

Theatre as Creative Failure: Simone Weil's *Venise sauvée* Revisited

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Abstract

Simone Weil's dramatic criticism and dramatic writing offer a way of reconceptualising what it means to engage critically under fascist censorship. This essay explores her closet drama *Venise sauvée* as an example of her embrace of writing political resistance in a time when classical theatre criticism was absent and artistic resistance had been made futile. Simone Weil called for an awakening in the audience to acknowledge their responsibility of how they let theatre shape their way of thinking about war. I demonstrate that Weilian theatre theory does not only consider the stage an object to be analysed, but also the very subject through whose lenses one can undertake a critical reshaping of ways to interpret the world. In this dramatic view on WW2 Weil exhibits the artistic voices of resistance in occupied France as caught in its own echo chambers and thus no longer perceptible in society. The essay reads her unfinished historical tragedy *Venise sauvée* and its central motif of the silenced voice of resistance as implicit warning to the contemporary *théâtre résistant* to become the agent of its own irrelevance. I propose that beyond this warning there lies a theory of deconstructing propaganda theatre by unleashing the creative power of theatre's failure, namely via a distortion of the socially synchronized *inner* and *outer* stage of the audience.

Theatre Has Failed

By 1940, writer and philosopher Simone Weil¹ (1909-1943) had become convinced that theatre and theatre criticism in Nazi occupied France had

¹ Born as daughter of a Jewish doctor in 1909, Weil completed an elitist education in philosophy in Paris in 1931. She became part of the labor movement and attempted to personally experience the precarious social conditions of the lower classes: In 1934/35, she worked in major French factories, like Renault, and dissected the mechanisms of the contagious power of ideology and class oppression. In the course of the collapse of leftist politics in Europe in the early 1930s, the experiences in the factories and a failed participation in the Spanish Civil War in 1936, Weil turned to religious concepts. Via Casablanca and New York, Weil managed to reach London in 1942 with the intent of serving as a frontline nurse for France Libre. When denied she starved herself and died of heart failure in Ashford in August 1943.

failed. She was aware that performances had become a powerful channel for capturing the public eye and that the traditional ‘critical’ function of the theatre and theatre criticism had been abandoned. Recognized critics had gone into exile or risked imprisonment and execution, while newly installed conformist ‘critics’ took over the media landscape of Nazi Germany and its occupied territories. By a 1936 decree of Nazi Propaganda Minister Joseph Goebbels all ‘disgraced’ critics had been replaced by new conformist ‘journalists’ called *art-report writers*, who largely wrote in favour of and with the goal of advancing the will of the regime (cf. Goebbels 30). Consequently, Weil detached herself from the contemporary theatre culture of the Fascist regimes and observed developments in (not yet occupied) France tentatively and with great concern (cf. Pétrement 435). One rare example of Weil’s sentiment is documented in a letter from her trip to Rome in 1937 (then under fascist rule). Commenting ironically on a performance she attended in the Colosseum, she mused that it was ‘a well-acted play, quite good and interesting from the standpoint of the attitude of the regime’² (transl. from French Pétrement 426).

Although not a theatre critic herself, Weil regularly attended performances in Paris and other European cities, like Berlin, Rome, or Zurich. She also wrote many private reviews of theatrical and operatic performances throughout her life, which she sent frequently to family and friends. One of the few still existing reviews is a letter she wrote to the Swiss doctor and connoisseur of the Parisian art scene Jean Posternak after visiting a performance in Paris in 1937. In a cynical tone she writes about her regret of not having a theatrical career herself:

You will have noticed that the Electra of Giraudoux is *not* my Electra. (Yet who will give birth to her?) ... Why don’t I have countless existences that I needed to dedicate this one to theatre?³ (transl. from French Pétrement 435-6, emphasis in original)

2 ‘Pièce bien jouée, assez bonne (et intéressante du point de vue de l’esprit du régime)’

3 ‘Comme vous le remarquez, l’Électre de Giraudoux n’est pas la mienne. (Celle-là, qui la mettra au jour ?) ... Que n’ai-je les n existences qu’il me faudrait pour en consacrer une au théâtre !’

These lines exemplarily illustrate how discontented Weil was with current forms of European theatre and how she was playing with the thought of getting involved as a dramaturg herself. Yet taken as a whole, her reviews show that she did not so much direct her disapproval against the individual performances. Rather her reviews speak of her general discomfort with the growing political instrumentalisation of European theatre by the totalitarian regimes of Franco, Hitler, Mussolini and Stalin. But to her, theatre was not just an innocent victim of fascist politics but theatre itself was complicit in the current situation of fear and censorship. In particular, she noted a growing vanity and narcissism in the art scene becoming the driving force of the artist-celebrities, which risked sacrificing political vigilance to personal ego (1957, 18):

Precisely the artists and writers who are most inclined to look at their art as spread of their personal exceptionality are in fact the most subject to the public's appetite. [...] The collective opinion of the specialists is almost sovereign over each of them.⁴ (transl. from French *ibid.*)

She reasoned that the obsession of artists to please and to satisfy the public appetites subjugated art to the despotism of whomever had the most power and influence at any moment. In this context she considered the newly 'installed' critics, whom she mockingly called 'spécialistes', only a logical consequence to a political process of appropriation and censorship of an already corrupt and fragile theatre system. In Weil's eyes, these artists and critics were complicit in the crimes perpetuated by the regime, and she strove to formulate an alternative to this bending to public will in her own literary practice.

Confronted with the absence of theatre criticism Weil felt the need to develop a theatre of failure that demasks the actual failure of propaganda theatre. Weil identifies this *failure* of theatre as hidden reproduction of the regime's logic of delusion and oppression. This

⁴ 'Par exemple, ce sont précisément les artistes et écrivains les plus enclins à regarder leur art comme l'épanouissement de leur personne qui sont en fait les plus soumis au goût du public. [...] L'opinion collective des spécialistes est presque souveraine sur chacun d'eux.'

essay analyses Weil's closet drama *Venise sauvée* as a theatre of failure and argues that Weil applied an implicit theory of theatre perception that offers the audience the possibility to deconstruct what happens on stage and to gain the interpretive authority.

Her concept of failure follows her reading of *The Iliad*, in which she identified the actual agent and true subject of war as force. It does not matter if someone suffers force or executes it, it is always force which remains the sole supremacy (cf. Doering 58). However, the enslavement of those who appropriate the delusion to control force and execute it weighs heavier than of those who are innocently subjected to it. The latter had retained inner freedom which for Weil was the highest moral good. Here, an intentional and evident *failure* of theatre that self-deconstructs had the possibility to provide 'a new interface between politics and performance and foregrounds urgent questions about how those struggling against an apparatus of political violence can avoid reproducing that apparatus's own logics' (Irwin 170). Consequently, Weil's play aimed to reveal the promise of force as a dangerous lie.

Theatre Must Fail

Weil began writing her play as political resistance, when theatre had already become an instrument of modern warfare. She imagined *Venise sauvée* as fighting against the collective delusion of war. The concept of the play was driven by the idea that force was the actual agent and author of war, not any individual human being. If force were to be applied onto theatre aiming to synchronise spectators' minds into one large collective stage of the 'Social' global mass delusion would ensue. Ultimately, *Venise sauvée* must be read as Weil's attempts to staging and disrupt propaganda theatre as failure and develop modes of private resistance to it.

In order to understand Weil's engagement with this failure, it is important to understand Weil's distinction between the inner and outer reader, and by extinction the inner and outer theatre audience. Weil never explicitly elaborated her own theory of theatre perception. However, *Venise sauvée's* text and stage directions contain repeated allusions to her

philosophical theory of perception which serves as theoretical blueprint of her play: According to Weil's *notion of reading* the human subject believed that its own thoughts constitute the way it interpreted the world and that the way it felt originated in its *inner* being. However, Weil claims that thoughts, in fact, come to us from *outside* while the subject *read* them from our environment. She explains this with her observation that the human self unconsciously and constantly imitates the way it reads the outer world. This *earthly part of our soul*, as Weil called it, was nothing other than a mimetic mirror cabinet of the world. Consequently, every form of social interaction, according to Weil, is in its essence an attempt to influence other's reading of the environment, controlling the way of perceiving their 'outside' and thus their 'inside' (1946, 14). The mutually co-dependent dimensions of *internal* and *external* necessities can be traced back to the theatre discourses of Saint Augustine. As bishop he urged his faithful 'not to destroy the desire for theatre but transform it' ('voluptatem spectandi non perdat sed mutet', Berns 27) With this, Augustine claimed that the worldly *outer* theatre of sin must not spoil the *inner* theatre in the Christian soul, but a hermeneutic filter must be interposed that deconstructs the sinful temptations on stage as morally disgraceful. There is no definite reference in how far Weil was aware of the Augustinian dichotomy of inner and outer stage, although Weil had studied ancient theatre culture and Augustine extensively. Notwithstanding this, I adapt this dichotomy in terms of *Venise sauvée*, because in my opinion it represents the direct application of Weil's *notion of lecture*, of *reading* the world around us, to the world of theatre; consecutively I refer to the dichotomy of inner and outer theatre as Weil's *implicit* theory of theatre perception.

The simultaneously subversive and subjugating power behind this dichotomy of outer and inner stage lies in the idea that parallel to what is happening on stage, unconsciously an inner theatre is at work in the heart of every spectator. This inner stage translates and adapts what is perceived on the outer stage and integrates it with the viewer's own existence. In this framework, Weil's concept of theatre does not

regard the stage merely as an object of reflection. The inner stage itself becomes the acting subject. Under certain circumstances, the 'Empire. The Social without roots' (2019, 50), as Weil calls it, is able to short-circuit outer and inner theatre in such a way that what is performed on the outer stage is likewise mentally performed on the inner stage and is thus appropriated by the spectator as one's own.

To reflect this influence from the outer stage on the inner stages the audience must be granted the possibility to invert the process in a way that the motions on the inner stage *deconstruct* the imaginary world of the outer stage. To do so, Weil insisted that 'theatre must manifest both internal and external necessities' (2019, 57). *Necessity* here signifies something like a higher will and plan at work in the universe, metaphorically speaking the play's script, that dictate what the performance must adhere to. Facing the determination by the 'script' of Fascist supremacy, i.e. its mass propaganda, she reminded her readers of one's 'inner necessity [...] where [one feels one] cannot withdraw from it without becoming unfaithful to [oneself]. If this inner necessity is joined by an outer necessity what power does it not acquire?'⁵ (transl. from French Pétrement 578). Due to a *suggestive realism* inherent to theatre, it can create the illusion of an imaginary external necessity of a situation, e.g. when Nazi Germany presented war as external necessity on the stage and on the screen. Here, an inner stage's deconstruction of 'the great international drama'⁶ (transl. from French Pétrement 435), by which she means international politics, becomes a powerful instrument of critique that allows the audience to distinguish between imaginary external necessities and the *naked* or '*real*' external necessities of a situation which she considered as good.

Weil subsequently aims to penetrate the inner stage with the imaginary of the outer stage of *Venise sauvée* in such a way that the consciousness of the inner stage's autonomy becomes manifest.

5 'Une nécessité intérieure [...] à laquelle je sens que je ne puis me soustraire sans me trahir moi-même. Quant à cette nécessité intérieure une nécessité extérieure s'ajoute, quelle puissance n'acquiert-elle pas?'

6 'Mais je souhaite que les dieux n'en profitent pas pour commencer la représentation du grand drame international.'

Therefore, I propose to read *Venise sauvée* as a theatre of *creative failure*. This term describes theatre reproducing the regime's delusion (failure) but in a way it self-deconstructs which then opens up for the possibility to look out for the 'actual' outer necessities – which can be found best, as we will see, in the human milieu marked by its vulnerability.

The concept of *creative failure* expressed in Weil's remark that *Venise sauvée* offers a μεταξύ [the gap in between] (Weil 2019, 52). Appropriated from Plato, Weil used the concept of μεταξύ to describe the existence or production of a hermeneutical 'gap'. This gap of interpretation and authority between the outer stage and the audience enables the *inner* stage to reevaluate the *outer* stage asking for the actual outer necessities of a situation. For her, the best criterion to evaluate a situation's true outer necessity 'is not what is social; it is a human milieu of which we are no more conscious than the air we breathe' (Weil 2019, 52). The sharp distinction between the Social and the human milieu builds the very heart of Weil's implicit theory of theatre perception: The Social is the *abstract* collective manifest in the univocal will that eradicates all individuality and strives for complete domination of the audience to implant its imaginary outer necessity. This *metaxical* human milieu on the other hand are the concrete persons sitting next to you with their vulnerability, needs and fragility, in other words the *naked* outer necessities of a concrete situation that reveals the needs and duties between you and them. Via a close reading of *Venise sauvée* I demonstrate how the imaginative outer necessity of the play aims to enable a new awareness of a *metaxical* human milieu in means of Weil's imperative to dramaturgically distort the short-circuit between the audience's inner and outer theatre. Ultimately, the play is an attempt to unmask the theatrical imaginary to become a member of the powerful as failure.

How Theatre Can Fail (Creatively)

Venise sauvée is an unfinished historical tragedy Weil wrote from 1938 until her death in 1943. It tells the story of a forsaken Venetian commander Jaffier who inevitably is forced to commit a crime regardless

of which decision he makes.

Jaffier and his troops dream of supremacy and force. In a nocturnal attack they intend to seize Venice, the last free bastion against the Spanish royal house. Their plan is to proceed as brutally as possible: 'The victor lives *his* dream; the vanquished lives another's dream. All the men of Venice who live through the next night and day will spend the rest of their lives wondering if they wake or dream. But, as of tomorrow, their city, their liberty and their power will seem to them to be more unreal than a dream. Arms make a dream stronger than reality' (Weil 2019, 74). However, at the last instant Jaffier is struck internally and realizes his dream of force as illusion and crime. With the promise of a pardon on his soldiers he surrenders to the Venetians. These break their word and Jaffier witnesses the massacre of his people.

Janet Patricia Little argues that

until this moment of realization, Jaffier has been unable to comprehend the reality of Venice's existence, because he has been blinded by 'le social' [...] By reading in the beauty of Venice its reality, Jaffier has made it impossible for himself to continue with the plans for its destruction. (Little 303-304)

However, when the Venetian army applied the same brute violence that Jaffier just renounced, when he then witnessed how those he rescued were acting in return, he realized the actual *failure* that lies in the hidden reproduction of a violent logic. Weil's insight was that when external and internal stages are merged, collective delusion interprets criticism of violence as hostility, and criticism of violence becomes the origin of violence: 'Those whom I have saved by my pity, having robbed me of honour, ban me' (Weil 2019, 104-5).

The play is based on the novel 'The Conspiracy of the Spaniards against the Republic of Venice, in the year 1618' by César Vichard de Saint-Réal, published in 1674, which Weil decided to re-adapt as she saw in it a fit subject to perform and simultaneously reveal the power of one's inner stage to distinguish imaginary and real outer necessity of a situation. Because of her sudden death in 1943 the unfinished drama

remained a fragment until Albert Camus published the script and an extensive apparatus drawn from her private notebooks in form of a closet drama in 1955. Weil's central reading of the novel relies on the idea of the human milieu as the only true outer necessity, which she felt was lacking from previous adaptations by Thomas Otway's tragic melodrama *Venice Preserv'd* from 1682 and Hugo Von Hofmannsthal's *Das gerettete Venedig* from 1905:

Otway and others had not understood the nobility of the motive that, according to Saint-Réal, led Jaffier [the protagonist] to denounce a plot against the city of Venice: it was pity for the beautiful innocence of that city. An emotion so rare must have seemed impossible to them, so in fact they had invented other motives.⁷ (transl. from French Pétrement 500)

During her visits in Germany Weil was present when totalitarian forces started to merge external and internal necessities in the minds of the people. Collectively following only their one Führer, Adolf Hitler, the regime banned most forms of individualism from the stages and screens (Annuaire 15). Directors and dramaturges reinterpreted classical subjects within the new ideological fashion of National Socialism, omitting the press and the public any possibility for critical evaluation (Fischer-Lichte 126). What was seen on stage or screen produced by means of polysensual immersion emotional fantasies of supremacy within the audience (Grau, 85). In this atmosphere, Weil observed an ideologically deluded theatre culture that reproduced the regime's imaginary outer necessities, i.e. an imperative of war and violence. She witnessed that the individual conscience was replaced with collective spirit.⁸

⁷ 'qu'Otway et d'autres n'avaient pas compris la noblesse du motif qui, d'après Saint-Réal, porta Jaffier à dénoncer le complot : la pitié pour la ville. Un sentiment si rare avait dû leur paraître impossible, si bien qu'ils avaient inventé d'autres motifs'.

⁸ The aim of Fascist theatre and film became a preparation to sacrifice ones live for Führer, Volk, and nation. David Barnett describes that especially 'Goebbels was inspired by Tolstoy and Dostoevsky, and their ideas of a mystical socialism in which a reinterpretation of the Bible would deliver working men from their exploited lot [...] through sacrifice' (Barnett, 167). Goebbels' aim was 'a dramaturgy of collectivism and universalism [where] the egocentricity of the oppressor is confronted with the collective identity of the representative figures on stage' (ibid).

Weil's option to compose *Venise sauvée* as historical drama, a genre out of fashion in France at her time (cf. Nevin 168) is only at first glance a critique of Otway and Hofmannsthal. With this unpopular choice she deliberately mimicked the Nazis' inclination to prefer historical subjects of drama, something she had witnessed herself in Germany. The influential Nazi theatre theorist Rainer Schlösser for instance had asked his readers in 1934 whether there is 'any historic material which would not be given a totally new face when advanced into the light of our natural and legitimate myth of blood and honor?' (Gadberry 97). Accordingly, *Venise sauvée's* mise en scene did not turn out to be a 17th century Venice but was, in fact, Paris in the early 1940s:

A city isolated before a mighty and despotic foe it is a mirror image of Paris in the spring of 1940. The conspiracy's strategist, Renaud, rationalizes that betrayal of Venice will unite all of Europe against Turkey, the Eastern menace. Embodying a will to universal domination that characterizes what Weil calls evil's illimitability, Renaud seems a transparent caricature of the slavophobic Hitler seeking to unify Europe against Bolshevism. (Nevin 168)

This commentary on the deal with the Nazi theatre culture is also relevant when situating Weil's play in the context of the theatre resistant, especially in occupied Paris. The term theatre resistant refers to a group of playwrights and other artists that Charles De Gaulle retroactively stylized as artist for his French resistance. They hold a great place in French national memory and some of them, like Sartre and Camus, profited from this status as resistance fighters after the war, giving their plays a popular appeal. Weil's notion of inner and outer reality on stage and in reading, however, prompts us to reconsider. In the light of Weil's implicit theory of theatre perception, we have to reconsider the *théâtre résistant* as implication in resistance politics and accept that it often 'reproduced' in its own way the idea of the supremacy. Rather than model the vulnerability and fragility of the human milieu, which Weil strove to do, prominent members of the theatre resistant became complicit in fascist aesthetics.

Theatre Will Fail

One priority of the German occupying forces in France was to maintain public peace and order. Therefore, Nazi cultural representatives publicly endorsed literary plays by Jean Anouilh, Paul Claudel, Jean Giraudoux, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Albert Camus up to a certain extent, who had a reputation as ‘unpolitical’ writers, aiming to create an impression of German generosity and intellectual freedom among the occupied French people (Engel 227). However, recent historical research shows that the cultural memory of a vivid *théâtre résistant* in Paris had in fact never existed the way French history books describe it (Engel 230). A famous example was Jean Paul Sartre’s *Les Mouches* [The Flies], which was performed in Paris in 1943. After the war Sartre remembered the play as (hidden) resistance against the invaders. However, back in 1943 both critics and the audience regarded his performance as ideologically pale and without any political meaning (Engel 229). Zoë Ghyselinck collected official and non-official reviews of Sartre’s debut as a dramaturge and concludes:

The bulk of the official press in the capital, saw the play as superficial and dismissed the dramatic and aesthetic form. [...] This group almost completely left any philosophical, moral or political interpretation undisturbed. (Ghyselinck 367)

Like the *théâtre résistant*, Weil used the framework of classical Greek tragedy. By doing so Weil alluded to the intellectual Parisian theatre culture, the background of the *théâtre résistant* similar to the way she alluded to Nazi theatre culture with the historical content. However, in contrast to Ancient Greek tragedy and the *théâtre résistant* fashion Weil emphasized not an alternative form of supremacy of the tragic hero, but the exposure any supremacy’s failure in the end (Brueck 124). Considering these circumstances, the central motif of Jaffier’s silenced voice not only stands for the most tragic form of individual fate but also resembles the dangerous cul-de-sac of the *théâtre résistant*: The unheard voice of Jaffier, just before he was silenced, alludes to the silent call of the *théâtre résistant*. I argue that *Venise sauvée* can be read as exposing

the futility of the *théâtre résistant* by addressing the critical audience as someone 'who is absent and so, who cannot respond as such, but whose presence is nonetheless reanimated in the form of his absence' (Cha 83). A *theatre of failure* is therefore always 'speaking from the point at which it can say nothing' (Cha 80). For Weil it was evident that not only theatre culture was at risk here, but that the events in WW2 were so intensified that it must no longer be indifferent to what happens on stage. For her theatre was no longer a political question and criticism no longer a sheer intellectual activity. When Weil composed *Venise sauvée* and with it combatted the perils of WW2 everything was at stake for her. Consequently, *Venise sauvée's* outstanding difference to the *théâtre résistant* consists in a *metaphysical dimension* beyond all political messages underlying the way how to *read* theatre. She did not only consider the stage an object to be analysed and performed on, but also the very agent through whose lenses the spectator undertakes a reshaping of ways to interpret the world. Here, creative failure aims to dethrone not only *one* form of supremacy but *all* forms of supremacy.

Weil was driven to break the vicious circle of false power imaginations, whether on the part of the Nazi propaganda or on the part of the resistance. At the end, what does this tell about Simone Weil's understanding of criticism? For her, criticism was in danger of adopting a position of false power that it did not possess and illegitimately claimed by mimicry. Through this claim to power, criticism, analogous to propaganda, mirrored false external necessities. The only remedy she saw lied in an individual who was able to discover the true external necessities from the inside and respond accordingly, like Jaffier. Perhaps it is legitimate to identify *Venise sauvée* and its ambition to shift the final authority to the human being's inner self, as a form of post-criticism as it is currently made strong once again by Laurent de Sutter and others. They claim that criticism must be aware of its own weakness and not insinuate false power. Criticism must emerge from powerlessness not from force. For only then criticism is authentic (cf. Sutter 7).

Contemporary Failings

If today the situation of theatre critics is getting more and more precarious, Simone Weil stands as a reminder and a warning sign that theatre criticism must fulfil this task of deconstructing imaginary outer necessities and their promises of gaining power. As Silvia Panizza and Philip Wilson point out in their commentary of the first English translation of *Venise sauvée*: 'It is an urgent call to recognize and respond to the moral and spiritual perils that history has presented again and again' (Weil 2019, 20). Back then and today, it is this failure that harbours a creative moment: Revealing the failure makes it possible to generate the recognition of failure it needs so that the human milieu can be authentically present as a category of critical re-evaluation of outer necessities. Theatre criticism is there to remind the audience that in the end, they are the reader of the stage, even if and especially when their readings remain a fragile endeavour.

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