The James K. Binder Lectureship in Literature
Number Eight

Death(s) in Venice:
Bodies and the Discourse of Pollution From Thomas Mann to Porto Marghera

Serenella Iovino

Department of Literature
University of California, San Diego
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Department Chair
Department of Literature
University of California, San Diego
9500 Gilman Dr. # 0410
La Jolla, CA 92093-0410

BINDER
LECTURE SERIES

The Eighth James K. Binder Lectureship in Literature

The James K. Binder Lectureship in Literature, established in 2005, is the result of a generous bequest from the former Carlsbad resident who chose this gift to the Department of Literature at the University of California, San Diego as an expression of his gratitude to the State of California.

The department is pleased to honor Mr. Binder's wishes that leading European intellectuals be brought to campus to provide a forum for rigorous discussions of literary topics and to enhance interdisciplinary learning and scholarship among academic departments.

In the inaugural year of the lecture series, two eminent Europeans were invited to present the James K. Binder Lectureship in Literature: Klaus Scherpe from Germany, followed by Tzvetan Todorov from France. In 2006, Gianni Celati from Italy presented the Lectureship, followed by Belen Gopegui from Spain in 2007, Almudena Grandes from Spain in 2009, Mario Biagioli from Italy in 2010, and Roger Chartier from France in 2013. The lectures are published and available from the Department of Literature at the University of California, San Diego.

A philosopher by training, Serenella Iovino is Professor of Comparative Literature at the University of Turin. President of the European Association for the Study of Literature, Culture, and Environment (www.easlce.eu) from 2008 to 2010, she is a research fellow of the Alexander-von-Humboldt Foundation. One of the most influential voices of European environmental literary criticism, she has been a plenary speaker and visiting scholar in European and extra-European countries, including Germany, France, the Netherlands, China, Australia, Taiwan, Turkey, and the United States.

Professor Iovino is the author of four books and numerous essays, and serves on the editorial boards of several international journals and publications in the field of the environmental humanities, including prominent ecocritical journals such as *ISLE*, *Green Letters*, and *Ecozon@*. Among her recent works, *Material Ecocriticism* (coedited with Serpil Oppermann, Indiana University Press, 2014) and, as a guest editor, *Ecozon@*'s Special Focus Issue on *Mediterranean Ecocriticism* (Autumn 2013). Her current book project, titled *Ecocriticism and Italy: Ecology, Resistance, and Liberation*, is under contract with Bloomsbury Academics.

Professor Iovino presented the James K. Binder lecture entitled "Death(s) in Venice: Bodies and the Discourse of Pollution from Thomas Mann to Porto Marghera" on May 15, 2014. A listing of lectures in this series may be found at http://literature.ucsd.edu/news-events/binder.html.

Abstract

There are many ways to imagine the death of a city. A recurrent literaty tropos, the “Death in Venice” found its quintessential embodiment in Gustav von Aschenbach, the German nobleman who acts as the protagonist of Thomas Mann’s novel. Considered in an ecological perspective, however, the death in Venice has other meaningful materializations: it can have the face of dioxin and hepatic Angiosarcoma, spread in the Lagoon by the Montedison petrochemical factory of Porto Marghera, just a few miles from San Marco Square. It can have the face of the threatening waters or of the fluxes of energy generated by global warming. These latter elements are coupled with the engineering systems implemented to control the ever-increasing high tides affecting Venice, with the unsustainable tourism of humongous cruise ships, and with the normal human activities interfering with the delicate ecosystem of the Venetian Lagoon.

This lecture concentrates on Venice as a *text* made out of embodied stories—a *material* text, in which natural dynamics, cultural practices, political visions, and industrial choices are interlaced with human bodies in issues of justice, health, and ecology.

Taking literary works, theatrical plays, and “living” cases as my focus, I will show how an ecocritical reading can amplify the (often unheard) voices of Venice’s reality.

This discourse is part of my current book project. Titled *Ecocriticism and Italy: Ecology, Resistance, and Liberation*, the book attempts to collect the “material stories” of some particularly dense places in Italy as segments of the vast ecological and ecocultural horizon of this country. The idea is that, in this (local) scenery of (global) crisis, literature and critical practices enact forms of ecological resistance and cultural liberation.

* * * * *

As you can see from the title, the focus of this lecture is Venice and the death(s) in this city. This parenthetical plural is exactly the point of my talk. In fact, I will not merely focus on the "Death in Venice" as a *tropos*—a literary subject that precedes and prepares Thomas Mann's novella—but on the embodiments of this death, on its materializations in the corporeality and in the many bodies of this city: its biome and ecosystem, its landscape, its human residents and workers. All these bodies tell stories: stories of elements and of natural dynamics, as well as stories of cultural practices, political visions, and industrial choices. They tell stories of life, but also stories of pollution, exploitation, and death. We will read all these bodies as texts, and we will read them in combination with literary works. My thesis is that "diffracting" these bodily and literary texts with each other—namely, reading them in mutual combination—is a way not only to shed light on the hidden plots and meanings of a reality, but also to amplify the (often unheard) voices of this reality.

"Every time I describe a city, I am saying something about Venice," Marco Polo says in Calvino's *Invisible Cities*. Venice is "a first city that remains implicit" in all the others (78). Our view is complementary to this one. Venice is our case in point, but implicit in our discourse are all the places where the balance between nature and non-nature is precarious, instable, or challenging. In Venice's translucid story, we can catch a glimpse of many other places, near and far, from Bhopal to New Orleans.

Framework: Ecocriticism, World, Text

But, before we come ashore in Venice, or in any other implicit place, let us briefly see what ecocriticism is. As one of its pioneers, Glenn Love (Emeritus at the University of Oregon) has written some years ago, "Teaching and studying literature without reference to the natural conditions of the world and the basic ecological principles that underlie all life seems increasingly shortsighted, incongruous" (*Practical Ecocriticism*, 16). The world in which we teach and study literature—the world in which literature is made—is the same world in which humans, along with several millions of other species, live. What physically affects this world, affects all the activities happening in it, including our intellectual and cultural productions. Ecocriticism is therefore an incitement to consider "culture" not as abstract/totally apart from "nature," but to see nature and culture as porously interconnected. Ecocriticism invites us to see how world and texts are mutually permeable, how they intersect, how they *meet* and sometimes

combine. In so doing, it looks for the point in which world and text meet. Practically, this can mean many things. For example, it means to examine how literary texts mirror or elaborate on the ecologies of the "outside world"—how they culturally respond to the crises affecting these ecologies. But it can also mean another, interesting thing, namely, that the world itself becomes a text in which these crises—as well as all encounters between nature and culture—are scripted. Ecocriticism is thus not only a critical analysis of literary texts, but it asks us to read the world as a text. There is, in other words, a form of eloquence spread in the material forms of this world, in the compound that we call "nature-culture."[1] In this perspective, our world is a *storied* dimension emerging from the cooperation of nature and culture, of physical elements and discursive practices. The matter of the world, in form of landscapes, ecosystems, and bodies, is here read as a text expressing the interactions of human and nonhuman actors.[2]

Ecocriticism becomes therefore an attempt to read into the world's own eloquence, and to elicit the implicit message of those material texts, also trying to create connections between these material texts and literary representations. When world and literature combine, as in the case of Venice, the whole expressiveness of reality is enhanced, and we are able to see more.

What do we see in Venice, if we read it as a text? What is its "material narrative"? To say that Venice's body is a text to read is not simply a metaphor here. The global crisis of our environments confirms how deeply unstable and delicate the ecological balance of natural-cultural substances is. As the perfect epitome of this fact, Venice symbolizes the discordant harmony between nature and culture. Most of all, it challenges the very possibility of such a harmony. To create a city suspended on a lagoon, the Faustian dream of taking land from the waters, is an exercise in hybridity not only because it mixes water and land into a new elemental combination, but most of all because it is an act of *hybris*, a violation of ontological pacts. *Hybris* may nevertheless have a creative function, and Venice is the luminous splendor of this fact. It is undeniable, however, that the precariousness of the substances suspended in this volatile balance—water, land, air, fire—creates here an incumbent state of danger. Not only is Venice exposed to its amphibious nature and to all the consequences of climate change; it is also exposed to decades of polluting practices, due to political and industrial choices, which proved to be abstract from this complex reality. When political and industrial choices, such as the building of Porto Marghera's Petrochemical

factory were made, the *text* "Venice" was read in isolation from all the rest: in isolation from its ecosystem, its history, its elemental corporeality. The story of this misinterpretation is narrated by documents and bodies, is written in cells and legal files, in industrial sludge and algae, in a landscape transformed into highways of pipes, in the air transformed into smoke.

In this lecture we will follow a series of stories: material stories and literary stories. After considering the stories embedded in Venice's body, we will move to literary stories. In particular, we will take into account three authors: Thomas Mann, Andrea Zanzotto, and Marco Paolini, respectively a novelist, a poet, and an actor-playwright. Scrutinizing how literature interacts and interferes with this material textuality, we will see the how such interferences—this is my thesis—add a further dimension to Venice's storied matter, thus helping accomplish ecocriticism's project of reading into—and thus restoring—the world's narrative layers.

If interpretation is a way to do justice to reality, our exploration of the death in Venice is intended to partake in a restoration of meaning. Providing a narrative framework for this materiality, these literary works have a revelatory power. In fact, they reveal reality as a whole, by disclosing the enclosed parts and shedding light on the unspoken connections hidden in this whole. In doing this, literary works enact a restoration of reality, in its the existence and meanings. The principle is clear: something, which can be narrated, exists and can be known, cognitively appropriated. Just like a restored artwork, reality is thus recreated as a meaningful text.

Ecocriticism is this, too: a narrative justice, which advocates for the political dimension of the impersonal, in order to give to reality the chance to resonate in all of its chords, and from all of its angles.

Text 1: Venice, Lagoon

The first textual approach to Venice begins with a plunge into its nature, its remote past. As a matter of fact, we cannot read the text of Venice without looking into its past and "geological unconscious" (Zanzotto, "Lagune," 111), a subtext made of the evolutionary dynamics of waters, land, climate, ecology, and history.[3]

The text of Venice, we said, is a hybrid one. This hybridity refers in the first place to the compound natures of its territory. Venice is situated inside a lagoon, a mobile site where the blending of fluvial and saline waters determines unique evolutionary conditions for biomes and ecosystems. Extended over 340 square miles, Venice's

lagoon displays a rich and delicate web of biodiversity, also due to its distinctive microclimate: temperatures are here 2°C below the Mediterranean average. This produces a phenomenon called "Atlanticism," also characterized by the existence of a flora and fauna more similar to the Atlantic than to the rest of the Mediterranean. The Lagoon has a special feature: it breathes with the moon. Tides are the expression of this breath: "It is easy to picture the steady coming-in and going-out of waters as a breath of the lagoon, which 'inhales' high tide and 'exhale' low tide. Like a lung expanding with the incoming air, the lagoon increases its surface with the incoming sea" (Fabbri, 19). The tide cycle lasts twelve hours. In the oscillations/stabilizations of the lagoon, time—the poet Andrea Zanzotto writes—"becomes visible … from hour to hour in the game of tides" and in the colors of sandbanks and marshes, of the emerging/submerged ground ("Lagune," 112).

The way the lagoon looks today is rather recent. Its current hydrogeological conformation dates back to twenty-five hundred years ago (Egyptians were already in decline!). We need to travel way back in time to see the Venetian lagoon originating from the melting of a vast ice gulf, which used to connect Grado (near today's Slovenian border) with Ancona, the Alps with the central-Italian Apennines. At the end of the last ice age, the glacier waters started flowing to the Adriatic Sea, forming in rivers that carried huge quantities of sediments. In the course of thousands of years, the heaviest sediments fell on the lagoon bed, hardening into very compact solidified clay, called "caranto" (from the late Latin *caris*, rock). The remaining sediments accumulated, contributing to the formation of a multitude of small islands. This is Venice's core: a hundred sedimentary islands, covered with a unique vegetation of reeds and other plants, laying on a firm and thick Pleistocene "paleo-ground."

Even though the terra firma was already populated in the Neolithic and the Bronze Age, it was not until the V and VI centuries AD that the first settlements over this land-sea started appearing. The settlers were mostly fishermen, trying to escape the attacks of Visigoths, Huns, and Lombards, nomadic populations coming from the Northern forests of Europe. Looking for shelter, these inland people begun to make their abode on these tiny islands, connecting them with wooden bridges and creating canals. It is in these canals, Zanzotto writes, that Venice's "metaphysical blood" flows ("Lagune," 112). But these veins required a skeleton, too. The fishermen started stacking wooden piles into the muddy seabed,

driving them until they reached the caranto. Underwater, surrounded by salty mud, in an oxygen-free environment, these oak, pine or larch trunks mineralized. They literally petrified, becoming as hard as concrete—as hard as the caranto itself—thus providing the perfect foundation for the development of the world above. It took an immense quantity of trees to make this "urban forest of buildings" as Zanzotto names it ("Venezia, forse," 96), and to turn this place into a "beaver-republic" (so Goethe in 1786, 74). When the primitive palafittes became houses, palaces, streets, a generous part of Europe's forests had joined the caranto in this watery underworld to resurrect in the form of a city: Venice, *la Serenissima*, for centuries one of the most powerful city-states in Mediterranean Europe and in the world.

What is clear, here, is that this city results from the cooperation of many forces, human and nonhuman. These forces interact in a hybrid compound, forming hybrid, collective stories. Venice is thus a text written by human and nonhuman "makers," to use Jorge Luis Borges's term. And so Borges pictures this collective making of Venice:

> Rocks, the rivers whose cradle lies in the mountain peaks, those rivers' waters blending with the waters of the Adriatic sea, the cases and fates of history and geology, riptide, sand, the gradual formation of the islands, the proximity of Greece, fishes, migrating people, the Armorican and Baltic wars, the reed huts, the branches mixed with mud, the inextricable network of canals, primeval wolves, the incursions of Dalmatian pirates, the delicate cotto, terraces, marble, horses, Attila's spears, the fishermen protected by their own poverty, the Lombards, being a site where West and East meet, the days and nights of forgotten generations: these were the makers (1332, my translation).

Venice is thus a natural-cultural being that surprises for its supernatural ambition: a city emerged out of an endless mineralized forest, oak trunks that became as hard as concrete in order to create a suspended garden of palaces, houses, cathedrals, museums, warehouses, and other nature: backyards, parks, and feral corners where "nature" comes to claim the city back. This occurs whenever it seems that there is a threat of nature over culture: hide tide, subsidence, the proliferation of algae. Or illness—cholera, for example, as it happens to Gustav von Aschenbach, the protagonist of Mann's novella. Also Aschenbach's illness is one of Venice's wild corners, one of these interstices where nature and culture meet in the porous body of this city.

The *text* "Venice," had been written and carefully interpreted by generations of citizens and governors. A lagoon is an amphibious ecosystem whose unstable balance is due to the combined action of two concurrent forces: river waters and sea tides. River waters are responsible for carrying sediments to the sea. If this force prevails, the fate of lagoons is to become, in the long run, land. If tides prevail, lagoons become bays or gulfs. For over a thousand years, the Venetian Lagoon—whose main problem was not so much that of being submerged by water, but of being covered by fluvial sediment—was able to keep its peculiar conditions thanks to the wise, constant, and unitary management carried out by the Republican government of the *Serenissima*.[4] Responsible were the seven Magistrates of the Waters. There were precise reasons for this, both military and commercial. Whatever the strategic reason, this form of wisdom was a sensible interpretation of Venice's material text: the public authorities and institution *read* it as a lagoon, and acted accordingly, thus seconding this "Faustian dream" before *Faust*. "Faustian dream" is meant here literally. In fact, it is likely that, without experiencing Venice, not only Thomas Mann but also Johann Wolfgang Goethe would have missed important elements for his final oeuvre. In his *Italian Journey* Goethe, though not particularly sympathetic with the population of this "beaver-republic," praised the way Venetians control their environment and suggested further improvements. He wrote:

> [B]y intelligently improving their system of dredged channels [the Venetians] will do their best to keep their possessions intact.
>
> If only they would keep their city cleaner! It may be forbidden, under severe penalties, to empty garbage into the canals, but that does not prevent a sudden downpour from sweeping into them all the rubbish that has accumulated at the street corners, or, what is worse, from washing it into the drains, which are only meant to carry off waters, and choking them, so that the main squares are in constant danger of being flooded (98).[5]

These words were written in the fall of 1786. The "sensitive interpretation" of the lagoon's text lasted until 1797 (Treaty of Campoformio), when Venice and the greatest part of its territory were given by Napoleon to the Emperor of Austria in compensation for the Netherlands, united to France.[6] Under the Habsburg domination, many portions of the lagoon were privatized; they were either

reclaimed and thus transformed into agricultural land, or enclosed and turned into fish farms. Almost one third of the lagoon was thus subtracted from the free expansion of tides and fluvial waters, and even more damage was inflicted by lowering the level of the canals connecting the city with the lagoon and by enlarging the harbor mouth. Finally, the creation of groundwater wells for industrial use caused the ground level to sink even deeper.[7]

At the end of the nineteenth century, besides deeper canals, bridges and railways were also built. In 1917 the decision was made to install a huge industrial plant in the Porto Marghera area; here, too, with deeper canals to allow big cargo ships. This, as it is easily imaginable, has contributed to expose Venice to the force of high tides. And so the lagoon, from a collective of actants of human/nonhuman forces, has turned into scenery: as if they were completely removed from the physical world, some human activities fatally concur with (partly natural) phenomena like subsidence and eustatism, favoring the crumbling of this delicate body.[8] In Venice's "beautiful setting" thousands of ferries, working and private boats, the enormous cruise ships touching on San Marco Square, cause in fact a supplement of wave power that shatters the palace walls, eroding the wooden piles that constitute the foundations of the city. Other factors, such as the reclamation of the industrial area, or the enclosing of (sometimes illegal and often unsustainable) fisheries, amplify the high tides phenomenon. These areas, once storage spaces for tidewaters, become now inaccessible: "Less absorption surface, more incoming water, land sinking, sea-level rise, disappearance of natural barriers: these are all little tiles of the puzzle composing Venice's ruin" (Fabbri, 48–49).

Today, in spite of a number of important studies and requests coming from the citizens, the prevailing approach to the protection of Venice's Lagoon continues with the practice of textual misinterpretations. Instead of promoting ecologically sustainable measures, the national and local governments have chosen to protect this fragile geoecological balance from the water by closing the harbor mouth with a mechanical system of dams. The so-called MOSE project (an acronym for Modulo Sperimentale Elettro-Meccanico, *Experimental Electromechanical Module*) is not only the latest misreading of the city's material textuality, but also one of the biggest financial businesses in Italy. Not only, in fact, the MOSE—a "monstrous solution" (De Lucia, 90)—is draining all the money allocated for the protection of the lagoon, strongly impacting the landscape, but it is already proving insufficient for its purpose.

Text 2: Venice, Industry

Thomas Mann's Lido, that on which Aschenbach dies, had already become extinct at the end of the 1960s, chased away by the reclamation works necessary to make room for industry. In the Land Use Plan of 1962 (still valid in 1990), this destination (or induced destiny) was expressed with threatening recklessness: "The industrial area of Porto Marghera will chiefly contain those plants emitting smoke, dust or health-impairing fumes in the atmosphere, releasing polluting substances into the water, and producing vibrations and noises" (Fabbri, 66). Again, the abstraction of this "narrative of development" from the material text of Venice is patent. And it is also patently uncanny, if one considers the magnitude of this artificial satellite, launched into Venice's orbit: "18 kilometers (more than 11 miles) of navigable canals (waterways), 33 km (20.5 miles) of docks, and over 2000 hectares of industrialized peninsulas that, like metastases, [spread] into water" (Fabbri, 37–38).

What does the Petrolchimico[9] look like? The Venetian magistrate Felice Casson provides a description that could match Calvino's *Invisible Cities*. With a substantial difference, though: the Petrolchimico is indeed very visible; and smellable, too:

> A true city, entirely surrounded by high walls, not far from Marghera's residential area, with miles and miles of inner roads and little streets, bordering on the lagoon. From here, in the distance, you [can] see Venice and its belfries. But if you [turn] around, you [see] the endless pipes, thin and huge, new and old, rusty and repaired, whole or covered with creative patches [creatively mended], at the ground level as well as 15 meters high or more, endlessly long, straight or crooked. They [enter] in mysterious hangars and barracks, whence they [get] out, to chase other hangars and barracks in a senseless, unfathomable labyrinth. [Everything is] merged in pungent and acrid smells, sometimes sweetish, sometimes intolerable, among fumes and gas spills of any color and extension. (Casson, 34–35)

More than a satellite, industrial Venice materializes here as "a planet fallen into sea" (Marchiori, 127), an anti-Venice. In fact, the above-ground face of Marghera is the macabre, grotesque, and surreal pendant of Venice's watery underworld. In this industrial surrealism, the elemental hybridity of this city is forced to merge with other elements, unknown, unexpected, frightening, and unforgiving. The

human is here only a disposable wedge in the cannibal mechanism of the “development narrative.”

But this “futurist” chapter was inaugurated well before the time of artificial satellites and space exploration. Exactly one year before Thomas Mann’s visit to Venice (and four before the beginning of WWI), the theorist of Futurism, Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, cast a spell *Against Passéist Venice* (*Contro Venezia passatista*). It was the 27th of April 1910:

> We repudiate the old Venice, enfeebled and undone by centuries of worldly pleasure, though we too once loved and possessed it in a great nostalgic dream.
>
> We repudiate the Venice of foreigners, a market for counterfeiting antiquarians, a magnet of snobbery and universal imbecility, a bed whose bottom has been staved in by caravans of lovers, the bejeweled hip-bath of cosmopolitan courtesans, the *cloaca maxima* of passéism.
>
> We want to cure and heal this putrefying city, this magnificent sore from the past. We want to reanimate and ennoble the Venetian people, fallen from their ancient grandeur, drugged by the morphine of nauseating cowardice and debased by the habit of shady business.
>
> We want to prepare the birth of an industrial and military Venice that can dominate the Adriatic Sea, that great Italian lake.
>
> Let us hasten to fill in its little reeking canals with the ruins from its leprous and crumbling palaces.
>
> Let us burn the gondolas, rocking chairs for cretins, and raise to the heavens the imposing geometry of metal bridges and factories plumed with smoke, to abolish the cascading curves of the old architecture.
>
> Let the reign of divine Electric Light finally come to liberate Venice from its venal moonlight for furnished rooms to let (67–68).

“Let the reign of divine Electric Light finally come,” Marinetti said. And divine Electric Light came into Venice by way of Giuseppe Volpi, first Count of Misurata. Volpi, who would later become Mussolini’s Minister of Finances, was the owner of SADE, at that time the major Italian corporation for the production of electric

energy. (It is remarkable that, in 1963, SADE will be liable for one of the biggest environmental disasters of Italian history, the provoked collapse of a mountain into the reservoir of the Vajont dam.[10]) Volpi had promoted the creation of an "industrial Venice" to be placed in an area of the lagoon which had to be reclaimed and filled with ground. This area would become Porto Marghera, and the general agreement for its construction—engaging the city council and private entrepreneurs, with Volpi in the first row—was made in 1917. The land, which was state-owned, was conceded to the industrial group completely free of charge.

Porto Marghera was located in an agricultural site near the railways connecting Venice with the mainland. Meant to be Venice's industrial harbor, it was built on the sediment removed from the lagoon while digging the canals for the new settlement. In 1919, the first industrial plants had been completed, and in 1920–21 Marghera was already host to metallurgic factories and units for the production of sulfuric acid. Around 1923 "the productive plants [were] already twenty-seven, including those for coal and mineral oils distillation, shipbuilding, and metallurgic industries, all powered with the energy furnished by the SADE corporation […]. In 1929, the factories [were] fifty-five, out of which fifteen produce[d] chemicals; the workers [were] around ten thousand" (Fabbri, 26). A considerable urban expansion begins to surround the industrial area. In 1932 there were five thousand residents (today there are about twenty-eight thousand).

The history of Marghera is also the story of a dense concentration of industrial and financial interests, binding together the main industrial corporations in Italy and beyond.[11] But it is also a story of war: Marghera, in fact, was a production site for yperite or sulphur mustards, the infamous "mustard gas" used by the Italian army in Ethiopia and Libya (1936), in spite of the Geneva Protocol of 1925. Predictably, the Venetian industrial site also became a "sensitive target" during WWII.

In the 1950s, the era of petrochemical production begins. The former corporations operating in Marghera merge in a new company named "Edison," which will become "Montedison" after merging with Monsanto and Union Carbide (the owner of Bhopal's Union Carbide). In 1951, on a new expanse of land (called Industrial Zone II), the production of chlorine and PVC starts: Italy enters the plastic era.

As a symbol—at once ironic and gruesome—of the material textuality of this place, we can consider the way Industrial Zone II was

constructed. While the first industrial site was built on clean ground, the foundations of the Industrial Zone II were assembled using the chemical and metallurgical sludge of the "early days." Considered ecologically, this sludge accumulated near sandbanks, transforming them into big peninsulas: "To put it frankly, it was an industrial site laying on a humongous toxic dump, quantifiable in 10 million tons" (Fabbri, 41). Textually interpreted, however, this site is a material *mise en abîme* of the whole pollution system, almost a metaphysical self-representation of toxicity.

Obviously, the whole existence of the Petrolchimico comes at an incredible price for the human and natural ecology of the lagoon. Incredible amounts of toxic waste are produced over the decades, in spite of the denunciations of people, workers, environmental associations, and systems of rules meant to protect public health. Marghera is therefore also a story of irresponsibility, deceit, and stubborn denial. It is a story of how the pursuit of industrial interests (or economic interests in general) became so "absolute" (that is, so abstract) as to falsify the *texts* of reality—in form of territory, peoples' rights and health, an age-old landscape and the lagoon's ecological balance. In order to accumulate profit, this absolute industrial narrative became literally world-less. As a matter of fact, ever since its foundation, the Marghera Petrochemical factory had produced the most dangerous agents (including dioxin and phosgene), systematically keeping the workers uninformed about their noxiousness, occulting and manipulating scientific reports, which were already available from the 1950s and 60s. As that research had made clear, many of those substances "were carcinogenic, mutagenic, namely able to cause alteration to […] DNA, and/or teratogenic, namely able to negatively influence the fetus development" (Fabbri, 70). In 1973, the World Health Organization officially declared the carcinogenicity of vinyl chloride monomer (VCM), whose most frequently induced pathologies include cirrhosis, hepatopathologies, brain, lung, and liver cancer. But the production in the Petrolchimico continued.

In the 1980s Marghera finally became an environmental case for its systematic practice of dumping in the lagoon toxic pollutants such as sludge from the production of aluminum, zinc, sulfuric, and fluorhydric acid. In 1984 it was documented that every day—and for at least two decades—some four thousand tons of phosphogypsum had been poured into the sea. As the historian Piero Bevilacqua notes, the lagoon "has now turned into a private landfill for [these] factories" (147). This reckless practice ceased (if possible) only in 1988,

but for some years that sludge continued to be processed and used as the basis for construction and road-making materials. After that date, many of those pollutants were illegally dumped in Africa, or sank in the Mediterranean Sea on board of the so-called "ships of poison": secretly wretched ships clandestinely loaded with tons of all sorts of hazardous pollutants.[12]

In his long and important memoir on the trial, titled *La fabbrica dei veleni* (*The Poison Factory*, 2007), the magistrate Felice Casson has demonstrated how, in the decades of its industrial flourishing, the chief executive officers of Porto Marghera did their best to bury all the medical and scientific evidence related to the actual toxicity of the chemicals produced in the factory. The studies conducted by Italian physicians (in particular, the factory doctor Pier Luigi Viola and the oncologist Cesare Maltoni) and by international researchers were deliberately ignored or boycotted, in a game of trans-Atlantic industrial complicities aimed at the singular goal of continuing a dangerous production, regardless of the cost for the workers' health. Casson's investigations evinced a "secrecy protocol" binding the world's major petrochemical corporations: "A criminal and generalized 'pact of silence,' agreed upon between 1972 and 1973 by all the leaders of the world's [petrochemical] industries. This agreement was promoted by European corporations, with Montedison in the front row" (31). The result of the epidemiological research, if any (in many cases, in fact, they were not authorized), should remain top secret. The workers and residents of the industrial areas were either not informed about the risks, or "served" other, more reassuring information about the toxicity of the chemical agents produced in the factory. Among all the layers of justice (social, ecological, historical) of which the Marghera people were deprived, the most important was the cognitive one.

But the voice of the cells was telling another story, and this story became gradually evident and understandable by the affected subjects. The point was that, when these stories coming from the cells were reported to the factory's sanitary officers, they were either underestimated or attributed to other causes (excessive drinking or smoking, for example. But, however unhealthy drinking and smoking might be, a systematic association between them and pathologies as complex and rare such as hepatic Angiosarcoma, is hard to prove, especially in so high epidemiological rates).

To speak of the voice of the cell, here, is not simply a metaphor. As the biosemiotician Wendy Wheeler notes, our social life, our

work, the hierarchies we are placed in, are "written in our bodies in terms of flourishing or […] illness" (12). In terms of our biology, the coupling of environment and body "is a form of conversation, … a kind of narrative of conversational developments" (126). In this conversation, the human body, in its immune, nervous, and endocrine systems, elaborates and keeps the memory of "the many 'not-me' which it encounters" (122). This memory is elaborated by our cells, and shows itself in pathological forms. Hence, "It is not by looking at things that we understand them, but by dwelling in them" (63). To those dwelling in this reality, the cells voice was telling a story of inner mutation, of trans-substantiation between plastic and flesh. As Nancy Tuana explains:

> Beginning at a molecular level, we know that phtalates and vinyl chloride affect, in the human and also in nonhuman animal bodies, a complex interaction that can result in cancer. Workers inhale PVC dust, and those who live by incinerators inhale it as plastics are burned. The viscous porosity of our bodies and that of PVC allow for an exchange of molecules, where PVC and phtalates pass through the porosity of skin and flesh, particularly the mucosal linings of our intestines and our lungs. Plastic becomes flesh. (*Viscous Porosity*, 200–01)

Tuana's words describe a situation taking place in New Orleans in the aftermath of Katrina. In this respect, there are strong similarities between Venice and New Orleans. Like the undeniable evidence of cancer cases and pollution lays bare the hidden story of the factory, Katrina too exposes the plots of reality told by these material texts: the body cells, the bodies of the people suffering from exploitation and lack of protection. In Marghera, however, these bodily stories were ironically denied for many years. Rather than stopping the production, the workers were forced to operate wearing anti-gas masks; it was recommended that they use special toothpaste, or to drink milk. In the 1960s, after strong union struggles, the factory started to economically quantify the risk, and to compensate the workers for being exposed to substances clearly known as poisonous and toxic. In part, the unions backed this compensation policy, and this makes them co-responsible, at least in part, for the damages inflicted to the workers: complains of the workers about their health conditions were undermined or ignored even by the unions.

Finally, in 1998 a trial was ordered. Instrumental to it were the denunciations made by the workers themselves, in particular by

Gabriele Bortolozzo, who—with an admirable mix of social engagement and self-made scientific expertise—built an archive of all the medical records of those working (and dying) in Marghera. Combining his energies with those of Greenpeace and the medical association "Democratic Medicine," among others, Bortolozzo's efforts were crucial not only to start a widespread campaign against the chemical pollution in the lagoon, but to instruct this historic trial against the heads of the petrochemical factory, conducted side-by-side with Felice Casson. The story told by the medical records of 424 workers was that there was a connection between their pathologies to the production cycles of PVC and VCM. The trial was now trying to liberate that story.

The indicted executives totaled thirty-one. The accusations were mass murder, environmental disaster, mass culpable homicide, missing workplace safety, water and food poisoning, and the construction of illegal waste dumps. In a shocking decision, however, in 2001 all the defendants were acquitted, and the State obtained from the Montedison circa three hundred million euro as compensation. In 2004, though, the Mestre Appeal Court reversed the verdict, sentencing five Montedison executives to serve one and a half years in jail for culpable homicide. The Cassation Court (Italy's supreme level of justice) finally confirmed this sentence. What can be said today is that the Marghera Petrochemical factory is responsible for killing 157 workers (this figure is increasing due to the pathologies' development period), and it has caused the almost irremediable ecological degradation of Venice's lagoon. The story of this "lethal deception" is the subject of books, journalist reportages, documentary films, websites, and also it is also recorded in a virtual museum (http://agb.provincia.venezia.it/Attivita/Museo/Museo.html).

This was, after all, the Italian industrial dream: plastic, nylon, chlorine, cars, bags, etc. But this dream was, unfortunately, "absolute": it was completely disconnected from the textual evidence of reality. And the more disconnected it was, the more disconnections it caused; more and more disconnected layers of reality accumulated in this horizon made of ill bodies, polluted places, exploited and deceived people. Marghera (and the Margheras of the world) are the price paid for this dream of "absolute industrial narrative," with a peculiar detail: Marghera is not in the desert. It is up front in Venice. It *is* Venice.

The "putrefying city," whose "leprous and crumbling" matter Marinetti wished in 1910 to "reanimate" by means of "metal bridges

and factories plumed with smoke," was, almost a century later, dying of cancer, with all of its bodies. And this cancer was caused by the very factories, by those very smokes. There was no other way to "cure and heal" this new "magnificent sore" but to restore the material textuality of that body.

Text 3: Venice, Literature

In May in 1911, accompanied by his wife Katia and his brother Klaus, Thomas Mann finally touches Venice's body. He will give this experience a literary elaboration almost immediately thereafter, publishing *Der Tod in Venedig* the following year, in the October and November issues of the *Neue Rundschau*. Much has been said about this work. Prominent scholars and skilled critics have written on this masterpiece of modernist literature. They have seen it as a manifesto of Decadence, scrutinized the inner conflict of art and life, or analyzed the queer aesthetics of Aschenbach's voyeuristic relationship to the young Tatzio. Also particularly intense have been the explorations of the autobiographical background of the novel, in search of the inspiration sources behind the protagonist's figure (in Aschenbach, Mann has put traits of Mahler, Wagner, Nietzsche, the poet August von Platen, the painter Oswald Achenbach, of himself).[13] In the context of our reading, however, there are two main points to which I would like to draw your attention: first, the fact that Mann's novella is a story about bodies, whose macrocategory is Venice's body itself as a hybrid and collective organism; secondly, the fact that *Death in Venice* is also the story of how discursive falsifications of Venice's bodily texts generate forms of cognitive injustice, culminating in death.

Let us see how these two lines develop. In his trip to Venice, Aschenbach is prepared to experience a sensuous and hybrid landscape; this hybridity involves elements as well as the temporal dimension of biological development. In fact, Venice's body is Aschenbach's body: an aging, decaying, unquiet, "embellished" body—a dirty, sweating, sublimely dying artist's body. This is even more evident in Luchino Visconti's reinterpretation of the novel. Also Visconti's Venice is, to quote Borges again, a "*Venice made of crystal and twilight*" (1334, emphasis in the original), but it is also a liquefying and decomposing world, inhabited by feverish, sometimes grotesquely excited, figures. For Mann, however, Venice's body is also Tatzio's body—an ineffably beautiful young body. In this beautiful body, the germ of decay resides for the very fact that this is a living

body, a biologically determined *matter*.[14] The only possibility for this body to *stay* beautiful would be to have its *form* frozen in time, to die. It might be for this very reason that *the artist* Aschenbach secretly enjoys the idea of Tatzio being ill and not destined to a long life, of his teeth revealing poor health (Mann, 62): this early death would thus preserve his exquisite *form* from corruption. But Venice's body is all of this city's bodies, its dirty streets and white Istria stones, its seabirds and sandbanks, its brackish waters, its people—rich and poor, powerful and powerless. They are all caught in the tangle of space-time-matter from which biology depends.

Here Mann's decadent aesthetics inhibit any romanticization of Venice's landscape. In his iconographic imagination, rather than Canaletto we sense Guercino, *Et in Arcadia Ego*. In fact, and first of all, Venice is not a landscape, here. It is not a picturesque setting, a mere background, but it is itself a character of Mann's novella. It is a full-fledged persona in the story. It is a corporeal presence one can smell, feel, touch: "A repellent sultriness permeated the narrow streets, the air so thick that the odors emanating from houses, shops, and food stalls—the vapor of oil, the clouds of perfume, and more—hovered like fumes without dispersing" (62). Venice possesses here its own pervasive metabolic agency. Aschenbach knows that "the city had … *made* him ill" (68, emphasis added). The "foul-smelling lagoon" (62), takes possession of Aschenbach's feverish bodymind, confusing it completely.[15]

In some cases, this bodily presence is portrayed in ways that are not immune from gendered modulations. Venice is here clearly a female figure and, expectedly, not a positive one:

> Such was Venice, the wheedling, shady beauty, a city half fairy tale, half tourist trap, in whose foul air the arts had once flourished luxuriantly and which had inspired musicians with undulating, lullingly licentious harmonies. The adventurer […] recalled, too, that the city was diseased and was concealing it out of cupidity (104).

The city's uncanny materiality culminates with the admission that another living agent has entered Venice's body. Illness is this "strange stranger" (Morton, 15), manifesting itself in sensuous forms: "the odor of the diseased city" (101). In this heavily breathing atmosphere ("The air was still and noxious," 103), the body of Venice and all the bodies in/of Venice share the same fate.

But this fate is not due to a combination of merely material conditions: "the city was diseased and was concealing it out of cupidity" (104). Indeed, *Death in Venice* is the story of a sanitary emergency, and of the fraudulent way the city's authorities handle this emergency. The cholera outbreak is caused by a number of coalescing agencies: environmental conditions, the climate, poor hygiene, "the prevailing insecurity" of the populace. Fatal, however, is the way "corruption in high places," undermining or covering the danger, mingles with all these agencies, thereby amplifying the explosion of the epidemic. We have here a clear example of how material elements coupled with discursive practices result in a series of "often unpredictable and unwanted actions" (Alaimo, 2), whose effects are fractally disseminated throughout the bodies of reality. As this case illustrates, the rim between (human) bodies and (more-than-human) environment is hardly more than an abstraction. Rather than an indistinct holism, however, we are witnessing a vast, ensnaring and puzzling "mesh" of bodies and forces. This material-discursive entrapment clutches all forms and dimensions of life. The world's ecologies are this very entanglement, and no being, idea, or thing can exist apart from it, nor does "nature" stand as in a separate sphere, immune from the "alien" substances and polluting discourses affecting our life.[16]

Venice is therefore a larger metaphor of the bodily condition as split between pureness and contamination, splendor and decay: an elementally *hybrid* (i.e. *impure*) state depending on the laws of space-time-matter. Venice, however, is not only is *par excellence* body, but also *par excellence* complexity, being itself a "compound individual" (see Oppermann), a super-organism made of other organisms, their lives porously connected with its life. The epitome of such interconnectedness is what Nancy Tuana has called "viscous porosity":

> There is a viscous porosity of flesh—my flesh and the flesh of the world. This porosity is a hinge through which we are of and in the world. I refer to it as viscous, for there are membranes that effect the interactions. These membranes are of various types—skin and flesh, prejudgments and symbolic imaginaries, habits and embodiments. They serve as the mediators of interaction (199–200).

The "mediators of interaction" here are the sirocco and the "fetid lagoon," body cells and police, a basket of strawberries, and the complicity between negligent authorities and the people in Venice

(the "unctuous" barber,[17] the hotel manager,[18] the Southern joker/singer[19]). What is striking, though, is the way information is deliberately manipulated and the truth artfully disguised: "The street corners were plastered with printed notices warning the population on behalf of the city fathers against eating oysters and mussels and using canal water because of certain gastric disorders that were only to be expected given the weather conditions. The euphemistic nature of the ordinance was clear" (98–99). "A precautionary measure, sir!" (99). But finally everything comes into sight in a clear and comprehensive picture:

> The Venetian authorities issued a statement to the effect that health conditions had never been better, then took the most essential precautions against the disease. But some food must have been contaminated [...] because, denied or concealed as it was, death ate a path through the narrow streets, and the premature summer heat, which had warmed the water in the canals, was particularly conducive to its spread. [...] [F]ear of the overall damage that would be done—concern over the recently opened art exhibition in the Public Gardens and the tremendous losses with which the hotels, the shops, the entire, multifaceted tourist trade would be threatened in case of panic and loss of confidence—proved stronger in the city than the love of truth and respect for international covenants: it made the authorities stick stubbornly to their policy of secrecy and denial. The chief medical officer of Venice, a man of outstanding merit, had resigned from his post in high dudgeon and been quietly replaced by a more pliable individual. The populace knew all this, and corruption in high places together with the prevailing insecurity and the state of emergency (122).

In the face of the materiality of danger, a falsifying narrative provides reassuring discourses, so as to disable the alarm without neutralizing the bomb. The echoes between this story and that of the Petrochemical factory are hard to overlook. In saying this, however, I am not alluding to a bizarre mimicry between art and life. What I mean is that literature, combined with the material texts of reality, provides theory to better understand these texts. If we read literature and reality through each other, in a diffractive way, we might better recognize recurring patterns: in our case, a game of unheeded material eloquence and pursued discursive deception in which cognitive justice—*people's right to know and to choose accordingly*—is completely nullified. Both in Mann's Venice and in Porto Marghera, the combination of

physical danger, political complicity, and textual falsification of reality are fatal. As Belle-époque travelers become disposable resources for an economic system feeding on tourists, so Porto Marghera's workers taste the violence of an abstract, world-less, and indifferent industrial narrative. The only difference between the two situations emerges, if we consider Aschenbach's death. Aschenbach is aware of the epidemic and willfully decides to die, whereas Porto Marghera's people undergo a much more subtle coercion, accentuated by the economic blackmail that the factory plays with the community.

But, by providing a theory to better see reality, literature can also provide categories to interpret reality. In so doing, literature transforms reality itself into its own narrative. This is what Zanzotto and Paolini respectively do. Zanzotto does it by offering a poetic reading of Venice's invisible nature(s) and wounded body. Paolini does it by socializing these wounds and turning them into a performative memory that can be shared, cognized, and re-enacted.

Andrea Zanzotto (Pieve di Soligo, 1911–2011) is without any doubt one of the most important contemporary European poets. As his American translator Patrick Barron explains, "his poetry delves beneath the surface of language and landscape to explore the complex mesh of culture and nature evident in his native village and the surrounding countryside—concentrations of energy within clustered locales that he terms 'archipelagoes of places'" (3). Venice obviously occupies a major part in this archipelago. In his poetic prose and poems, Zanzotto—a poet of the landscape "as a subject"—emphasizes the hybrid and ambivalent nature(s) of Venice. In its natural-cultural complexity and stratification, this is one of these places "laden with geologic, human, and nonhuman remains, all jumbled together" (Barron, 4). Among the numerous compositions he devotes to Venice, particularly interesting for our purpose are five poems composing a cycle titled "Fu Marghera (?)" ("The Late Marghera (?)," published in 2009) and a work of narrative prose, "Venezia, forse" ("Perhaps, Venice," 1976). I concentrate here on the latter.

In "Venezia, forse" Zanzotto is not afraid of this ambiguous textuality of Venice. Like his poems, also is prose strips the city of its picturesque aura, and gives it back to its weird life—a strange, quasi-zombie life, in which destructive and vivifying forces coexist along with the discordant fates of the city's storied body. After an intensely lyrical opening, hesitating between geological vastness and a delicate coming-near, Zanzotto focuses on Venice's inner fluctuations and ambivalences. These fluctuations, he suggests, require first

of all a different way of *thinking* Venice: "every thought referring to it has to be located elsewhere" (88), it has to "shatter any confirmed perspective" (87). In other words, to entirely meet Venice, we need to uproot ourselves from it, "entering so deep inside as to 'pierce' [it], arriving elsewhere, and seeing [this place] anew" (Giancotto, 13). "Perhaps" one can approach Venice only from this elsewhere, Zanzotto suggests, or "perhaps" we can possess it only as a simulacrum, a picture in a painting, a postcard replica, or a fragment of the huge touristic imagination. But, comprehended from the distance of this elsewhere, Venice appears as a whole, a round universe, in which the idealized pictures make way for the material complexity of a "monstrous" ecology (see Cohen). So we are here in a "world of crossings" (Zanzotto, "Venezia, forse," 96), a "precarious/eternal" dimension (88) where the Adriatic sea shows "its nature of poor pool now thickened with sludge, where the purest mother-of-pearl blends with the shady rainbows of industrial dejections" (89), where "pus and petroleum, phosgene and worms [...], incompetence and vain ambition, are [...] facts" (108). As Zanzotto says:

> Humans and things find themselves together in asking for help against the near furnaces for chlorine and phosgene, against the black magic that fertilizes all earth with death. Quite different from the traditional myth of the "death in Venice" is the one looming from Marghera and from the whole womb of the dry land, whose horizons are worm-eaten by the encastellations and towers of industry (103).

To accept Venice's double nature means to go past its metanarratives—whether of "absolute beauty" or of "industrial progress." Beauty, Zanzotto says (consonant with Mann) is not absolute; it is not disconnected from the materiality of its object; hence, it implies decay, corruption, and death: every living matter is, *sub specie aeternitatis*, a corpse. "Industrial progress," on the other side, is an abstraction—and it is an abstraction as it abstracts its substantive processes of withdrawal, transformation, consumption, and pollution from the world; its very reality depends on this abstraction—and therefore it is, like beauty, non absolute from its materiality. In that it mesmerizes governments, decision makers, and workers, "industrial progress" is as deceiving as "black magic." But death is also a chance of solidarity for getting together humans and nonhumans, because "the haunting of monsters reveals communal values, shared aspirations and lived ethics [...] as well as the coinhabitance and alien

thriving of the nonhuman" (Cohen, 273). This shocking coinhabitance has, nevertheless, ethical and cognitive disclosures:

> The most distressingly strident couple in the world, Venice fastened together with Mestre-Marghera (which one is the living, which one is the corpse?), all of a sudden challenges you to a salvaging suture through the obscenity of the real and of the present; it challenges you [...] to 'move further,' [...] toward a never-seen where even evil could be stopped, emptied of its power, and rehabilitated as a sign, a trace, a form (104–05).

Like living body and corpse, the mother-of-pearl blended with industrial dejections, matter and anti-matter, Venice and Marghera—this anti-Venice—are one and the same. To see Venice means to see this living monstrosity. As an alternative, we should concur with Giorgio Agamben and admit that Venice is no longer a corpse, but rather a specter—a "blabbering" presence "left to drain on the *fondamente*, together with rotten algae and plastic bottles" (11). But, if we really want "to move further," we have to transform mourning into cognition, and develop new ways of seeing that stop the evil, as Zanzotto demands. And this is just what an ecocritical interpretation of all the "implicit Venices" aims at: stopping the evil and rehabilitating it as a sign. To see Venice (which is the same as to see the world) is to embrace all these contradictions and to recognize them. It means to recognize the world as a place of unremitting interferences, hybridizations, encounters. In this "moving-further," even beyond the Aristotelian principle of noncontradiction ("which one is the living, which one is the corpse?") is the key to understanding the many wounds of this huge body of which we are part.

Even more than novels and poetic prose, theater can contribute to socialize these wounds. One of the most original and *engagé* Italian playwright, Marco Paolini (b. in Belluno in 1956) is the author of a number of plays that enact what he calls "*teatro civico*," "a civic theater": long monologues about events of the recent past, often, but not exclusively, from an Italian standpoint (his most celebrated works are about two socioenvironmental catastrophes, both displaying an underground connection to Venice: Vajont and Bhopal).[20] In these acts of "narrative resistance," a collective civil memory is reconstructed as a necessary operation of cognitive justice. Venice is "implicit" in many of his plays, but it emerges as the subject of two of them: *Il Milione: Quaderno veneziano* (*The Million: A Venetian Notebook*, 1997)

and *Parlamento Chimico: Storie di Plastica* (*Chemical Parliament: Plastic Stories*, 2001). This latter play is about Porto Marghera.

Chemical Parliament: Plastic Stories is based on a significant amount of data, including historical documents, the workers' medical records, the proceedings of the trial against the heads of the Petrochemical factory, scientific and technological descriptions of the production processes, and many personal stories of people living inside or near the factory. Here again, the "narrative agencies" are material. As Paolini says in an interview: "In my narrative style, characters are [...] the substance; through their bodies and words the story materializes. In *Plastic Stories*, in turn, productive processes and plants play the leading role; finance, chlorine: they have now become my characters" (Marchiori, 79).[21] The factory itself emerges as a body. Paolini portrays this body as a naked body, so naked that one can almost picture it through X-rays: "you see the whole skeleton and all the nerves, the circulatory system and the inner organs of the factory: cracking towers, refinery plants, autoclaves, pipes" (Marchiori, 38). Looking into this organic nudity creates a new porn, an industrial porn:

> Naked factories that, when the lights are turned on, let you glimpse their circulatory system, their organs... this is porn. Therefore men like it. I know of many people seduced at night by the petrochemical factories spread in the landscape: this is something that lures mostly males, with all those fires, lights, structures...[22]

This obscenity, however, is the same that Zanzotto saw in the ambivalent corpse/body of Venice. The present, for Paolini like for Zanzotto (and like Pier Paolo Pasolini before them), is obscene. Still more so if one considers the circularity between such obscenity and the discursive obscenity of the Italian industrial metanarrative. All this is obscene not because it reveals too much, but because it hides what should be showed. As Fernando Marchiori observes: "to move inside the labyrinth of the petrochemical factory, of its plants, productions, struggles and judicial acts [...] means drawing [...] a geography of environmental crime in the fragile ecosystem of the lagoon, a geography of the whole Italian blind industrial development" (Marchiori, 38). Paolini connects facts and framework into a narrative "civic" memory and thus creates a game of mirroring and resonances within the naked and wounded bodies of reality. And so Marghera becomes all the Margheras of the world, near and far: it

is Bhopal; but it is also the archetype figure of the global theatres of war, from WWI and WWII to more recent wars. "Marghera plants can help us picture the VCM factory bombed in Belgrade, and the euphorizing sweetish-tasting cloud, which goes unnoticed, cover by smoke and the exploding bombs" (Marchiori, 39). Performed in front of an audience of workers (who are themselves textual matter on which this story is written), of informed citizens and of common people, the play echoes reality indefinitely, and in so doing it produces multiple reverberations of meanings. (It is worth noting that the preparatory representation—a "narrative attempt," "*prova di racconto*"—of *Chemical Parliament* took place in 2001 in Castiglioncello, Tuscany, near the Solvay petrochemical plant of Piombino, an "associate" of Montedison: the Marghera factory's story was thus set within another similarly storied factory.) Paolini's play connects all these people, with all these places, with all the pieces of this puzzle. Literature is helping reality to perform itself and its interconnectedness via the story, the stage, and the audience. This is a practice of civil resistance and narrative liberation.[23]

Put on stage in Venice in 2003, during the Carnival, and right after the second sentence of the Marghera trial, *Chemical Parliament* is the story of a political failure in front of matter's textuality. As Paolini said: "The language of politics do not include the admission of failure. Its narrative 'art' is conventionally structured as to always tell things in terms of defense, consolidation. But who shall tell failures, if no politician will care to do it?" Venice's bodies do. But literature does it, too. It does it by transforming evils into signs, thus liberating the voices of reality.

Text: World

The way we, not only as ecocritics, but in general as intellectuals, relate to the material eloquence of the world is important. It involves, in fact, a reflection on the ethical role of the humanities in creating tools apt to understand the tangles of material agencies, socioecological sustainability, and human responsibilities. To read the worlds as a text—and to implement correct interpretations of this textuality—is not only ecologically correct, but also a necessary way to create social forms of cognitive justice, and hence practices of political liberation and environmental responsiveness.

The importance of this approach is clear. Whenever the "text" of the world is misread, uncontrollable consequences ensue. This misreading happens all the times we believe that the boundaries between

"the outside" and "the inside" are firm and solid; it happens when we think of the "world outside" as inert matter and we imagine it as unrelated to the "world inside." It happens all the times we set up an alienated relationship to reality. Whenever this occurs, we fall into

> a mass hallucinatory fantasy in which the megatons of waste we dump in our rivers and bays are not poisoning the water, the hydrocarbons we pump into the air are not changing the climate, overfishing is not depleting our oceans, fossil fuel will never run out, wars that kill masses of civilians are an appropriate way to keep our hands on what's left, we are not desperately overdrawn at the environmental bank, and, really, the kids are all right (Kingsolver, "A Good Farmer," 13).

An alienated relationship (and, therefore, a misinterpretation) of reality is also the one that, in Italy, leads ecomafia clans to intersperse densely populated areas with toxic waste, areas where their own families—and they themselves—live. In their criminal hallucination, they act as if they do not have to breathe the same air, drink the same water, eat the same food produced on that land, or live in houses built on polluted ground.

A city always hovering above itself, Venice too has fallen prey to the narrative of industrial development, an alienated narrative not necessarily contemplating the existence of reality as it is. This narrative has a characteristic feature, namely, that of deciding which elements to include in the story, which voices to allow to speak, and to which actors to assign the main role. It is a narrative often built in advance and hard to reconcile with the reality of things. It is based on the oversimplification of complex dynamics and it relies on an arbitrary and disputable "editing"—one that leaves outside the truly revelatory elements, those that give a sense to the story nonetheless emerging in the final frame. This final frame is that of the death in Venice, or, if you prefer, of the deaths that Venice holds in itself, as a place, as a scenery, as a landscape, and, most of all, as a collective of actants.

The aim of this lecture was exactly this: to rewrite or rebuild the narrative about Venice and about the death in Venice, privileging a different logic compared to the "official narratives." Our logic is not linear, but "emergent." Things originate from an indissoluble reciprocity; they emerge as a collective in which human and nonhuman players act together. In this ontological interaction and coemergence,

material and discursive dynamics blend with each other and have an equally formative role in the constitution of reality.

Barry Commoner's first law of ecology reads: "Everything is connected to everything else. There is one ecosphere for all living organisms and what affects one, affects all." However empirically hard to prove, this "law" is helpful to understand our discourse. If we think that most of the plastic composing the infamous Great Pacific Plastic Patch consists of PVC and related substances, essentially deriving from petroleum; if we think how these eerie bodily presences are interacting with the sea's biodiversity, oceanic streams, the atmosphere, climate, and (via the food chain) our own life; and if we consider that this oceanic plastic was produced in industrial plants like Marghera (or like Bhopal, or New Orleans), using the same procedures, creating the same pollution, generating the same diseases, exploiting and cognitively defrauding people in the same way, and participating in the same deceitful industrial "narratives"—whereas "corruption in the high places" means death in the lower ones, whether human or not—then we will admit that Commoner might be on the right track, and that there is an actual connection between the tiles of the mosaic. Like the cholera and death(s) in Venice, the climate change that threatens to erase a lagoon in Northern Italy is also due to interplaying factors, which include "natural" agents as well as human discourses, sometimes disconnected from the matter of the world.

An ecocritical approach is the way we, as literary critics who believe in the existence of reality,[24] try to see all these apparently disconnected elements as parts of a wide story, and to make sense of this story. As our moral duty, we have to responsibly discard falsifying narratives and heed the eloquence of things. Maybe not arbitrarily, we put all these elements into a comprehensive frame, one that works like Kant's regulatory ideas: it provides directions, inviting us to act *as if* these apparently disconnected tiles would compose a picture, a chapter in this complex text we call "the world." Such as if is our strongest weapon in the struggle for cognitive justice. If we really hope that "the evil is blocked, emptied of its power, and rehabilitated as a sign," that is the means we have.

University of Turin

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Endnotes

[1] See Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, 7 and (without the hyphen) Haraway, *The Haraway Reader*, 2.

[2] See Iovino and Oppermann, *Material Ecocriticism*.

[3] As Andrea Zanzotto wrote, this dynamism of waters and lands "takes us back to the time when a large part of the Adriatic sea did not exist, and the rivers of a powerful, now unthinkable 'geological unconscious' used to flow here" ("Lagune," 111). Unless otherwise indicated, translations are my own.

[4] So Goethe on the 9th of October 1786: "The lagoons are a creation of nature. The interaction of tides and earth, followed by the gradual fall in level of the primeval ocean, formed an extensive tract of swampland at the extreme end of the Adriatic, which was covered at high tide but partly exposed at low. Human skill took over the highest portions of ground and thus Venice came into being as a cluster of hundreds of islands surrounded by hundreds of other islands. At great cost and with incredible energy, deep channels were dredged to enable warships to reach the vital points even at low tide. All that intelligence and hard work created in times past, intelligence and hard work have now to preserve" (97).

[5] Goethe saw in the urban pollution a problem. Sewage systems did not exist, and the rubbish was also disposed in the lagoon. Today not only is a sewage system missing, but the lagoon is the open cesspool for all the wastewaters of the mainland region.

[6] As the nineteenth century historian André Viessieux commented, "This was the first open act of French policy which alienated the Italians of all parties. It was unjust and cruel towards the Venetians; although, perhaps, it was expedient to France" (*Italy and the Italians in the Nineteenth Century* I, 255).

[7] For all this information, see Bevilacqua, *Venezia e le acque*, Salzano, *La laguna di Venezia*, and De Lucia, *Nella città dolente* 86–90.

[8] The subsidence is "the sinking of land due to natural and anthropogenic causes, is primarily due to the drawing of groundwater

that in the past has been strong, especially in the industrial area of Marghera. From 1950 to 1970 the average lowering of the soil in the Venice area was approximately 12 cm. The eustatism, sea-level rise, is linked to climatic variations of the globe: from the beginning of the last century to the '70s, the eustatic rise in Venice was 9 cm. Since 1970 the increase observed in Trieste and thus independent of local subsidence, was approximately 5 cm. These two processes have contributed to the change over time of the average sea level, which currently is about 26 cm (average for the last ten years) higher than that of 1897." See http://www.comune.venezia.it/flex/cm/pages/ServeBLOB.php/L/EN/IDPagina/1844.

[9] Montedison, Enimont, Enichem, and more recently Vinyls: these are only some of corporate names of Venice's Petrochemical factory. In fact, in less than a century of activity, it has changed so many "labels" that is it impossible to keep a consistent denomination. I will refer to it simply as the "Petrolchimico" or the "Petrochemical factory."

[10] The subject of a series of studies, the Vajont case has been declared by the UNESCO the first of five "cautionary tales," caused by "the failure of engineers and geologists." So reads the "cautionary tale" on the UNESCO website: "The Vajont reservoir disaster is a classic example of the consequences of the failure of engineers and geologists to understand the nature of the problem that they were trying to deal with. During the filling of the reservoir a block of approximately 270 million cubic metres detached from one wall and slid into the lake at velocities of up to 30 metres per second (approx. 110 kilometres per hour). As a result a wave overtopped the dam by 250m and swept onto the valley below, with the loss of about 2500 lives. The dam remained unbroken by the flood and is still there today. Proper understanding of the geology of the hillside would have prevented the disaster. Vajont is located in the south-eastern part of the Dolomite Region of the Italian Alps, about 100km north of Venice. It was built as a part to provide hydroelectricity for the rapidly-expanding northern cities of Milan, Turin, and Modena. A proposal to site a dam at this location was made in the 1920s; excavation of the site began in 1956 and the dam was completed in 1960. The completed doubly curved arch dam was, at 265.5 metres above the valley floor, the world's highest thin arch dam. The volume of impounded water was 115 million cubic metres" (http://en.lswn.it/press-releases/international-year-of-planet-earth-global-launch-event-12-13-february-2008/). As it appears from this "tale," the

narrative of the "reign of divine Electric Light" was taking materially shape in the 1920s. In the terms of our discourse, if engineers and geologists had not culpably provided a wrong interpretation of this material textuality, this disaster would not have occurred.

[11] SAVA furnished aluminum alloys, ILVA the iron and steel products, whereas the Montecatini provided the chemical agents necessary to transform mineral and petroliferous products. All these corporations are part of the—not always happy—history of Italian industrial capitalism.

[12] The history of Porto Marghera, briefly summarized here, is meticulously explained by the natural scientist and Greenpeace activist Fabrizio Fabbri in his volume *Porto Marghera e la Laguna di Venezia: Vita, Morte, Miracoli*. See also Rabitti, *Cronache dalla chimica*, and Bettin and Dianese, *Petrolkiller*.

[13] For a discussion about these aspects, see, among many others, Hans-Georg Schede, *Thomas Mann, Der Tod in Venedig*. Stuttgart: Reclam, 2006; Ellis Shookman, *Thomas Mann's "Death in Venice": A Novella and Its Critics*. Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2003. For a more general overview, see Herbert Lenhert, Eva Wessel. Ed. *A Companion to the Works of Thomas Mann*. Rochester: Camden House, 2004.

[14] In this context, we can see the hypothetical presence, in Aschenbach's figure, of the poet August von Platen (1796–1835). Platen was the author in of a series of *Sonette auf Venedig* (1825). The poem Tristan begins with verses that Mann used to quote in his work: "Wer die Schönheit angeschaut mit Augen, / Ist dem Tode schon anheimgegeben" (Schede, 33). To look at beauty *with eyes* (as opposed to an ideal contemplation) is already a way to embed this beauty into a bodily dimension, one fatally destined to corruption and death.

[15] "The longer he walked, the more afflicted he was by that odious condition brought on by the combination of sea air and sirocco: simultaneous excitation and prostration. He broke out into a disagreeable sweat. […] he felt feverish, […] and the fetid effluvia from the canals made breathing a torment. Leaning against the edge of a fountain in a quiet square, one of those forgotten, godforsaken spots in the heart of Venice, he wiped his forehead and realized he would have to travel on" (Mann, 63).

[16] As Timothy Morton put it: "The mesh of interconnected things is vast, perhaps immeasurably so. Each entity in the mesh looks

strange. Nothing exists all by itself, and so nothing is fully 'itself.' […] Our encounter with other beings becomes profound. They are strange, even intrinsically strange. Getting to know them makes them stranger. When we talk about life forms, we're talking about *strange strangers*. The ecological thought imagines a multitude of entangled strange strangers" (15).

[17] "'But you are staying on, sir. You have no fear of the disease.' Aschenbach looked at him. 'The disease?' The prattler did not reply, acted busy, disregarded the question, and when it was put to him with more urgency he claimed to know nothing and attempted with embarrassed eloquence to change the subject" (Mann, 97–98).

[18] "One day at breakfast in the main dining room he confronted the manager, the light-footed little man in the French frock coat who would circulate among the diners, greeting them and ensuring that things were as they should be, and had stopped at Aschenbach's table for a few words. Why is it, the guest asked casually, as if by the by, why in the world have they been disinfecting Venice all this time? 'It is a police precaution,' answered the hypocrite, 'an official measure designed to forestall any situation injurious to the public health that might arise as a result of the sultry and unseasonably warm weather.' 'The police are to be commended,' Aschenbach replied, and after a brief exchange of meteorological observations the manager excused himself." (Mann, 108)

[19] "'Tell me,' said the solitary traveler in an almost mechanical undertone. 'Venice is being disinfected. Why?' 'It's the police,' the joker answered hoarsely, 'the rules, sir. It's the heat and the sirocco. The sirocco is oppressive. It's bad for the health …' He spoke as if surprised one could pose such a question, and demonstrated the sirocco's pressure with the flat of his hand. 'So there is no disease in Venice?' Aschenbach asked very softly between his teeth. The jester's muscular features settled into a grimace of comic helplessness. 'Disease? Of what sort? Is the sirocco a disease? Or our police—are they a disease? You must be joking! A disease? How can you say such a thing? A preventative measure, can't you see? A police order to combat the effects of the oppressive weather conditions…'" (Mann, 114).

[20] *Il racconto del Vajont* (1996) and *Bhopal: 6 dicembre 1984* (2003). On Paolini's theatre, see Marchiori.

[21] "The two and a half hours of the show are split in two parts, marked by a perfect narrative cut. The first part collects the history (the *stories*) of the industrial building and of the chemical discoveries,

the explanations about the productive cycles, in particularly about the chlorine line. When the narrative arrives to the first protests of the workers, who threat to directly discommode the 'master,' the answer is at once funny, *true*, and precisely functional to the montage: 'Yes, but who is the master?' [in Venetian, 'Sì, ma chi xè el parón?']. The second part will then be devoted to sketch an essential but precise scheme of the Petrochemical factory's complicated changes of property, of its corporate structure and financial games" (Marchiori, 155).

[22] Excerpts from the play are available online at: http://www.jolefilm.com/produzioni/teatro/parlamento-chimico/

[23] As Marchiori comments, *Chemical Parliament/Plastic Stories* is "a theatrical enclave within a 'didactic drama,' a precious touchstone for every civil theatre to come, set into a narrative structure always remindful that its efficacy lies it capacity to divulge information" (153).

[24] The reference is to Latour, *Pandora's Hope*, chapter 1.

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