



Victor Burgin: Nietzsche's Paris

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In Victor Burgin's video installation *Nietzsche's Paris*, the melancholy of the excluded party in a love triangle pervades a garden of learning, writes Jeremy Melvin. Burgin weaves together two paradigmatic concepts through the specific instance of an episode in Nietzsche's life.

During much of 1882 Nietzsche was in love with Lou Salome, a relationship forged through philosophical discussions in the forest of Tannenbaum, but complicated by Salome's attachment to Paul Ree.

For a short time it seemed that a menage a trois in Paris would satisfy all parties. Suggestively Salome wrote: 'I saw a pleasant study filled with books and flowers, between two bedrooms, and, coming and going amongst us, comrades in thought forming an intellectual circle at once serious and gay.'

But she abruptly left Leipzig with Ree, leaving Nietzsche in confusion. Three years later he would ask: 'Supposing truth to be a woman - what? Is the suspicion not well founded that all philosophers, when they have been dogmatists, have had little understanding of women? That the gruesome earnestness, the clumsy importunity with which they have hitherto been in the habit of approaching truth have been inept and improper means for winning a wench?'

It is the Nietzsche who germinates such thoughts that interests Burgin. A stay in Weimar where Nietzsche died 100 years ago suggested the subject to him: the tantalising relationship between Nietzsche and Paris became a source of speculation.

Even if Nietzsche had actually visited Paris - which he never did - he would have made an unlikely flaneur; it's hard to imagine him, tortoise on a lead, strolling through the arcades. Burgin, not a realist, circumvents this by reference to Nietzsche's restlessness for an ideal domicile, and by using contemporary Paris. Where, after all, would Nietzsche have gone when he failed to find his beloved but the Bibliotheque de France?

There Burgin's piece begins. A video camera takes a panoptical view from the library's podium, a wistful gaze over the roofs of Paris (see above).

CRISTIN TIERNEY

Nothing moves other than the eye. De Chirico-like, the smoke from a power station hangs still in the air; there are no people (removed by technical sleight of hand); and the waves are frozen, as if in a futile attempt to forestall life's tragic end. Even the plants, confined in their frames, add to the sense of stifling restriction. It all begins to suggest a temporarily arrested descent into madness.

Relief only comes in heart-rending extracts from Handel operas, and brief colour shots of a prim matron in a Victorian crinoline sitting on a park bench. Is she Nietzsche's less than praiseworthy sister or a middle-aged, regretful Lou?

Madness, too, connects Nietzsche with the library. If Nietzsche upended European philosophy, so Perrault upends, literally, the library, with books in glass towers rising above an enclosed reading area. But it is also a repository of knowledge, that one leitmotif of optimism in Western thought - optimistic, at least, until Nietzsche and particularly his work as it was coerced into service after his death. And the antipathy between learning and love lies at the heart of one of Europe's most pervading legends, Faust.

So Burgin's work tugs at the sinews of Western culture: love, madness, learning and cities. No wonder that rationalists suspect it. As Jeeves consoled Bertie Wooster over the ending of his betrothal to Lady Florence Cray: 'I have it from her ladyship's own maid. . . that it was her intention to start you almost immediately on Nietzsche. You would not enjoy Nietzsche, sir. He is fundamentally unsound.'

Jeremy Melvin is a writer and teacher