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On Jerrold E. Hogle's *The Undergrounds of
The Phantom of the Opera: Sublimation and the
Gothic in Leroux's Novel and Its Progeny*

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TITLE

Jerrold E. Hogle, *The Undergrounds of The Phantom of the Opera: Sublimation and the Gothic in Leroux's Novel and Its Progeny*

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Jerrold E. Hogle, *The Undergrounds of The Phantom of the Opera: Sublimation and the Gothic in Leroux's Novel and Its Progeny*. New York: Palgrave, 2002. xv + 261pp. \$69.95. (Hdbk; ISBN: 0-312-29346-1).

Reviewed by

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"What accounts for the continuities *and* the discontinuities in the history of this shifting but ongoing phenomenon?" Jerrold Hogle asks of *The Phantom of the Opera* (xi). "What 'cultural work'--what symbolic shaping of the way we think in the West--does *The Phantom of the Opera* keep doing for us in its original form and in the wider variations on it?" (xi). Beginning with these questions, Hogle gives us a subtle, nuanced, and lucid excavation of the social and psychological undergrounds that Leroux's Erik and his "progeny" throughout the twentieth century inhabit. These undergrounds, Hogle argues, "turn out to be deep-seated anomalies in Western European life--crossings of boundaries between class, racial, gender, and other distinctions--that are quite basic to, but commonly shunted off as 'other' than, the social and individual construction of a rise middle-class 'identity'" (xii). Put another way, the Phantoms are "sublimations" of cultural anxieties, displaced into a monstrously other figure yet resonant

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and legible as that which white Western culture needs to solidify its sense of itself as a developed and healthy people.

What follows from this hypothesis is a remarkable exercise in new historicist criticism. Hogle devotes the first half of the book to historicizing Leroux's original novel of 1910, establishing its ghostly precursors in the Romantic Gothic as well as the cultural politics of Paris in the late nineteenth and earlier twentieth centuries. He emphasizes the history and architecture of the Paris Opera House, shooting this history through with reflections on the role of carnival in nineteenth-century France, the recurrence of the *danse macabre* in French art history, and the rise of psychology, sexology, and most particularly, psychoanalysis as a group of "human sciences" that configure the "human" at the *fin de siècle*. By placing Leroux's Erik within and against these discourses--where the Phantom produces another set of the continuities and discontinuities I noted above--Hogle demarcates a truly overdetermined figure who registers the fantasies and fears of a burgeoning middle class. Erik comes not just to represent but to *embody and perform* transgressions of boundaries regarding class, gender, sexuality, place, and episteme. Most importantly, Erik foregrounds what has now become Hogle's oft-cited "ghost of the counterfeit," a proto-modernist signifier that points to nothing but other signifiers, thus opening up a gothic abyss of meaning at its center. (More on this in a moment.) Yet, unlike so many other new historicist studies, Hogle is always careful not to claim too much or to let his enthusiasm for Erik's disruptiveness run away with him. He repeatedly reminds us that while the novel may present myriad threats to the stability of bourgeois identity, it "also finds ways, especially in its manner of *reportage*, to settle and seem to contain" these threats through self-conscious fictionality (36). As Hogle says, "the original phantom is an announcement of these anomalies [of middle-class ontology] in a way that makes them 'safe'" (75).

The second half of the book exports this pointedly French figure into the cultural politics and practices of twentieth-century Anglo-American phantomizing. (And the degree to which the book leaves behind twentieth-century France is quite startling. After the painstaking historicizing of its first half, Hogle's study leaves me wondering what sort of progeny France itself has bred.) Hogle takes us from the first film adaptation, the 1924-25 silent film starring Lon Cheney, through the 1943 remake, versions of the tale in the 1960s and 70s, and into the famous 1986 musical by Andrew Lloyd Webber. Throughout this half of the book Hogle again demonstrates his acumen in what is surely the book's greatest strength: an analysis of the politics of simulacra, whether that politics is located in the rise of industrial capitalism in the film industry (a phenomenon crucial to the 1925 film), Hollywood's reinvention of stage opera during the Second World War when only the most tired chestnuts could be imported from war-torn Europe (a difficulty that is central to the 1943 remake), *Roe vs. Wade* and the abortion debate in America (crucial for understanding the near-aborted title character in the 1987 *Phantom*), queer visibility and celebrity as they come to inform *Michael Jackson's Ghosts* (1996), and so on. In each case Hogle analyzes deftly how revisions to the early Leroux novel effectively mute (but do not silence) fundamental anxieties regarding middle-class life and entertainment, thus engaging *The Phantom of the Opera* and its audiences in a repetition compulsion that operatically proclaims its centrality as one of our dominant fictions.

While *The Undergrounds* is unabashedly materialist in its analysis, Hogle is particularly interested in what he calls the "psychoanalytic veneer" that envelops the novel and its filmic revisions through the twentieth century. After all, you don't need to be Freud to wonder about the psychological significance of a malign "underground" force who draws his decorating scheme from his mother's bedroom--and its proximity to her death chamber--so that he (Erik) can seduce a maternally suggestive and socially proper young woman into its corrupting orbit; nor about this virginal young woman who finds herself attracted to Erik because he reminds her of her own father. Hogle wants to take these psychoanalytic moments seriously and to use them as the central sub-argument of his book. Hence the psychologically inflected question that runs throughout this study: "What are the cultural or even political imperatives in the virtually simultaneous rise and development of psychoanalysis and *The Phantom of the Opera* in Western thinking, especially in Europe around the turn of the nineteenth into the twentieth century? What ideological and social purposes are served by both the psychoanalytic scheme and its use in Leroux's *Fantôme*?" (37).

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Historicizing the psychoanalytic in *The Phantom* offers Hogle his richest opportunity for elaborating a theory of gothic "sublimation," a term crucial to his subtitle. He centers on concepts such as "tender" (32 ff) and "debt" (115), drawing their emotional and affective connotations into their financial ones. By emphasizing the "debt" which the Paris Opera owes to the very forces it abjects--including the maternal, the low-class, the racially other--Hogle spins the site of the Opera and its phantasmatic inhabitant through Jean Baudrillard's theory of sublimation, in which the Freudian concept of sublimating desire melds with Baudrillard's post-structuralist theory of simulation. Simulation, the ubiquitous fact of counterfeit tender and empty signification, becomes the spectacle of repression's return (and here "repression" must be considered in both its social and its psychological aspects). What Hogle produces from this monstrous marriage is a theory that extends far beyond *The Phantom of the Opera* and its progeny and into the gothicisim of (post)modernity itself. As Hogle's own debts to Kristeva, Lacan, and Žižek make clear, Erik and his sons are avatars that allegorize the impossibility of subjectivity as it is constructed--and deconstructed--within capitalist models of exchange.

Readers of a certain bent may find themselves resisting Hogle in his relentless subordinating (sublimating?) of psychoanalysis to social materialism. For example, let's consider the status that "family" holds in Leroux's *Phantom*. Hogle smartly argues that the desired closeness between Christine and her father is the desire for a return to the pastoral, a pre-industrial France nostalgically invented by these post-Romantic visionaries. Such a move is symptomatic of the book's overall take on psychoanalysis: "Leroux's *Fantôme* . . . employs psychoanalytic motifs especially about father-daughter and mother-son relationships . . . but the novel does so in a way that reveals such notions as consequences of the cultural and ideological construction of the bourgeois family" (160-61). This is no doubt true, and such a constructionism aligns the novel with its Romantic precursors in convincing ways, but it does not explain *why* Christine and her father should want that closeness in the first place, *why* they need to imagine a space that will permit it. In other words, it does not explain the intensity of father-daughter desire that grounds its bourgeois fantasies. We could bring the same questions to Erik and his absent mother--indeed, Hogle often does, in his drawing on Kristeva as a primary theoretical model. One might easily argue here that the more oedipal desires between father and daughter or mother and son precede the fantasized social space (Christine's Eden, Erik's bedroom) that will allow those desires to be realized, rather than the other way around. Thus, when Hogle warns us against taking the energies of the novel "in a narrowly Freudian direction . . . if the reader chooses to stay at a 'mental' or just 'familiar' level" (100), we might push harder on what that "just 'familiar'" might be made to mean in this narrative.

While one might want to quibble with the psychoanalytic temporalities as they are represented in Leroux's novel, Hogle's study capitalizes on all those psychoanalytically based desires in his study of Leroux's progeny. Indeed, the book is brilliant in its suturing of the material and the psychological at particularly moments in twentieth-century Anglo-American history. In this way *The Undergrounds of The Phantom of the Opera* will be important not only as the definitive analysis of the cultural phenomenon that just won't seem to die, but as a model for scholars and students on the sophisticated ways that psychoanalysis can be historicized and history can be psychoanalyzed.

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