



# BEAUTY AGAINST FORCE: SIMONE WEIL'S *VENICE SAVED*

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The tragedy *Venise sauvée* (*Venice Saved*) is Simone Weil's only literary works. She began writing it in 1940, and continued to work on it until her early death interrupted its completion in 1943. The action takes place in a Venice threatened by a plot, but saved by one of the conspirators who, seized by its beauty, cannot bring himself to take it by force. Although, like many of Weil's writings, it is rarely read due to its incompleteness, the play offers a synthesis of the philosopher's views on ethics, politics and even ontology.



Inspired by the [\*Conjuration des Espagnols contre la République de Venise en l'Année MDCXVIII\*](#) (1820), by the Abbé de Saint-Réal, the action takes place in 1618 against the backdrop of a conspiracy to overthrow the Serenissima Republic of Venice and place it under the control of the Spanish Empire. A group of mercenaries, led by the characters Renaud, an old French lord, and Pierre and Jaffier, two privateers from Provence, plan to seize the city on Ascension night, just as the Venetians are celebrating their [\*sea betrothal\*](#), a sort of national holiday during which the Doge boards his ceremonial galley to cast a golden ring into the sea, symbolizing his city's domination over the sea. From the outset, we see the antagonism between two typical political ideals: the city and the empire.

### **Empire: The Archetype of Strength**

First and foremost, the Spanish empire of the House of Habsburg. Its hegemonic aspirations is expressed by Renaud in a speech to his troops:

Thanks to you, the whole of Europe will be united under the Habsburg dynasty, and the ships of a united Europe, sailing the seas, will conquer, civilize and convert to Christianity the entire globe, just as Spain did for America. And it will all be thanks to you.... The House of Austria is very close to universal domination; if it lets it slip, bloody, long and ruinous struggles will ensue all around (*Venise sauvée*, I, 2).

Here, the empire appears to be driven by a movement of expansion, which will only end in universal domination. However, this expansion is presented here as subordinate to two aims: the verb "to conquer" is followed by "to civilize, to convert to Christianity." Yet it is hard to give real substance to

these aims, given that the hegemony of the House of Austria, which reigned over Spain at the time, immediately comes to the fore in Renaud's discourse. If these manifestly cosmetic ends make the strengthening of the empire seem like a means, it appears here as its own end: the empire serves its strength as much as it serves itself. Indeed, Weil seems to place the Habsburg empire in a filiation that runs through Western history: that of Rome, the hegemony drunk with conquest. This Roman spirit, devoid of any real spirituality, conquering and dominating, would run through the history of Europe right up to Hitler at the time of her writing, via the colonial empires of the 15th to 19th centuries. This is what she suggests in *La Personne et le sacré* when she writes: "The Romans, who understood, as Hitler did, that force is only fully effective when it is clothed in a few ideas, used the notion of right for this purpose."

Here, we find a relationship to the notion of right, analogous to that which the conspirators have with civilization or religion, which are summoned only to clothe force. Simone Weil's notion of force is the subject of particular elaboration, notably in *L'Iliade ou le poème de la force*, where she characterizes it as a mechanism that acts on bodies and minds, reducing them to the status of things. Indeed, she sees force as the main subject of *The Iliad*, which perfectly depicts its effects on its characters, singing with equal melancholy of the loss of Greek and Trojan heroes. Force is at work, for example, when, in the hands of Achilles, it reduces a begging Hector to a thing, or when it intoxicates the victorious Achaeans, who find themselves submissive to its impulse and go on to the total destruction of Ilion:

The victorious soldier is like a scourge of nature; possessed by war, he is as much a thing as the slave, though in a very different way, and words have no power over him as over matter.... Such is the nature of force. The power it possesses to transform men into things is twofold and is exercised from two sides; it petrifies equally the souls of those who suffer it and those who wield it (*L'Iliade ou le poème de la force*)

Through the Spanish conquests, the mechanics of force are at work, making both the conqueror and the conquered their own. Rome, Habsburg Spain, Hitler, the empire is thus the collective at its most dangerous, the vessel through which force crushes individuals, the allegory of the Big Animal with its random movements used by Plato (*Republic*, 493d) to imitate the inertia of collective opinion that drags souls along.

## **The City: Archetype of Harmony**

Facing the empire, the city. The lexicon of the city refers almost systematically to beauty. This beauty is crystallized in the betrothal festival at sea that is about to take place, as seen in the joy it brings to the character of Violetta, the daughter of a Venetian nobleman:

Oh, how I wish I could be there tomorrow! Have you never seen the Venice festival? There's nothing like it in the world; you'll see tomorrow! What a joy for me, tomorrow, to show you my city in its most perfect splendor! There will be such beautiful music... (*Venise sauvée*, II, 3).

The beauty of the feast seems to culminate in music. Given the centrality of reading Plato in Weilian thought, it is hard not to see an echo of the role he attributes to it in Books IV and VII of *The Republic*. Like gymnastics for the body, music is described as the cultivation of harmony in the soul. Here, Venice appears on the side of Western Hellenic heritage. In contrast to Rome, Greece represents the rooted civilization par excellence, a community that, rather than crushing individuals, nurtures them by allowing them a "real, active and natural participation in the existence of a community that keeps alive certain treasures of the past and certain presentiments of the future," so as to "receive almost the totality of its moral, intellectual and spiritual life through the intermediary of the environments of which [the individual] is naturally a part" (*L'Enracinement*). This moment of Venetian communion in the beauty of one of their traditions is precisely the one chosen by the Spaniards to subdue the Venetians by uprooting them by force, as Renaud explains to Jaffier, in charge of executing the plan: "Tonight and tomorrow, the people here must feel that they are only toys, that they are lost. The ground must suddenly and forever give way from under their feet, and they must be able to find equilibrium only by obeying you" (*Venice Saved*, II, 6). Thus, by uprooting it—that is, by destroying the beauty and harmony that the city cultivates—the empire seeks to throw it into the arms of the force that drives it, in order to subjugate it.

### **A City Saved by its Beauty**

The action concludes with Jaffier's denunciation of the conspiracy, resulting in the arrest of his companions and his banishment from the city, hated by the Venetians who see him as a traitor to the Republic as well as to his own people. Haunted by the guilt of having delivered his companions to their death, he finally takes his own life. His decision to betray the conspirators seems to come from a sort of revelation of the city's beauty during a discussion with a Venetian nobleman and his daughter Violetta: "No man can do such a thing as Venice. Only God. The greatest thing a man can do, which brings him closer to God, is, since he cannot create such wonders, to preserve those that exist." The effect of

beauty on Jaffier's soul cannot be summed up here as a form of seduction that would divert him from his mission. It is to be understood in the context of the ontology that Simone Weil developed in various writings at the end of her life, consisting mainly of a rather original exegesis of Plato.

According to [Fernando Rey Puente](#), this exegesis postulates a profound internal unity in Plato's work, set in the context of a Greek civilization whose spirituality was centered around the idea of mediation between divine eternity on the one hand, and human misery on the other. Thus, Plato's thought consists of the articulation of pairs of antagonistic notions: "identity and diversity, unity and multiplicity, absolute and relative, pure good and good mixed with evil, spiritual and sensible, supernatural and natural" in two relationships: contradiction and analogy. This confrontation of opposites, from which the intermediary between them emerges, is then understood by Weil as the driving force behind Platonic dialectics, described in *The Republic* as the means by which the soul tears itself away from appearances and rises to the contemplation of the intelligible.

In the ontological domain, this structuring duality is the relationship between Good and Necessity, understood as the chain of causes and effects that conditions the becoming of all things here below. At first glance, it appears as an antagonism, particularly in the Weilian reading of *The Iliad*, which shows the world inside the Cave, deprived of good, where necessity is embodied in the force at play with characters struggling, passive in the face of it. Plato's work then consists precisely in thinking the intermediary and the passage from this reality to the good. In this respect, *The Republic* must be seen in relation to other dialogues, as she points out in her *Cahiers* ("February 1942-June 1942"):

### **"An Aborted Iliad"**

Basically, there is only one path to salvation in Plato; the various dialogues indicate different parts of the path. *The Republic* does not say what first does violence to the chained captive to remove the chains and compel the unfortunate. We will have to look for that in *The Phaedrus*. It is beauty, by means of love (every value that appears in the sensible world is beauty). It is the contemplation of beauty in the order of the world, conceived *a priori*. Next comes beauty as an attribute of God, and then the Good. Then the return to the cave; this is *The Timaeus*.

Indeed, *The Timaeus* depicts the sensible world in terms of the Demiurge's will: "He (the Demiurge) was good, and in that which is good there is no jealousy of anyone. Without jealousy, he wished all things to

become like him" (29e). From this perspective, necessity, which orders the becoming of the sensible world, is an imitation of the Good emanating from the Demiurge. This perspective clarifies what, in *The Republic*, appeared to be an abrupt dualism between the intelligible, good world, and the sensible, marked by necessity. Indeed, in *The Timaeus*, becoming is beautiful insofar as it bears the imprint of the Good. *The Symposium* and *The Phaedrus* make this intermediary role of beauty explicit, showing how it is the sensible presence of the Good in things, correlated with the love personified by Eros, the daemon who comes to possess souls in the form of madness, to carry them towards it.

Thus, when Jaffier pays attention to the beauty of Venice, he is literally seized with love for this city, which, as Weil writes of art, "is an attempt to transport in a finite quantity of matter shaped by man an image of the infinite beauty of the entire universe" (*Formes de l'Amour implicite de Dieu*). The emergence of this beauty in his soul subtracts it from the inertia of force and imbues it with a movement of love, which translates into a renunciation of the need to destroy the object of love. In the words of Léo Tixier in the preface to the Payot et Rivages edition, *Venise sauvée* is "like an aborted *Iliad*," in that Jaffier prevents another sack of Troy. Paradoxically, through the beauty of the city of the Doges and his attention to it, Jaffier also saves himself through his sacrifice.

This state of grace gives it full life in a final gesture of love, in contrast to the state of inertia in which force holds man under its sway. This double salvation by beauty, of a city and a man, illustrates how, far from being superfluous and ornamental, beauty is a need of the soul just as fundamental as food is to the body, as Weil herself writes in *L'Enracinement*: "The point of view of aesthetes is sacrilegious, not only in matters of religion, but even in matters of art. It consists in having fun with beauty by manipulating it and looking at it. Beauty is something to be eaten; it is food."

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**Featured:** *The Bucintore Returning to the Molo on Ascension Day*, by Canaletto; painted ca. 1727-1729.



