*, or the insertion of a second stage (scenic structure of Elizabethan theatre), thought to have been invented by Shakespeare who used it for the final scene of the romantic comedy *The Tempest*.

costumes, choreography, special effects, makeup and sets: elements that contributed to creating the legend of this show, which gave rise to a real «Phantomania» with massive sales of gadgets, records and t-shirts featuring the Phantom: a favorite among young fans. In fact, the truly surprising phenomenon surrounding the adaptation of such a decadent, romantic text is that young audiences love it. Young fans were literally awestruck by the show's theatrical extravagance, abundant with decorative elements such as colors, golden statues, the proscenium's arches, musicians, ballerinas, heroines, monsters in love, magic and mysterious melodies – all this enriched by Andrew Lloyd Webber's outstanding score. These sensational elements work to hypnotize over twenty million spectators that have seen *The Phantom of the Opera* over the past twenty years. If Gaston Leroux could have entered «Her Majesty's Theatre» in London and seen «his *Phantom*» so full of life after a century, he would be quite surprised and certainly very happy.

On this note, it is interesting to note how Leroux's novel inspired a theatrical masterpiece composed in English that has enjoyed extraordinary success all over the world, from London to Las Vegas, Australia to New York – everywhere except France. In France, there has been no noteworthy version of this work of art originally written in French.

Perhaps in years to come, French theatre will also want to pay homage to one of its most important authors whose work has triumphed all over the world, yet always with adaptations in English and never in its original language. Let's hope so!

The Phantom's adventure does not end at «Her Majesty's Theatre» in London, however. It continues on the big screen, with the cinematic version conceived and produced by Andrew Lloyd Webber himself in 2004. Webber personally financed the film which cost over one hundred million dollars, making it the most expensive independent film in the history of cinema.

4.2. THE CINEMATIC VERSION ADAPTED FROM ANDREW LLOYD WEBBER'S MUSICAL OPERA

After the triumphant premiere of *The Phantom of the Opera* on Broadway, Andrew Lloyd Webber proposed to film director Joel Schumacher to do an on-screen version of the musical. The composer considered Schumacher a great director and remembered his brilliant films, among which the vampire thriller *The Lost Boys* (1987). Lloyd Webber, in fact, declared:

I understood that Joel Schumacher has an incredible artistic gift, even for the use of music in his films. Our shared work was very involving and satisfying. I was amazed by his ability to «hear» the music. He understands how much music influences the development of the plot.⁵

Andrew Lloyd Webber's unexpected and painful separation from Sarah Brightman, his wife and muse for the creation of *The Phantom of the Opera*, led the composer to put off the production of the musical's film version. During the following years, the musician often returned to the idea of turning the musical into a movie, but Joel Schumacher was already occupied in directing major films such as *Falling Down* (1993), *The Client* (1994), *Batman Forever* (1995), *A Time to Kill* (1996) and *Phone Booth* (2002). In 2002, Lloyd Webber and Schumacher felt ready to work on the film version of *The Phantom of the Opera*. Director Joel Schumacher recalls:

I have worked in various film genres, but I've never directed a musical. It was really interesting to put myself to the test in such a complex and difficult genre. This tragic love story has become part of our culture since the publication of Gaston Leroux's novel because we, as readers and spectators, can identify with the Phantom: he is the physical embodiment of what we feel in our hearts. The Phantom is a character that stirs our compassion for many reasons: he makes us think of the unfortunate Quasimodo from Victor Hugo's *Nôtre Dame de Paris* and the Beast from *La Belle et la Bête* by Jeanne Marie Leprince De Beau-

⁵ All material has been taken from *Kollekzionnoe izdanie DVD/Video* (Russian DVD/Video Collector's Edition: the film «Džela Šumachera e muzikl Llojda Vebbera *Prizrack opery*», directed by Joel Schumacher, with music by Andrew Lloyd Webber, *The Phantom of the Opera*). Produced 2004: SR Didžital, Russia, Moscow; ul. Malaja Bronnaja, d. 13.

mont. Another reason for working on this film version was my will to show this story to those who can't afford a theatre ticket in London or who live in countries where there aren't any theatres that stage this extraordinary show.⁶

In transforming the musical's libretto into a screenplay for the big screen, Lloyd Webber and Schumacher wanted to go deeper into the stories of the main characters and to show the world that swarms behind the scenes of the theatre, as Leroux did in the original text. On this theme, Lloyd Webber comments:

The theatrical version includes only a few references to the Phantom's childhood, while this story is told more extensively in the film. This change was really important to us, since it let us dig deeper into the Phantom's existential drama.⁷

Joel Schumacher also notes:

In the theatrical performance, the action is mainly focused on the love triangle: Phantom, Raoul, Christine. In the film version, we wanted to not only explain how each of these characters ends up at the opera, but we also wanted to present the world behind the scenes, just as Gaston Leroux did in his novel, and nel suo romanzo, showing what happens when the curtain goes down, with the prop masters, makeup artists, hairdressers, decorators, dancers, singers ...

The success of our work is determined by the friendship and mutual respect that has bonded us for fifteen years. Creatively, we were a perfect team for the realization of his huge musical film, since I took care of the directing and Andrew worked on the music. Since he focused his brilliant talent on the musical aspects of the film, I had a lot of freedom, and I had his full support in directing the film.⁸

Andrew Lloyd Webber completely re-orchestrated the musical version of *The Phantom of the Opera* for the film, adding a new song to the soundtrack, *Learn to be Lonely*, as well as some instrumental pieces for the new scenes included in the screenplay. Webber was not new to these kinds of changes, since he composed the soundtrack for the films *The Odessa File* and *Gumshoe* early in his career. Webber

⁶ *Ibidem.*

⁷ *Ibidem.*

⁸ *Ibidem.*

stated that he was quite satisfied with this film adaptation of his musical, a project that was especially dear to him and that he waited many years to realize, as evidenced in his own words:

The figurative solutions and sound are perfect. The musical was adapted extremely well. As for the emotional richness and fullness, this big-screen version is maybe even better than the musical: it represents everything I could have ever hoped to realize.⁹

4.3. THE ACTORS AND CHARACTERS OF THE FILM VERSION OF «THE PHANTOM OF THE OPERA»

Casting for the cinematic version of *The Phantom of the Opera* was difficult task for both Andrew Lloyd Webber and Joel Schumacher. The latter visualized the film as a youthful love story: thus, he decided to cast fresh, unknown actors for the leading roles. This was particularly important for the role of Christine Daaé – the naive, orphan *ingénue* who believes that the Phantom's voice that calls to her from the depths of the theatre is that of the «Angel of Music», which her father had promised from his death bed. Joel Schumacher affirms:

The beauty of Christine's image lies in her ingenuity, her affection towards her father and her faith that the Phantom is the spirit of her father who has returned from the afterlife. For this reason, we had to find a young woman who could emanate true naiveté and an adolescent torment and, at the same time, two young, charming actors to play the men who fall in love with her.¹⁰

Lloyd Webber handed the casting decisions over to Joel Schumacher, while he worked on the actor's voices to obtain the harmony necessary to perform such a complex musical. Webber stated:

We needed actors who could sing, since the songs are what really tell the story. Joel has a great ability to discover new, young talent. For the role of the Phantom, the search was pretty tough: we needed a handsome, charming actor with a magnetic, charismatic personality.

⁹ *Ibidem.*

¹⁰ *Ibidem.*

We needed an actor who looked like a rock star, a bit wild and dangerous – not your typical opera singer. Christine is attracted to the Phantom because he possesses the lure of mystery and danger, and we were looking for an actor who could embody these qualities.¹¹

The film's creators found these qualities in the young Scottish actor Gerard Butler, known for his co-starring role alongside Angelina Jolie in *Lara Croft Tomb Raider: The Cradle of Life* (2003) and as leading man in the television movie *Attila* (2000) and *Dracula* (2000). When Joel Schumacher offered Butler the role, the actor was not familiar with the part and read over the script every night, while listening to the score. He recalls:

Towards the end of the script I burst into tears: I totally identified with the Phantom, with his melancholic passion, with his artistic sensibility, the suffering and the solitude that followed him his whole life.¹²

While preparing to interpret the iconic role of the Phantom, Gerard Butler took singing lessons and practiced every day with the director of the musical *Phantom*, Simon Lee. Butler recalls his final audition with Andrew Lloyd Webber:

I was standing in front of Andrew Lloyd Webber, at his house. Simon sat at the piano and I thought, now I'll have to sing *The Music of the Night*, one of this composer's most famous songs, right in front of him. I was so nervous that my knees started shaking.¹³

After that audition, Gerard Butler got the part. During the film's production, before shooting began, he would spend nearly four hours in the makeup chair to transform his handsome face into the Phantom's tragic mask, the symbol of a spectacular and memorable film.

Casting the female protagonist Christine turned out to be quite difficult, since she had to be a compelling actress as well as a talented singer. Among the hopefuls for the coveted role were eighteen-year-old Emmy Rossum, known for her performances in the television series *Law and Order* (1997) and *As the World Turns* (1999), the films *Mystic River* (2003) and *The Day after Tomorrow* (2004), as well as

¹¹ *Ibidem.*

¹² *Ibidem.*

¹³ *Ibidem.*

her interpretation of Audrey Hepburn in *The Audrey Hepburn Story*. Regarding his leading lady, Schumacher said:

When she was only seven, Emmy began to study at the *Metropolitan Opera School*. We got her application at the last minute: she had said that she wouldn't have been able to participate in the audition because of a family reunion in Las Vegas. I had to convince her to stay because Andrew told me she had an exceptional voice.¹⁴

To immerse herself in the role of Christine, Rossum took classical dance lessons, visited the famous «Opera Garnier» in Paris and studied the paintings of Degas's famous ballerinas at the «Musée d'Orsay». The actress remembers:

The hardest part for me was finding a connection between my voice and my acting for a film that wasn't only supposed to be a musical. My voice and my acting had to blend together in a way that seemed natural. I see a solitary soul in Christine, like in the Phantom, who is looking for the love and protection she lost when her father died. Christine is desperately searching for a sign of her lost paternal love. When she first hears the Phantom's voice, she wants to believe with her whole heart that it belongs to the Angel of Music that her dying father had promised her. She finds traces of her father in that voice, as well as traces of unhappiness and loneliness.¹⁵

For the role of Raoul, the film's creators chose a famous Broadway performer, Patrick Wilson, who had been a great success in *Oklahoma* on New York's musical stages. In fact, besides being an attractive actor, Wilson is also an expert singer, possessing the warm, harmonious voice needed to play the romantic role of Raoul De Chagny.

4.4. RECREATING THE «PHANTOM»'S WORLD

The musical's accurate historical setting of Paris in 1870 led the producers to a careful recreation of this world in the 2004 film version directed by Joel Schumacher.

¹⁴ *Ibidem.*

¹⁵ *Ibidem.*

This demanding task was entrusted to the celebrated set designer Anthony Pratt, a multiple Oscar nominee. Schumacher recalls:

I've admired Tony's talent for a long time, and I feel really lucky for having had the chance to work with him and to have had him on my team for this film.¹⁶

The sets for both the theatrical musical and the film have the prestigious Paris Opera Theatre designed by Charles Garnier as their main feature. Schumacher again comments:

The Paris Opera is beautiful, but it is a huge municipal building that has an almost bureaucratic style. I wanted the *Opéra Populaire* to be more intimate, to not even look like a building, but resemble a sensual female character.¹⁷

To realize Pratt's project, a real theatre was constructed that contained 866 seats on two levels. Sensual golden statues decorate both the theatre's box seats and the stage. A scarlet velvet curtain and tapestries surround the sumptuous proscenium. One of the hall's most important details, as well as the most spectacular element of the scenery, is the giant dome-shaped chandelier: the same chandelier that the Phantom, filled with rage and desperation, causes to collapse on top of the audience in the film's climactic scene.

Three different chandeliers were created during the film's preparation: one for daily shooting, its «body double» for the collapse scene, and a third electric lamp for the scenes that take place during the 1919 auction.

The chandelier designed by Pratt generally corresponds to the one that adorned the Paris Opera, which he describes in this way:

Garnier's chandelier is amazing, but it was too metallic. Joel wanted our chandelier to be entirely made of crystal and glass. The silhouette of our prototype really resembles Garnier's, but we added more crystals and eliminated some decorative elements.¹⁸

The «main» chandelier amazes the audience for its size, with a diameter of 4.5 meters and a height of 7.5 meters, weighing 2.2 tons. More

¹⁶ *Ibidem.*

¹⁷ *Ibidem.*

¹⁸ *Ibidem.*

than 20,000 Swarovski crystal drops, worth over one million dollars, decorate the chandelier. The producers wanted the Phantom's theatre to reach the splendor of great palaces like New York's «Metropolitan» Opera, or even Versailles, adorned with matchless and sumptuous chandeliers known worldwide for their brilliant, glittering crystals.

Shooting for the film should have begun in 1990 with the same actors of the musical version, Michael Crawford and Sarah Brightman, but Lloyd Webber's separation from the actress put the project on hold for a long time.

The search for the new protagonists was a long one, and led the producers to first cast actors such as John Travolta and Antonio Banderas for the role of the Phantom.

Antonio Banderas, in fact, following his performance of various songs from the *Phantom* during a commemorative event in honor of Andrew Lloyd Webber's fiftieth birthday, was a favorite for the role until 2003, when Joel Schumacher announced that Banderas would not have gotten the part:

Webber really likes Antonio Banderas, but he's not my Phantom.¹⁹

Among the potential candidates for the role of Christine were Mariah Carey, Catherine Zeta Jones and Keira Knightley. The film's distribution rights, which had belonged to «Warner Brothers» for a long time, were subsequently bought by Lloyd Webber.

The film version, which is more articulate from a musical perspective and contains extremely enthralling performances by the whole cast, made it possible for the *Phantom* to reach wider audiences and offered the world the chance to relive the intense emotions of this timeless story.

¹⁹ *Ibidem.*

CONCLUSIONS

I began this thesis by posing certain questions on the origin of the continued interest that Gaston Leroux's novel *Le Fantôme de l'Opéra* has stirred in many artists for nearly a century, giving rise to a blossoming of adaptations, re-readings and remakes that seem to never end. I discussed how this phenomenon could be attributed to contingent causes of a cultural and sociological nature that are influenced by fashions and styles that change over time but which, ultimately, lead us back to the themes of this novel that can only apparently be considered an example of gothic literature.

The myth of the Minotaur that pursues the young Arianna; the myth of Europa who is raped by Jupiter, disguised as a fearsome yet fascinating white bull; a whole wealth of tales and legends that speak of princesses kidnapped by dark monsters – these have been mankind's favorite themes throughout the centuries. Even the Italian poet Giacomo Leopardi, in his *Zibaldone*, describes the artist's feeling of disorientation and bewilderment before his own horrid image:

The man of imagination, sentiment and enthusiasm, deprived of the beauty of the body, always acts towards nature in a way similar to how an ardent, sincere, unrequited lover does towards his beloved. He fervently hurls himself towards nature; he feels all its force, its attraction, its beauty in the deepest way; he loves it with every transport but, as if he was not loved in return, he feels that he is excluded from this beauty that he loves and admires; he seems himself outside the sphere of beauty, like the lover excluded from the heart, the tenderness and the company of his beloved. In the consideration and sentiment of the

nature of beauty, the return above himself is always painful. He immediately and constantly feels that that beauty, that thing he admires and loves and feels, does not belong to him. He feels the same pain that one feels in imagining or seeing one's beloved in the arms of another, or in love with another, and indifferent to you. He feels as if beauty and nature are not made for him, but for others (and these others – a much more bitter thing to consider – are less worthy, rather completely unworthy of enjoying beauty and nature, incapable of feeling it and understanding it): and he feels the same disgust and subtle pain of a poor hungry man, who sees others nourishing themselves delicately, at length, and with relish, with no hope whatsoever of being able to taste the same food. All in all, he sees and knows himself as an outcast, with no hope, and not taking part in the favors of that divinity that he feels so present and so close to him, as if it were inside him, and he identifies with it: abstract beauty. This is nature.¹

What words could better describe the heartbreaking drama of the Phantom of the Opera? Erik is a great artist with a high and refined spirit, yet is condemned to hide deep in the theatre's vaults, far from the world, and must desperately witness Christine's love for Raoul, since half of his face is that of a monster; and the young singer, despite her attraction to the artist's bewitching charm, prefers the light of the viscount De Chagny's youthful face. The Phantom dies of a broken heart because he cannot bear the pain of having found Beauty – the abstract Beauty which Leopardi speaks of – and having to surrender her to another who is less worthy of her.

The novel's drama is at once current and ancient as the world itself. Leroux concedes his Phantom the consolation of art, music and theatre, but these are not enough for the unhappy character when he meets the love that is denied to him because of his ugliness.

In the novel, ultimately, everyone remains unhappy: Erik, the Shadow, returns to the darkness and dies; Christine carries her burning passion for the mysterious artist deep in her heart, and Raoul must settle for having only a part of Christine's soul, which will forever remain devoted to the illusion of the theatre.

I conclude this thesis with Giacomo Leopardi's words, once again:

¹ Giacomo Leopardi, *Zibaldone*, Milano, Einaudi, 1993, p. 2118, Reflection 818-819 dated 5 March 1821.

Qual fallo mai, qual sì nefando eccesso
macchiommi anzi il natale, onde sì torvo
il ciel mi fosse e di fortuna il volto?
[...] i destinati eventi
move arcano consiglio. Arcano è tutto,
fuor che il nostro dolor [...].²

² Giacomo Leopardi, *Canti, L'ultimo canto di Saffo*, Milano, Einaudi, 1993, p. 86 (transl.: «What error, what wicked excess / stained me before birth, whence so grim / heaven and fortune were to me? / [...] arcane counsel moves / the destined events. All is unfathomable, / except our pain [...]).

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