William Harrison Ainsworth's *Tower of London*: A Book of Stone

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When Walter Scott died in 1832, the question of his succession within the publishing market arose: having published at least one historical novel annually since 1814, conquering – if not creating – a considerable readership, he left a vacant space for new authors who might benefit from the contemporary enthusiasm for historical fiction.[1] While the position of successful writer would soon be occupied by a novelist not exclusively defined by historical fiction–Charles Dickens–the 1830s and early 1840s marked a period of transition and literary experimentation, during which the Scottian model gradually transformed.[2] The author who most successfully managed to slip into the breach opened by Walter Scott was undoubtedly William Harrison Ainsworth, whose novel *Rookwood* achieved remarkable commercial success in 1834.[3] Ainsworth developed an effective novelistic technique that combined historical elements linking him to the Scottian heritage, gothic atmosphere and incidents, and an interest in the criminal underworld, exemplified by his first two major successes, *Rookwood* and *Jack Sheppard*. This hybrid approach, blending historical romance, Newgate novel, and gothic fiction,

1 William St Clair estimates that in the United Kingdom during the first half of the 19th century, the author of the *Waverley novels* sold more books than all other novelists of his time combined. William St Clair, *The Reading Nation in the Romantic Period*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2004, p. 221.

2 Brian Hamnett, *The Historical Novel in Nineteenth-Century Europe. Representations of Reality in History and Fiction*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2011, pp. 173-181.

3 Stephen James Carver, *The Life and Works of the Lancashire Novelist William Harrison Ainsworth* (1805-1882), Lewiston (N.Y.), the Edwin Mellen Press, "Studies in British Literature", 2003, pp. 130-170; Stephen James Carver, *The Author Who Outsold Dickens: The Life and Work of W. H. Ainsworth*, Barnsley, Pen & Sword History, 2020, pp. 55-62.

was hardly exceptional in the context of the 1830s, a decade of extensive literary recomposition.[4] For Ainsworth, it became a well-oiled machine that captivated the public and enabled him to maintain a high rate of production at the turn of the 1830s and 1840s.

William Harrison Ainsworth's novels are almost exclusively set in urban environments, and the Manchester-born author, who moved to London at the age of twenty in 1824, gives special attention to the capital city. His works form what might be termed a London cycle, with individual novels complementing and responding to one another. Ainsworth depicts the metropolis across various historical periods, showing a marked preference for the Tudor era, which provides ample playground for his fascination with conspiracies, underground tunnels, secret passages, and torture chambers. His approach to urban description operates on two complementary levels: firstly, he seeks to create picturesque images of the historic city, enhanced by the extensive illustrations that frequently accompany his texts; secondly, he imbues his novels with an explicit didactic purpose, using them as vehicles for disseminating national history. This explains why national monuments–which were coming to be regarded as such during the first half of the nineteenth century[5]–occupy a central place in the urban settings of his historical novels: the Tower of London, St Paul's Cathedral, and Windsor Castle. Rather than serving as mere backdrop or setting, these monuments function as the matrix of some of his novels, whose plots appear to develop in service of architectural description. In this regard, alongside the Scottian influence already mentioned, one must consider that of Victor Hugo and *Notre-Dame de Paris*, published a few years earlier in 1831:[6] monuments are books of stone that both historian and novelist can read and help others to read.

The novel that forms the focus of this article, explicitly titled *The Tower of London*, originated from an abandoned project by Ainsworth in 1836, undertaken in collaboration with the illustrator George Cruikshank. The aim was to produce a series of narratives comparing, through both text and images, the ancient and modern elements of London, particularly its most famous monuments. Although this project, under the general title *The Lions of London*, remained incomplete, it gave rise to two of the writer's novelistic successes: *The Tower of London*, published in 1840 by the London publisher Bentley, which chronicles the brief reign of Lady Jane Grey and concludes with her

4 Tom Bragg, *Space and Narrative in the Nineteenth-Century British Historical Novel*, London, Routledge, 2016, p. 102.

5 Anne-Marie Thiesse, *La Création des identités nationales. Europe XVIII^e-XX^e siècle*, [1999], Paris, Seuil, Points Histoire, 2001, pp. 146-149.

6 The links between the two novels have been studied by Richard Maxwell, "City Life and the Novel: Hugo, Ainsworth, Dickens", *Comparative Literature*, 30/2, Spring 1978, pp. 157-171.

execution on 12th February 1554; and *Old Saint Paul's*, published the following year, which centres its plot on the disasters that struck London in 1665 and 1666 – the Great Plague and the Great Fire. While the second novel offers a fairly broad vision of London whose streets are traversed by the colourful characters of the narrative, the first makes the Tower of London virtually its sole setting. The fortress enables Ainsworth to embody national history and exploit the dual themes of temporal otherness and national continuity.

National Ambitions

William Harrison Ainsworth's didactic ambition is more explicit in the preface to *The Tower of London* than in any of his other historical novels. The opening two paragraphs state:

> It has been, for years, the cherished wish of the writer of the following pages, to make the Tower of London–the proudest monument of antiquity, considered with reference to its historical associations, which this country or any other possesses,–the groundwork of a Romance; and it was no slight satisfaction to him, that circumstances, at length, enabled him to carry into effect his favourite project, in conjunction with the inimitable Artist, whose designs accompany the work.
>
> Desirous of exhibiting the Tower in its triple light of a palace, a prison, and a fortress, the Author has shaped his story with reference to that end; and he has also endeavoured to contrive such a series of incidents as should naturally introduce every relic of the old pile,–its towers, chapels, halls, chambers, gateways, arches, and drawbridges–so that no part of it should remain un-illustrated.[7]

The artist mentioned at the end of the first paragraph is none other than George Cruikshank, creator of the numerous engravings in the 1840 first edition, who probably played a significant role in the actual composition of the novel.[8] The second paragraph illuminates the compositional method employed: rather than using the fortress as a setting for historical events, Ainsworth chooses to start from this highly symbolic location to select and arrange the narrated events, thereby making *The Tower of London* an architectural historical novel – if one may propose this new category – and

7 William Harrison Ainsworth, *The Tower of London. A Historical Romance*, London, R. Bentley, 1840, p. iii-ix. This first edition is available online on the Project Gutenberg website (link to the Gutenberg website, accessed 2 July 2026), and on Internet Archive (link to the Internet Archive, accessed 2 July 2026).

8 Rosemary Mitchell, *Picturing the Past: English History in Text and Image*, 1830-1870, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2000, p. 103.

setting himself the objective of providing as comprehensive a description as possible.

Ainsworth continues the preface by formulating two wishes that he hopes his novel will help to realise: firstly, that certain areas of the fortress, particularly important from a historical perspective but hitherto closed to the public, might be made accessible in the national interest: "They are the property of the nation, and should be open to national inspection";[9] and secondly, that the Tower of London should receive all the attention and care it deserves: "It is not possible to restore the Tower to its pristine grandeur. But it *is* possible to prevent further mutilation and desecration".[10] One might think here of the similar demands inscribed by Victor Hugo in *Notre-Dame de Paris*, whose historical fiction emphasises the urgency of contemporary preservation of the national monument against the damage it was suffering.[11]

Exhaustive Descriptions

As one progresses through the novel, it becomes apparent that the monument's preservation has in a sense already been accomplished by the novel itself, which, as announced in the preface, offers detailed descriptions of every part, every corner of the fortress: all its towers, the various interior courtyards and, naturally, the countless underground passages and secret tunnels, perfectly suited to accommodate prisoners, executioners and other gallows-fodder, whilst reinforcing the gothic atmosphere of the novel. The narrative order appears dependent on the architecture itself, and the thread of the story follows the characters through a historical plot and several fictional sub-plots as much as it does a spatial itinerary – like a gamebook whose objective would be, before the unfortunate Jane Grey's head falls, to have wandered through the entire fortress.

Moreover, the descriptions are not provided solely from the narrator's perspective: whilst the narrative voice, which delights in guiding readers through the maze of chambers, courtyards and underground passages, is responsible for most of them, some are introduced within the historical plot itself, through the gaze of historical characters. One can take as an

9 William Harrison Ainsworth, *op. cit.*, p. v.

10 *Ibid.*

11 Victor Hugo, Notre-Dame de Paris, Paris, Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1975, p. 106: "*si belle qu'elle se soit conservée en vieillissant, il est difficile de ne pas soupirer, de ne pas s'indigner devant les dégradations, les mutilations sans nombre que simultanément le temps et les hommes ont fait subir au vénérable monument*". This lament finds its explicit counterpart, in the form of indignation, in the article "*Guerre aux démolisseurs*" that Victor Hugo published in the *Revue des Deux Mondes* (13th March 1832).

example Jane Grey's view of St John's Chapel in the White Tower, which is precisely one of the places that Ainsworth calls for opening to the public in the preface. The young queen descends there alone and gives free rein to her thoughts.

> For some time, she was lost in admiration of this beautiful structure, which, in its style of architecture–the purest Norman–is without an equal. She counted its twelve massive and circular stone pillars, noted their various ornaments and mouldings, and admired their grandeur and simplicity. Returning to the northern aisle, she glanced at its vaulted roof, and was enraptured at the beautiful effect produced by the interweaving arches.[12]

This ephemeral queen's gaze serves as a pretext for an admiring description of the chapel, whose precision has something artificial about it and which is complemented in the following chapter by a description provided by the narrative voice. This dual portrayal allows the novel to reinforce the credibility of its historical elements by bringing together several temporal layers, following an established convention of the historical novel. To the chapel contemplated by Jane Grey in the narrative present is added an earlier survey, as described in John Stow's chronicle quoted in the text,[13] and a more recent assessment, made in the present of writing and marked by disappearance or deterioration.

> Already described as one of the most perfect specimens of Norman ecclesiastical architecture, this venerable structure, once used as a place of private worship by the old monarchs of England, and now as a receptacle for Chancery proceedings, has, from its situation in the heart of the White Tower, preserved, in an almost unequalled state, its original freshness and beauty; and, except that its floors are encumbered with cases, and its walls of Caen stone disfigured by a thick coat of white plaster, it is now much in the same state that it was at the period under consideration.[14]

Here, unlike other parts of the fortress that have disappeared entirely, the deterioration remains superficial, consisting merely of the covering of the chapel walls with a thick layer of plaster. The confrontation between past and present condition generally favours a certain nostalgia for the past–though one cannot read into this any more developed ideological stance.[15]

12 William Harrison Ainsworth, *op. cit.*, p. 32.
13 *Ibid.*, p. 36.
14 *Ibid.*
15 Rosemary Mitchell, *op. cit.*, pp. 97-99.

The architectural descriptions rely heavily on unsigned vignettes, and full-page illustrations by George Cruikshank, which introduce an alternation between different temporal layers. One can return to the example of St John's Chapel in the White Tower, described again in Book ii when the Duke of Northumberland renounces his Protestant faith there in the hope, which proves vain, of escaping execution.[16] The chapter is then accompanied by two images: the first is a vignette showing the chapel's contemporary state, as readers might see it if it were accessible to them–empty, stripped of its ornaments; the second, by George Cruikshank, depicts it as it appears in the plot, as a place teeming with life where history is being made. The difference between the two temporal layers is also emphasised by the typography of the captions: roman type for the modern era, gothic script for the historical period.

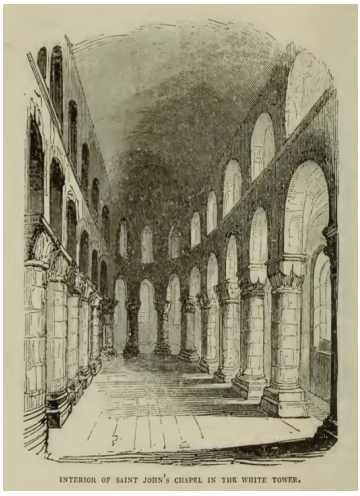

Figure 1. *"Interior of Saint John's Chapel in the White Tower", William Harrison Ainsworth, The Tower of London, Book II, chapter VI, London, R. Bentley, 1840, p. 152.*
[Alternative text: Interior of the chapel with a barrel vault and two rows of arcades supported by sturdy stone columns.]

Figure 2. *George Cruikshank, "The Duke of Northumberland Renouncing the Protestant Religion", William Harrison Ainsworth, The Tower of London, Book II, chapter VI, London, R. Bentley, 1840, [pp. 152-153].*
[Alternative text: Inside the chapel, the Duke is kneeling before the bishop of Winchester seated at an altar adorned with candles and a crucifix. The congregation is composed of laypeople and clergymen on the left, and a procession of choirboys on the right.]

16 William Harrison Ainsworth, *op. cit.*, Book II, chapter VI, pp. 149-153.

Temporal layering

Moreover, the architectural description of places is closely linked to the events that have occurred there: starting from the architecture, one invariably arrives at historical memory, perceived in ghostly fashion as still inhabiting the places where events unfolded. In this regard, the characters' perspective plays an even greater role than that of the narrator: they anchor themselves in their own present by contemplating past events. For example, when the Spanish ambassador Simon Renard, the French ambassador, and the Earl of Pembroke meet to foment a plot against the newly crowned Jane Grey, the latter indicates to the ambassadors the site of execution of two previous queens:

> As they proceeded across the Tower-green, the Earl of Pembroke paused at a little distance from the chapel, and pointing to a square patch of ground, edged by a border of white stones, and completely destitute of herbage, said–"Two Queens have perished here. On this spot stood the scaffolds of Anne Boleyn and Catherine Howard."
> "And ere long a third shall be added to their number," observed Renard, gloomily.[17]

Such a device serves both the novel's gothic atmosphere, which includes numerous ghostly figures evoking the condemned or predicting imminent bloody death, and its historical depth, by inviting readers to traverse the locations simultaneously in their own present and in the characters' present in order to contemplate a shared past.

The juxtaposition of different temporal layers through the perception of place–a recurring device in historical novels following the Scottian model and beyond–constitutes, in this Ainsworth novel, the very foundation of the relationship to History. The generic indication provided by the subtitle on the title page, "A historical romance," is complemented by the concluding formulas of the two volumes:

> Thus far the first book of the chronicle of the Tower of London.[18]
> Thus ends the chronicle of the Tower of London.[19]

The term "chronicle," hardly original in a historical novel, is remarkable for its chosen complement: these are not the chronicles of a people or territory,

17 William Harrison Ainsworth, *op. cit.*, p. 69.
18 *Ibid.*, p. 112.
19 *Ibid.*, p. 423.

but those of an architectural construction, of a single monument that embodies the historical continuity of the nation.

Indeed, the three epochs inscribed in stone create the perception, both visual and intellectual, of a continuous historical flow within which the historical novel is situated. A digressive chapter in the second volume, which narrates the history of the Tower of London from its origins until the 1820s, serves as its explicit vehicle. While the pretext is provided by a character–the Spanish ambassador Simon Renard, to whom one of the warders shows the view from the top of the White Tower–the didactic objective of the description is transparent: to describe the history of a monument that embodies English History itself.

> "There you behold the Tower of London," said Winwike, pointing downwards.
> "And there I read the history of England," replied Renard.
> "If it is written in those towers it is a dark and bloody history," replied the warder–"and yet your worship says truly. The building on which we stand, and those around us, are the best chronicles of our country. I can recount to your worship their foundation, and the chief events that have happened within them, if you are disposed to listen to me."[20]

This didactic introduction is ultimately taken over by the narrator in the following chapter, who shows complete agreement with his characters: the "chronicle of the Tower of London" is the chronicle of England itself. It is precisely as a national monument, as an embodiment of national History, that readers are invited to consider the Tower, both in the past and in the present.

Address to the Modern Visitor

Text and images very concretely encourage readers to compare their own experience of the Tower of London with that presented in the novel: they are invited not only to visualise the history they have learned in textual form at school, but also to confront these significant places directly. William Harrison Ainsworth's novel takes on, in certain respects, the appearance of a tourist guide, whose production developed precisely during this period, with the launch of the most famous collections by John Murray in England and Karl Baedeker in Germany:[21] through its concern for exhaustiveness and didactic presentation of all the historical and architectural aspects of the

20 *Ibid*., p. 128.
21 Barbara Schaff, "Travel Guides", Eric G. E., Zuelow, Kevin J., James, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Tourism History*, Oxford, Oxford Handbooks, 2022, pp. 321-338.

fortress, through its enthusiasm intended to be contagious for some of the architectural beauties described, and even through certain formulations. Let us take again as an example the panorama observed by Simon Renard from the summit of the White Tower:

> While the others returned to the Green, Renard lingered for an instant to contemplate the White Tower, which is seen perhaps to greater advantage from this point of view than from any other in the fortress. And as it is in most respects unchanged, – excepting such repairs as time has rendered necessary, and some alterations in the doorways and windows, to be noted hereafter, – the modern visitor to this spot may, if he pleases, behold it in much the same state that it appeared to the plotting Spanish ambassador.[22]

The explicit invitation to visit, addressed to the "modern visitor," is supported by formulations close to the tone of tourist guides: the nuance "perhaps," the announcement of later development "to be noted hereafter," the elegantly inciting comment "if he pleases"... Better still than a simple descriptive guide, the historical novel – which we have already compared to a gamebook – here offers its readers a role-playing game, since they are invited to realise that they are treading in Simon Renard's footsteps and can then imagine themselves as Machiavellian plotters like the cunning diplomat.

In this too, Ainsworth proves himself heir to the *Waverley novels*, whose influence on the development of tourism is well known, in Scotland and more broadly throughout the United Kingdom,[23] with this difference: Scott does not explicitly encourage this practice whilst Ainsworth makes it an avowed objective of his narratives.[24] Let us recall that the projected series with Cruikshank, *The Lions of London*, from which the novel emerged, had been conceived as a travel guide to past and present London. Indeed, the commercial success that was *The Tower of London* did have an impact on the development and democratisation of national tourism, within the broader context of the dissemination to a wide public of romantic historiography's theses,[25] but also, as historian John Baxendale has shown, on the museum scenography of the Tower itself, whose "gothic" dimension was increasingly emphasised.[26]

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22 William Harrison Ainsworth, *op. cit.*, p. 70.

23 Alastair Durie, "'Scotland is Scott-Land': Scott and the Development of Tourism", Murray Pittock, ed., *The Reception of Sir Walter Scott in Europe*, London, Continuum, 2006, pp. 313-322.

24 Tom Bragg, *op. cit.*, p. 98.

25 Rosemary Mitchell, *op. cit.*, pp. 1-19.

26 John Baxendale, "Royalty, Romance and Recreation: The Construction of the Past and the Origins of Royal Tourism in Nineteenth-Century Britain", *Cultural and Social History*,

Hybrid Writing: Characters and Places

Before concluding, it is worth emphasising the tension that exists between the choice to describe with precision some of England's most famous locations, which readers are invited to visit or revisit and compare, and the often unbridled imagination of the various plots, marked by colourful figures beyond all plausibility. This hybridity, which was heavily criticised in the 20th century and contributed to almost entirely erasing the novelist from literary history – he was then perceived as a second-rate author producing melodramatic effects against cardboard historical backdrops – seems to us illuminated by the differentiated treatment given to characters and places in his historical novels.

The former, whether historical or fictional, serve primarily to depict the past: the novelist dwells extensively on costumes, their fabrics, cuts, and colours, drawing inspiration from period sources and representations – just as George Cruikshank does for his illustrations. Portraits of historical characters are supported by citations from direct or indirect sources, which situate them within verifiable historical knowledge. Fictional or semi-fictional characters, meanwhile, connect to History as types representing a picturesque vision of the past and contribute to the sometimes hyperbolic fantasy of the intertwined plots and sub-plots. In *The Tower of London*, these include a dwarf named Xit whose clumsiness is inversely proportional to his pretensions, three giants valiantly defending the fortress against all betrayals, executioners whose marginal existence unfolds in the Tower's underground passages, and a fanatical preacher whose horrible execution by fire is minutely described. Just as Roland Barthes speaks of an "*effet de réel*,"[27] one might speak here of an "*effet de passé*" to characterise the treatment of characters.[28] They anchor the narrative in a vanished era, whether the reality of national History or the fantasy of a picturesque past: it matters little then whether the plots or even the characters are plausible, provided they give the sought-after impression of temporal distance.

By contrast, although the narrative voice often laments the degradation or disappearance of architectural treasures, it nonetheless establishes a constant parallel with the present. The contemporary visitor will no longer find jester or executioner when visiting the Tower of London, but the fortress itself has been sufficiently preserved for one to perceive the kinship between

4/3, 2007, p. 324.

27 Roland Barthes, « L'effet de réel », *Communications*, 1968, 11, pp. 84-89.

28 On this subject, I refer to my study: *Figures de marginaux dans le roman historique européen* (1814-1836), Paris, Classiques Garnier, 2023, pp. 283-284.

novel and reality. The novel's opening lines themselves compare the two states of the city:

> On the 10th of July, 1553, about two hours after noon, a loud discharge of ordnance burst from the turrets of Durham House, then the residence of the Duke of Northumberland, grand-master of the realm, and occupying the site of the modern range of buildings, known as the Adelphi…[29]

This opening sentence, which then enumerates the repetition of the signal from building to building – the first pretext for an architectural enumeration – seems to function as an instruction manual for the entire novel, where places will be the "*effets de présent*" within historical representation. The characters, "*effets de passé*" sometimes historical and sometimes fantastical, are situated within temporal continuity through the permanence of stone.

In conclusion, William Harrison Ainsworth's *The Tower of London* is undoubtedly the novel in his London cycle that most explicitly displays its architectural matrix whilst having a genuine dual impact on both the monument's preservation and its tourist appeal. Historical narrative paradoxically becomes, in this 1840 novel, the backdrop for an architectural presentation, the pretext for true commemoration – that of stone, far more than that of historical figures – although the novel is not devoid of historical ambitions, for instance in its partial rehabilitation of Queen Mary. It is also for this reason that the Tower is populated not only by historical characters, from the proud Duke of Northumberland seeking to usurp power to the solemn Jane Grey preparing for her tragic fate, but also by a motley crowd of fictional and semi-fictional figures. The Tower is also celebrated in playful fashion, reappearing in various *mises en abyme* within the novel, notably as the splendid centrepiece of a banquet or as a masquerade costume worn by one of the giants[30] – perhaps prefiguring the proliferation of tourist souvenirs in an era of burgeoning tourism development. The challenge of William Harrison Ainsworth's novel is not, as often with Walter Scott, to conceptualise historical causality, but simply to restore life, through an aesthetic founded on contrast, to a fascinating place that embodies national continuity whilst allowing one to dream of temporal otherness.

29 William Harrison Ainsworth, *op. cit.*, p. 1.
30 William Harrison Ainsworth, *op. cit.*, p. 81 and pp. 206-207.