

10 Little boy in a turret

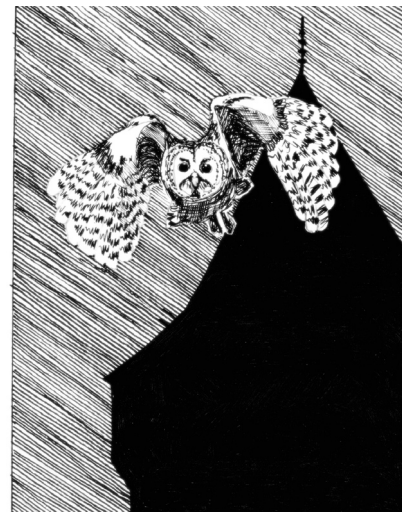
Climbing the staircase of the Tour du Chat today conjures up the image of the young Chateaubriand making this ascent to his lonely turret bedroom each night, far from other members of the family and servants, his vivid inventiveness peopling the darkness with mysterious beings.

We can easily envisage how evocative this aerie was to a young mind, especially, as he writes in his *Memoirs*, in times of dramatic storms. He was high above the mundane workings of the earth, at the mercy of the sights and sounds of the kingdom of air. And there was the thrilling awareness of ghosts, the wooden leg tapping its way down a stone staircase at night...

He recalls how from his 'cell' he could see only snatches of the sky and a few stars from his small window, where moon shadows of owls swooping from the towers passed across the curtains. He imagined the voice of the castle as the wind raced along corridors or roared from the depths. His door would rattle violently all of a sudden, fall silent and then that throaty noise again... No wonder the possibilities of ghosts seemed real.

Fears must be confronted in these circumstances. His father thought his son's isolation in the comfortless

conditions of the tower was character-building, and François-René later wrote that the experience had given him courage and stimulated his imagination.



Twenty years later, as an exile in London, when he was trapped in Westminster Abbey overnight, Chateaubriand recalls the same sensations as winter nights in the tower of Combourg: anxiety mixed with pleasure, listening to the wind play in the fabric of the building.