CHAPTER FOUR

The Ghost of the Counterfeit

LEROUX’S Fantôme AND THE
CULTURAL WORK OF THE GOTHIC

By now, we should not be surprised that Gaston Leroux’s conflicted social vision and its disguised exposure of cultural “abjections” appear most fully in a novel deeply rooted in the “Gothic” tradition. Over the last two decades, the study of the Gothic as a mixed and unsettling mode in fiction, theater, film, and other media has increasingly revealed how the archaic spaces and haunting monsters that loom before us in performances we call Gothic provide methods of “othering” that have definite ideological and social, as well as psychological, functions. In the Gothic from the later eighteenth century on, as David Punter has shown, “the middle class” often does what we have just seen Leroux do in Le Fantôme: it “displaces the hidden violence of present social structures, conjures them up again as past, and falls promptly under their spell” with feelings of both fear and attraction towards the phantasms of what is displaced (Punter, 418). The Gothic, well before Leroux adopts it, enables a growing bourgeois hegemony to be both haunted by and distanced from the “hidden barbarities” that have helped make it possible (Punter, 419)—and hence the repressed uncertainties it feels about its own legitimacy (as in Abraham’s “phantom”)—by projecting such anomalies into the horrors of apparently old and alien specters, buildings, and crypts.

Indeed, as Anglo-European and American Gothic fiction progresses from The Castle of Otranto (1764), The Mysteries of Udolpho (1794), The Monk (1796), and Wieland (1798) to Frankenstein (1818), “The Fall of the House of Usher” (1839), Jane Eyre (1847), Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde (1886), The Picture of Dorian Gray (1890), Dracula (1897), and The Turn of the Screw (1898), it keeps confronting the middle-class reader, and its own class-shifting protagonists, with relocated, “othered,” monstrous, and/or ghost-like forms of the contradictions (and hence the potential dissolutions of identity) that threaten—and threaten to expose—the unstable and mixed foundations of the very cultural positions that authors, inhabitants, and readers of the “Gothic” want to secure for themselves. This encounter is constructed so that the middle-class subject can be kept from beholding these contradictions directly by the extreme strangeness
or ghostliness of their Gothic reincarnations (see Moretti, 104–108). Just as José Monléon has said, the Gothic and its derivations have enabled the bourgeoisie in the West to be “plagued by vague fears” in a way that lets that class “postpone” or at least cough “the unveling of naked truth,” particularly as the Gothic both spectralizes and “relegat[es] to the other side of an ideological barrier all the elements that [have] haunted [bourgeois] existence” (Monléon, 61). As part of this postponement, we now see, the Gothic has helped generate, especially in the French fantastique and frenétique from Nodier on, the depictions of mental levels and depths that characterize Freudian psychoanalysis, which has consequently become an effective lens for reading the Gothic, at least up to a point. Yet this veneer, for all its helpful linkage of archaic settings and specters to infantile impulses still seeking fulfillment in “uncanny” ways, arises out of and manifests a much broader cultural process whereby the Gothic struggles with all the kinds of “otherness that I[ie] next to” the supposed “core of the bourgeois world” (Monléon, 34).

By the end of the nineteenth century, in fact, the Gothic has gotten to the point, in a Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, a Dracula, or a Picture of Dorian Gray, in which the ghost/monster in a tale of terror persistently “condenses various racial and sexual threats to nation, capitalism, and the bourgeoisie [all] in one body” (Halberstam, 3). Convincing recent scholarship has shown us that the Gothic by 1900 “produces the negative of the human” for public consumption—particularly in ghostlike incarnations of collapsing sexual, racial, national, and class boundaries—so that “these novels make way for the [re]invention of [a cultural ‘norm’: the essential] human as white, male, middle class, and heterosexual” at a time when the certainty of this standard is being called into question by rapid changes in the urban centers of Europe and America (Halberstam, 22; see also Showalter, Tropp, and Hurley). The psychological “abjections” that take place in these works, where Gothic monsters do often embody the pre-Oedipal state of being half–inside and half–outside the mother that Kristeva emphasizes, therefore symbolize processes of cultural abjection too. They manifest “throwings off” of betwixt-and-between social, racial, and sexual conditions—or sometimes conditions of slippage between the human and the non-human (the states called “abhuman” in Hurley, 3–4)—onto a seemingly grotesque “other” who also is made to seem “thrown under” the normative human existence that the dominant classes keep striving to assert. When Le Fantôme de l’Opéra enacts this kind of abjection and well as the psychological kind, as we have already seen it do with Erik as its site of the “abject,” it is performing that process within a specific genre basted together from other genres that has always been torn between “high culture” and “low culture,” has been engaged in this kind of symbolic “technology” for over a century prior to 1910, and has become a tool for cultural abjection especially by the time Leroux takes it up. Insofar as he is fearfully and enticingly “sublime,” as Christine calls him, then, Leroux’s phantom reenacts the Gothic sublimity and sublimation of terror first defined by Edmund Burke and Horace Walpole in the 1750s and ’60s (see Morris and Mishra). He acts out, in the words of Žižek on the “sublime object” created by capitalist ideology, the simultaneous embodiment and concealment of a “traumatic social division” or “antagonism” at the heart of Western culture as it is distanced by those who wish to pretend that they are free of it and therefore transform it into an ominous but impenetrable depth, a fictional “otherness” far less threatening than the actual social conflicts and blurrings of cultural boundaries that are abjected in it.