

**Featured poet: Lisa Gorton**



*Photo: Nicholas Walton-Healy*

*Transnational Literature* is delighted to be featuring the work of Lisa Gorton, an exceptional poet who has won many auspicious literary awards for her achievements. Lisa lives in Melbourne and writes poetry, fiction and essays. Her two most recent publications, both from Giramondo, are the poetry collection *Hotel Hyperion* and a novel, *The Life of Houses*. Her awards include the Victorian Premier's Prize for Poetry, the NSW People's Choice Award and Prime Minister's Prize for fiction, and the Philip Hodgins Memorial Medal.

For this issue of *Transnational Literature*, Lisa has reimagined Rimbaud's 'Villes', relating them to the dioramas and magic lantern slides popular at the time the poems were written. Her notes on the process are a work of art in themselves, overlaying a chiaroscuro of historical images to create a three dimensional understanding of the poetic artistry involved. When read alongside Marie de Quartrebarbes' selection of French poetry, it's possible to see a direct link between Rimbaud's 19<sup>th</sup> century poems and the work of the chosen contemporary French poets who have created their own versions of 'magic lantern slides'.

**ON TRANSLATING RIMBAUD'S 'VILLES' / MAGIC LANTERN SLIDES**

These are not so much translations as poems projected onto Rimbaud's 'Villes I' and 'Villes II' to cast light on his interest in

Lisa Gorton. 'Introduction: On Translating Rimbaud's "Villes" / Magic Lantern Slides'.  
*Transnational Literature* Vol.10 no.2, May 2018.  
<http://fhrc.flinders.edu.au/transnational/home.html>

imperial panoramas—a now-forgotten technology, in fragments scattered amongst his images—

In 1781, William Beckford, ‘the richest commoner in England’, held a voluptuous festival at his inherited mansion, Fonthill Splendens—Beckford’s wealth derived from slave-worked sugar plantations in Jamaica— For his coming of age, Beckford commissioned Philip de Louthembourg to fill Splendens for three days with magical lighting effects—

Philippe de Louthembourg, at his *Eidophusikon* in Leicester Square, ran a phantasmagoric theatre of moving images—a machinery of lantern projections, winding backscreens, transparencies, clockwork automata, oscillating lights and sound effects, pulleys, mirrors on rails, adding ‘motion to resemblance’— Dawn over the Thames, noon in Tangier, sunset over the Bay of Naples, the moon rising over the Mediterranean, a shipwreck off the Atlantic coast—

The artist WH Pyne saw de Louthembourg’s show of Milton’s Pandemonium—‘Here, in the foreground of a vista, stretching an immeasurable length between mountains, ignited from their bases to their lofty summits, with many coloured flame a chaotic mass rose in dark majesty, which gradually assumed form until it stood, the interior of a vast temple, bright as molten brass, composed of unconsuming and unquenching fire’—and mechanical demons climbed out of its burning lake—

De Quincey’s elder brother William was sent to London as de Louthembourg’s apprentice— He died of typhoid in de Louthembourg’s care— Baudelaire, introducing his version of *Les paradis artificiels*, compared someone seeking to create a narcotic paradise with that maniac who would replace solid walls and living gardens with panoramas, painted on a screen and hung on rails—

For Beckford’s three-day festival, in a winter storm, de Louthembourg remade Splendens as a ‘vaulted labyrinth’—‘the line of apartments being infinite were all vaulted’—a palace of vanishing points, opening out from a staircase which vanished into darkness, and, when you looked up, was lost in vapour—

Beckford's father had befriended Piranesi— He was the first in England to collect Piranesi's work— At the age of ten, William Beckford inherited his fortune— When Beckford, self-exiled to Venice, Piranesi's first city, first saw its Bridge of Sighs, he noted in his diary—'a marble bridge—joins the highest part of the prisons to the secret galleries of the palace from whence criminals are conducted over the arch to a cruel and mysterious death'— He found himself drawing 'chasms and subterranean hollows, with chains, racks, wheels & dreadful engines, in the style of Piranesi'—

Mallarmé wrote the preface to a French edition of Beckford's 1786 novel *Vathek, An Arabian Tale*— Beckford, who said he wrote the novel over three days and two nights, claimed to have copied it from his memory of that voluptuous festival— 'The glowing haze—the endless intricacy of the vaulted labyrinth produced an effect so bewildering that it became impossible for anyone to define exactly where at the moment he was'— A prose of sudden, suspended, vanishing images—

Baudelaire wrote, 'I would rather return to the Dioramas, whose brutal and enormous magic has the power to impose on me with useful illusions'— 'Do we show the public,' he had asked, 'the mechanism behind our effects?— All the rags, the paint, the pulleys, the chains'\*—

Panoramas, dioramas, nocturnoramas— Through a dark tunnel, upstairs to a platform enclosed by a balustrade— into a self-closed, apparently endless realm— 'Dawn— the contour of mountains—of houses—a kitchen stove slowly flaming up—a forge— illuminated night—a ship that is anchored in the foreground of a harbour'—an avalanche in the lovely mountains†—battles, genre scenes, mythologies— An apparatus that could enfold prospects of empire inside a windowless room— Between each scene a bell rang—

---

\* Charles Baudelaire, 'In the notes he left for a preface to a projected edition of *Les Fleurs du mal*,' mentioned in Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, translated by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin, the Belknap Press, Harvard, 2002.

† Walter Benjamin *The Arcades Project* page 690, citing 'Übersetzer von Daguerres Schrift über seine beiden Erfindungen (1839)' in Dolf Sternberger, 'Das wunderbare Licht: Zum 150 Geburtstag Daguerres', *Frankfurter Zeitung* <21>, November 1937.

In 'Villes', Rimbaud showed the public these stairs, platforms, balustrades, abyss, a short bridge up to the second story, air made of light, a canvas unrolling with pulleys and ropes—as if to reveal the mechanism of an empire's mirror-tricks—