Iovino, Serenella. "Cognitive Justice and the Truth of Biology: Death (and Life) in Venice." *Ecocriticism and Italy: Ecology, Resistance, and Liberation*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016. 47–82. Environmental Cultures. *Bloomsbury Collections*. Web. 26 Apr. 2023. <<http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781474219488.ch-002>>.

Downloaded from Bloomsbury Collections, www.bloomsburycollections.com, 26 April 2023, 11:00 UTC.

Copyright © Serenella Iovino 2016. Released under a CC BY-NC-ND licence (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/>). You may share this work for non-commercial purposes only, provided you give attribution to the copyright holder and the publisher, and provide a link to the Creative Commons licence.

Cognitive Justice and the Truth of Biology

Death (and Life) in Venice

“There is still one of which you never speak.”

Marco Polo bowed his head.

“Venice,” the Kahn said.

Marco smiled. “What else do you believe I have been talking to you about?”

(Calvino 1997: 78)

The first time I visited Venice it was one mid-December. It was lightly rainy, not particularly cold. The high tide all over the *calli* and *campi* had transmuted the city into an evanescent mirror of itself—a doubled reality, fading away when you touch it, or step upon it. After a while, however, all this was gone by itself: Ever since it is there, in that liminal swirl of northeast Italy, the lagoon breathes. And it breathes tides.

It was very valuable, in those few days, to experience how demanding it is to cohabit with elements that, in spite of all the delusions of modernity, you cannot control. Plunged into brackish waters, the city revealed the very volatility of this elemental cohabitation—a state of temporary (and perhaps occasional) balance, similar to the one that makes life—all life—“a vortex of shared precariousness and unchosen proximities,” as Jeffrey Cohen says (Cohen 2015b: 107). To make the vortex of life even more precarious, even more shared in space and in time, many of these proximities are chosen: In Venice, for example, the odd intimacy with one of Europe’s biggest petrochemical factories.

I remember entering Piazza San Marco from a side lane one night. The lights of the arcades were liquid; echoed in water, they were the square’s

ground. Suspended on the strange sea-sky right over our feet, the delicacy of the basilica's decorations in floral Gothic style made the Piazza look like an old virgin, once so powerful and now needing to protect herself from the many threats of people, the world, and the changing times. With my PVC wellington boots and ridiculous cell phone, that night I sensed the wheeze of this venerable miss, slowly drowning in her own breath. On the other side of the lagoon, on terra firma, floral smokes were swirling up the cracking towers. And so I realized that, far from being just a picture in the museum of decadent imagery, death is in Venice.

Ecocriticism, diffractions, and Venice's texts

A recurrent trope among artists and writers long before Thomas Mann, death in Venice is much more than a fictional theme. It has indeed concrete faces, which come into sight with very recognizable features. These faces are the menacing waters and fluxes of energy generated by global warming; unsustainable tourism and gigantic cruise ships; the anti-ecological engineering systems carried out to control the increasing high tides; or common human activities, interfering day by day with the delicate ecosystem of the lagoon. Again, it has the face of dioxin and hepatic angiosarcoma, spread here for decades by the Montedison petrochemical factory of Porto Marghera, just a few miles from San Marco Square.

This chapter casts light 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 unveil the hidden plots and meanings of a reality, but also to amplify the often unheard voices of this reality. Handled with this purpose in mind, ecocriticism becomes therefore a device to delve into the world's own

eloquence, and to elicit both the implicit message of those material texts and their generative connections with 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.¹

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. Our global ecological crises confirm how deeply unstable and delicate is the equilibrium of natural-cultural substances and forces. As the perfect epitome of this fact, Venice represents the discordant harmony of elements upon which human civilization lies. Even more so, it challenges the very possibility of such a harmony. To create a city suspended on a lagoon, the Faustian dream of turning sea into solid ground, is an exercise in hybridity not only because it mixes water and land into a new elemental combination, but above all because it is an act of *hubris*, a violation of ontological pacts. Certainly, *hubris* may have a creative function, and Venice stays as the luminous splendor of this assumption. It is undeniable, however, that the instability of this “alluring yet threatening hybridity” (Sullivan 2014b: n.p.), produces here an incumbent state of danger. Not only is Venice exposed to its terraqueous 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 suppress and completely misread this complex reality. When political and industrial decisions such as the building of Porto Marghera’s petrochemical factory were made, the *text* “Venice” was read in isolation from its broad *con-text*: In isolation from its ecosystem, its history, its elemental corporeality. The story of this misinterpretation is narrated by documents and bodies, it 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 chapter we will follow a series of stories—material stories and literary stories. After considering the narratives embedded in Venice’s body, we will move to literature. 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 how such interferences add a further dimension to Venice’s storied matter thus contributing

to accomplish ecocriticism's project of reading into—and thus restoring—the world's narrative layers.

This operation is not intended as a “local” journey. “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 (Calvino 1997: 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, unstable, or challenging. In Venice's translucent text, we can catch a glimpse of many other places near and far, from Bhopal to New Orleans.

Text 1: Lagoon

To read the text of Venice one has to plunge deep. And so, as through an underground psychedelic trip, one reaches its “geological unconscious” (Zanzotto 2013a: 111), an extraordinarily dense subtext made of the co-emerging dynamics of waters, land, climate, ecology, and history. We find the hybrid natures of this place right here, preserved in a remote stratigraphy of memory and matter.

Elementally amphibious, Venice lies inside a lagoon, a mobile site where the blending of fluvial and saline waters determines unique evolutionary conditions for ecosystems. Extended over 340 square miles (550 km²), the Venetian 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 creates 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 respires 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 “exhales” low tide. Like a lung expanding with the incoming air, the lagoon increases its surface with the incoming sea. (Fabbri 2003: 19)

The tide cycle lasts twelve hours; in the lagoon's fluctuating rhythm, time—the poet Andrea Zanzotto writes—“becomes visible [...] from hour to hour

in the mutual game of tides, the colors of sandbanks and marshes,” and the emerging/submerged ground (Zanzotto 2013a: 112). It is this sequence of oscillations and stabilizations that marks the uniqueness of this place: “This is the lagoon, and this is not the lagoon, this is the lagoon’s enigma, and this is the lagoon’s overwhelming clarity. [...] The lagoon is feverish and yet calm, at once reassuring and deceiving” (Zanzotto 2013a: 112–13).

But the Venetian landscape has not always been like this. Dating back to 2,500 years ago, the lagoon’s current hydrogeological conformation is relatively recent. It was about the same period that, some 1,500 miles southeast, Egyptian slaves, under a pharaoh of the Fourth Dynasty, were erecting in Giza a pyramid that would become the first of the Seven Wonders. We thus need to dive further back in time to see the Venetian lagoon originating from the melting of a vast ice gulf, which used to connect the eastern border of the Alps with the center of the Adriatic Sea, on a territory extending approximately from Grado (near today’s Slovenian border) to Ancona. Ten millennia ago, at the end of the last ice age, the glacier waters started flowing to the Adriatic Sea, shaping rivers that carried huge quantities of sediment. In the course of thousands of years, the heaviest sediment fell on the lagoon bed, hardening into very compact solidified clay, called “*caranto*” (from the late Latin *caris*, “rock”). The remaining sediment accumulated, contributing to the formation of a multitude of small islands. Here 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 Ages, it was not until the fifth and sixth 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 forests of northern Europe. Looking for shelter, these inland people began 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 (Zanzotto 2013a: 112).

But these veins required a skeleton, too. And so, the fishermen started stacking tarred wooden piles into the muddy seabed, driving them until they reached the *caranto*. Underwater, surrounded by salty mud, in an oxygen-free

environment, these twenty-five meters-long oak 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” (Zanzotto 2013b: 96), and to turn this place into a “beaver-republic,” as Goethe viewed it in 1786 (Goethe 1970: 74). When the primitive palafittes became houses, palaces, streets, a generous part of the forests of northeast Italy, Istria, and Dalmatia 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.²

This sumptuous composition was clearly the result of many concurrent forces, which, blending into a new hybrid reality, were forming hybrid, collective stories. Human and nonhuman “makers” contributed therefore to create Venice’s concrete narrative. This is how Jorge Luis Borges portrays this compositional “making” in his *Atlas*:

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. (Borges 1985: 1332)

All these things and events, people, accidents, elements, inhuman forces were the authors of the *text* “Venice,” a text that had been written and carefully interpreted by generations of citizens and governors.³ Using the categories of their pre-ecological science, they knew that a lagoon is an amphibious biome whose unstable balance is due to the combined action of two contrasting forces: River waters and sea tides. River waters are responsible for carrying sediment 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 millennium, 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 stable thanks to the assiduous, unitary, and wise management carried out by the Republican government of the *Serenissima*.⁴ This management, controlled by the seven Magistrates of the Waters, had nothing audacious in itself: it was only due, as Piero Bevilacqua notes, to a very pragmatic (and “non-religious”) relationship to the past. Potential scenarios of risk could be anticipated from written testimonies and memories, as well as from the observation of ruins and monuments: “History was for Venetians a very concrete matter of forecast” (Bevilacqua 1998: 47). This implied an extremely realistic sense of human responsibility:

To the eyes of countless generations of technicians and governors preoccupied about the fate of the lagoon, Venice’s present and future appeared subordinated to the population’s behavior, the magistrates’ loyalty, the State’s investments, much more than it was to fortune or nature’s uncontrollable force. The past was not myth, but history. (Bevilacqua 1998: 49–50)

It was, in other words, absolutely clear to everybody that Venice’s survival was “profoundly depending from human interests, actions, and material choices” (Bevilacqua 1998: 50). Be it ecological wisdom or empirical observation of past events, this form of management was a sensible interpretation of Venice’s material text as a natural-cultural text: The public authorities and institutions *read* this place as a lagoon with a city in the middle, and acted accordingly, thus defending their “Faustian dream.”

“Faustian dream” is meant here literally. In fact, it is likely that, without concretely experiencing Venice, Johann Wolfgang Goethe would have missed important elements for his last oeuvre. In his *Italian Journey*, in a note dated October 9, 1786, he provided a very accurate description of this distinctive natural-cultural formation, writing a page that is itself a masterpiece of *histoire naturelle*:

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. (Goethe 1970: 97)

Though not particularly sympathetic with the population of this “beaver-republic,” Goethe praised the way Venetians controlled their environment, only recommending a few corrections in terms of urban hygiene. So he remarked:

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. (Goethe 1970: 98)⁵

In spite of Goethe’s advices and of the *Serenissima*’s long tradition of water management, the “sensitive interpretation” of the lagoon’s text eventually came to an end. On May 15, 1797, the French Army conquered the Republic. The very next day a Municipality was established “that would destroy the nation’s moral and political unity, shattering along with it the State’s prestige and authority” (Cessi 1981: 763). A few months later, on October 17, Napoleon signed the Treaty of Campoformio, agreeing to give Venice and the greatest part of its territory to the Emperor of Austria in compensation for the Netherlands, united to France.

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 hence subtracted from the free expansion of tides and fluvial waters. Even more damage was inflicted by lowering the level of the canals connecting the city with the lagoon, and by enlarging the harbor mouths. Finally, the creation of groundwater wells for industrial use caused the ground level to sink even deeper: The “economy of land” was eventually devouring the space of waters.⁶

At the end of the nineteenth century, besides the digging of even deeper canals, bridges and railways were also built. In 1917 the decision was made to install a huge industrial plant in Marghera, on the lagoon’s coastal area right in front of Venice, here, too, with significantly deeper waterways to allow big cargo ships. This, as it is easily imaginable, contributed to expose Venice

to the force of tides. Constrained by land, concrete, and all sorts of unnecessary enclosures, the lagoon's breath was becoming more and more arduous, gradually turning into a paradoxical threat for the city. Paradoxical, I insist, because the very ceasing of this breath would in the long run determine the end of the lagoon and, most likely, of Venice.

It has been through all these "anti-historical" (in Bevilacqua's sense) interventions that many people, including governors, have ceased to correctly "read" the Venice and the lagoon. In their eyes, from a dynamical collective of human/nonhuman "makers," this place has turned into mere scenery. Following the same cognitive suppression of the physical world, many human activities fatally concur with (partly natural) phenomena like subsidence and eustatism, favoring the crumbling of this fragile body of land and water.⁷ And so, in Venice's "picturesque setting," thousands of ferries, working and private boats, along with the unstoppable flux of extra-large cruise ships docking in San Marco Square, cause a supplement of wave power that shatters the palace walls, eroding the *caranto* piles that constitute the city's foundations. 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. Once storage spaces for tidewaters, these areas become now unserviceable: "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 2003: 48–49).⁸

Today, in spite of a number of important studies and requests coming from the citizens, the prevailing approach to the protection of Venice and its lagoon continues with the practice of textual misinterpretations. Instead of promoting ecologically sustainable measures, the national and local governments have chosen to safeguard this delicate geo-ecological 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 at once one of the biggest financial businesses in Italy and the latest misreading of the city's material textuality. In fact, not only is this "monstrous solution" (De Lucia 2013: 90) strongly impacting the lagoon's ecosystem, but it is already proving insufficient for its purpose. Also sadly "anti-historical" is that, ever since the project started in 1988, MOSE has been draining all the money allocated for the protection of

the lagoon (some 6 billion euros).⁹ In June 2014, judicial investigations evinced a dense network of unlawful speculations, resulting in the conviction of thirty-five people, including Venice's former mayor Giorgio Orsoni.

"All that intelligence and hard work created in times past, intelligence and hard work have now to preserve," wrote Goethe in 1786. Today we know his historical optimism was most likely unjustified.

Text II: Industry

Goethe visited Venice twice. On his second journey, in 1790, he made an important discovery of comparative anatomy. Walking on the Lido, not far from the Jewish cemetery, he found a fragmented sheep skull. Accomplishing a long research, through these bones he could empirically observe what he formulated as "*die Wirbeltheorie des Schädel*," the vertebral theory of the skull: Just as the plant's various parts result from the metamorphosis of the leaf, so the skull is the vertebrae's extreme modification. A little more than a century later, on the same Lido, Mann's character Gustav von Aschenbach dies of cholera while backlit looking at a Polish boy bathing in the sea. As a final act of metamorphosis and demise, that Lido itself will be severely altered at the end of the 1960s, mutilated by the reclamation works ordered to make room for industry. More offense will come later from building developers, but this is yet another story.¹⁰

At the time of the Lido's reclamation, industry was already a consolidated element of the Venetian landscape. To make the lagoon's industrial destination (or encouraged destiny) even clearer, there was the threatening voice of the 1962 Land Use Plan (still valid in 1990), which so decreed: "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" (quoted in Casson 2007: 315–16).¹¹ Again, the suppression of Venice's material text in this development narrative is recklessly 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 waterways, 33 km [20.5 miles] of docks, and over 2000 hectares of industrialized peninsulas that, like metastases, [spread] into water" (Fabbri 2003: 37–8).

What does the Petrolchimico look like?¹² The Venetian magistrate Felice Casson provides a description that matches Calvino's *Invisible Cities*, but with a substantial difference: 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 creatively patched up, 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, just 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 2007: 34–5)

More than a satellite, industrial Venice materializes here as “a planet fallen into sea” (Marchiori 2003: 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 a chemical surrealism, the elemental hybridity of this city is forced to merge with other elements, unknown, unexpected, frightening, and unforgiving. The human, and the living in general, are here only disposable wedges in the cannibal mechanism of the development narrative.

But this “futurist” chapter of Venetian history had been inaugurated well before the time of artificial satellites and space exploration. Exactly one year before Thomas Mann's journey to Venice (and four before the beginning of the First World War), the theorist of Futurism Filippo Tommaso Marinetti cast a spell *Against Passéist Venice* (*Contro Venezia passatista*), which was one with his ruinous military idealism.¹³ It was April 27, 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. (Marinetti et al. 2009: 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 and the Governor of Italy’s colony of Tripolitania in Libya (hence his title of nobility), 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.¹⁴) Volpi had promoted the creation of an “industrial Venice” to be placed in an area of the lagoon that had to be previously 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.¹⁵

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 1920–1 Marghera was already host to metallurgic factories and units for the production of sulfuric acid. Around 1923 the manufacturing plants already numbered twenty-seven, “including those for coal and mineral oils distillation, shipbuilding, and metallurgic industries, all powered with the energy furnished by the SADE corporation” (Fabbri 2003: 26). In 1929, the factories were fifty-five, out of which fifteen produced chemicals. The workers were

around 10,000. A considerable urban expansion began to surround the industrial area. In 1932 there were 5,000 residents (today there are about 28,000).

Besides being the story of an environmental trauma, that 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.¹⁶ And, unsurprisingly, it is also a story of war: Marghera, in fact, was a production site for yperite or sulphur mustard, the infamous “mustard gas” used by the Italian army in Ethiopia and Libya in 1936, in spite of the Geneva Protocol of 1925. Predictably, the Venetian industrial site also became a “sensitive target” during the First World War.

In the 1950s, the age 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 factory in India). In 1951, on a new expanse of land (called Industrial Zone II), the production of chlorine and polyvinyl chloride (PVC) starts: Italy enters the plastic era. Certainly, in these wealthy years of “well-mannered” tycoons and enlightened working classes, ecological or “merely aesthetic” concerns are not part of any political agenda.

As a symbol—at once ironic and gruesome—of the material textuality of this place, we can take the building of Industrial Zone II. Whereas the first industrial site was constructed on clean ground, the foundations of Industrial Zone II were assembled using the chemical and metallurgical sludge of the “early days.” This sludge accumulated near sandbanks, transforming them into big peninsulas of chemical waste: “To put it bluntly, it was an industrial site laying on a humongous toxic dump, quantifiable in 10 million tons” (Fabbri 2003: 41). Interpreted as a text, this site is a material *mise en abyme* of the whole pollution system, almost a metaphysical self-representation of toxicity.

Obviously, the whole existence of the Petrolchimico comes at an immeasurable price for the natural and social ecology of the lagoon. Unbelievable amounts of hazardous pollutants are produced over the decades, despite the denunciations of people, workers, environmental associations, and notwithstanding systems of rules intended to protect public health. Investigations on the impairment and the state of the lagoon’s seabed report the presence of over seven and a half million cubic meters of toxic and poisonous sludge. These hazardous substances include heavy metals, fluorogypsum, phosphogypsum

(radioactive elements), dioxins, many sorts of chlorinated hydrocarbons, bauxite, sulfuric acid, mercury, aluminum, and all the possible by-products of petrochemical industry.¹⁷ Faced with this “horror movie” (Pergolizzi 2012: 12), the story that Marghera tells is therefore also one of irresponsibility, deceit, and stubborn denial. In this story, the pursuit of industrial and financial interests became so “absolute” (that is, so abstract) as to falsify the texts of reality in form of territory, people’s 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 1960s. As those reports had made clear, many of those substances were carcinogenic, mutagenic, namely able to cause alteration to DNA, and teratogenic, namely able to negatively influence the fetus’ development.¹⁸ In 1973, the World Health Organization officially declared the carcinogenicity of PVC’s basic component, vinyl chloride monomer (VCM). The most frequent diseases caused by this substance include cirrhosis, hepatopathologies, and brain, lung, and liver cancer. Despite these evidences, however, the Petrolchimico’s production 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. As documented by Legambiente, until the end of 1988—and for at least two decades—some four thousand tons of phosphogypsum were poured every day into the sea (Legambiente 2005: 36). The lagoon, Bevilacqua notes, “has now turned into a private landfill for [these] factories” (Bevilacqua 1998: 147). This reckless practice ceased (at least officially) 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 substances were illegally dumped in Africa, or sank in the Mediterranean Sea on board the so-called “ships of poison,” secretly wretched ships clandestinely loaded with tons of all sorts of hazardous pollutants.¹⁹

In a long and important memoir titled *La fabbrica dei veleni* (*The Poison Factory*, 2007), the magistrate Felice Casson demonstrates that, in

the decades of Porto Marghera's industrial flourishing, the Petrolchimico's chief executive officers did their best to bury all the medical and scientific evidence related to the actual toxicity of the substances produced in the factory. The studies conducted by international researchers and by Italian physicians in particular (a leading role was played by the factory doctor Pier Luigi Viola and the oncologist Cesare Maltoni) were deliberately ignored or boycotted in a game of transatlantic industrial complicities exclusively aimed at continuing production, regardless of the costs for the workers' health. Casson's investigations evince a "secrecy protocol" binding the world's major petrochemical corporations: "A criminal and generalized 'pact of silence,' agreed upon in 1972–3 by all the leaders of the world's [petrochemical] industries. This agreement was promoted by European corporations, with Montedison in the front row" (Casson 2007: 31). Accordingly, the results of the epidemiological research—when research was not stopped from the outset—should remain top secret. The workers and residents of the industrial areas were either not notified about the risks, or "served" other, more reassuring information about the toxicity of the chemical agents produced in the factory. Casson writes: "Although aware of the horrible truth, for years Montedison continued to keep everybody in the dark, in particular those who were the most directly concerned: workers" (Casson 2007: 295).

In this story, many forms of justice are missing: Social, ecological, historical, human. Of all the thwarted rights, however, that of which the Marghera people were primarily deprived was their right to know what was really happening to them, and hence to choose about their destiny. This simple, basic thing is cognitive justice. The "horrible truth" stubbornly concealed by Montedison was, in fact, the truth of the workers' biology. The voice of the cells was telling a quite different story from the one upheld by the executives, and this story became gradually evident and understandable by the affected subjects. 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" (Wheeler 2006: 12). In terms of our biology, the coupling of environment and body "is a form of conversation, [...] a kind of narrative of conversational developments" (Wheeler 2006: 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” (Wheeler 2006: 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” (Wheeler 2006: 63). To those dwelling in this reality, the cells’ voice was telling a story of inner mutation, of trans-substantiation of plastic into flesh. As Nancy Tuana explains:

Beginning at a molecular level, we know that phthalates 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 phthalates pass through the porosity of skin and flesh, particularly the mucosal linings of our intestines and our lungs. Plastic becomes flesh. (Tuana 2008: 200–1)

Tuana’s words describe facts taking place in New Orleans in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. Considered against each other, the cases of Venice and New Orleans reveal some profound similarities. Like the evidence of cancer cases and pollution lays bare the hidden story of Marghera factory, Katrina too exposes the plots of reality told by some important material texts of New Orleans: Contaminated body cells, the hierarchical organization of living spaces, the dying bodies of people suffering from exploitation and lack of protection.

In New Orleans many of these corporeal narratives were visible in the waters of the Mississippi River, on which they lifelessly floated, or in the Louisiana Superdome, where they were kept prisoners for days. Marghera’s bodily stories were in turn denied for many years, and it was not easy to tear the drapes of hostile complicities surrounding the events. To make the picture gloomier is that, when these stories were reported to the factory’s sanitary officers, they were either belittled 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 such high epidemiological rates. And yet, rather than stopping the production, the Petrolchimico’s executives and sanitary authorities recommended that the workers use special toothpaste, or drink milk. To prevent “problems,” workers were even instructed to operate wearing anti-gas masks.

In the 1960s, after strong struggles, the factory started to quantify the risk economically and to compensate the workers for being exposed to substances known as poisonous and toxic. Even though this might appear a step forward, this policy meant to accept ridiculous compensations and a slight salary increase only for those people working in the factory units where PVC was manufactured. In several cases, the unions backed this compensation policy, which as a matter of fact was an obstacle for further negotiations in favor of the laborers. This makes them partly co-responsible for the damages inflicted to laborers themselves. Moreover, complaints of the workers about their health conditions were in some cases disregarded even by the agencies that were supposed to protect their rights.²⁰

Finally, in 1998, a trial was ordered. Instrumental to it were the denunciations made by the workers themselves, who became here “experts and activists even unto death” (Garrard 2012: 509). Decisive in this respect were the efforts of Gabriele Bortolozzo, who, with an admirable mix of social engagement and self-made scientific expertise, built an archive of all the medical records of Marghera’s victims. Supported by allies such as Greenpeace and the medical organization *Medicina Democratica*, Bortolozzo’s files were crucial not only to start a widespread campaign against the chemical pollution in the lagoon, but also to instruct this historic trial against the *Petrolchimico*’s heads.

The choral story told by the medical records of 424 workers eloquently demonstrated that there was a patent connection between their pathologies and the production cycles of PVC and VCM. Courageously conducted by Felice Casson, the trial was now trying to liberate the voice of that very 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 Montedison circa 300 million euros 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 we know today is that the Marghera petrochemical factory, now semi-abandoned and partly dismissed, is responsible

for killing 157 workers (this figure is increasing due to the pathologies' development period), and that 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.²¹

The "putrefying city" whose "leprous and crumbling" matter Filippo Tommaso Marinetti wished to "reanimate" by means of "metal bridges and factories plumed with smoke" in 1910 was dying of cancer less than a century later. And this cancer was caused by those very factories, by those very smokes. This was, after all, just another chapter of Italy's industrial dream. But this dream was, unfortunately, "absolute": It was completely disconnected from the textual evidence of reality. Marghera, and the Margheras of the world, are the price paid for all the "absolute" industrial dreams, with a peculiar detail: Marghera is not in the desert. It is up front in Venice. It *is* Venice. From there came the "magnificent sore," still open today in Venice's body.

Text III: 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 shortly thereafter, publishing *Der Tod in Venedig* the following year, in the October and November issues of the *Neue Rundschau*.

Much has been written about this masterpiece of modernist literature. Prominent scholars and skilled critics 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 Tadzio. Also particularly intense have been the explorations of the novel's autobiographical background, in search of the inspiration sources behind the protagonist's figure: In Aschenbach, it seems, Mann blended together traits of Mahler, Wagner, Nietzsche, the poet August von Platen, the painter Oswald Achenbach, of himself ...²² The points that principally draw our attention, however, are two: First, the fact that Mann's novel is a story about bodies, whose macro-category is Venice's body itself as a hybrid and collective organism; second, 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.

The novel's nature as a thick story about bodies appears immediately. From the outset of his journey, Aschenbach is prepared to experience Venice as a sensuous and hybrid landscape; this hybridity—here in the sense of elemental fusion, confusion, and ambivalence—involves everything that enters this physical space. There is a subtle but clear interdependence between the city and the bodies that inhabit it. This interdependence appears in the novel as a veiled mirroring game, in which Venice, like the protagonists' bodies, is at once bloom and withering, youth and decline. And, like in the city, these aspects are interlaced also in those very bodies. Venice's body is indeed Aschenbach's body, an elegant but also aging, decaying, unquiet, embellished body—a dirty, sweating, sublimely dying artist's body. But Venice's body is also Tadzio's body, an ineffably beautiful young body in which, however, the germ of decay resides for the very fact that this is a living body, a biologically determined *matter*. 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 view of Tadzio's "jagged and pale" teeth "lacking the gleam of health," and the idea of him being "very frail," not meant to live long (Mann 2004: 62). This early death would indeed preserve his exquisite figure from corruption, just as the sea's "promised immensity," at which the boy gestures, appears perfectly unblemished in the finale. But this closing vision is only a segment of the whole, because Venice's body is not only mirrored in Tadzio and Aschenbach's bodies. It materializes indeed in all of this city's bodies, in its dirty streets and white Istria stones, its seabirds and sandbanks, its brackish waters, in its people, rich and poor, powerful and powerless. All these are members and figures (in Erich Auerbach's sense) of a collective corporeality, and they are all caught in the tangle of space-time-matter from which biology depends. This becomes even more evident in Luchino Visconti's filmic reinterpretation of the novel. Like Borges's, Visconti's Venice is "*made of crystal and twilight*" (Borges 1985: 1334, emphasis in the original), but it is also a liquefying and decomposing world, populated by feverish, excited, and often grotesque figures, whose bodily eloquence is exasperated not as much as an aesthetical feature but as an organic mode.

In the novel, Mann's decadent imagery and "dirty aesthetics" (Sullivan 2012: 515) inhibit any idealization of Venice's landscape. In his iconographic imagination, rather than Canaletto we sense Guercino, *Et in Arcadia Ego*. Death is Venice, too, and its presence is concretely embedded in this place's life. In fact, Venice is not mere landscape, here. It is not a picturesque setting, a mere background, but it is itself a character. It is a full-fledged persona in the story, 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" (Mann 2004: 62). Venice possesses its own pervasive metabolic agency. Inescapably caught in this eerie "flux" of "coexistence and intimacy" (Morton 2011: 169), Aschenbach senses that "the city had [...] made him ill" (Mann 2004: 68, emphasis added). The "foul-smelling lagoon" (Mann 2004: 62) takes possession of his feverish bodymind, confusing it completely.

In some cases, this bodily presence is portrayed in gendered terms. In Mann's imagination, Venice is clearly a female figure, and, unsurprisingly, 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 (Mann 2004: 104).

The city's uncanny materiality culminates with the admission that another living agent has entered Venice's body. Illness is this "strange stranger, who emerges from, and constitutes, the environment" (Morton 2011: 171). In this heavily breathing, sickly sensuous atmosphere, Venice's body and all the bodies in and 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" (Mann 2004: 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 people's state of "prevailing insecurity" (Mann 2004: 122). Fatal, however, is the way "corruption in high places,"

undermining or covering the danger, mingles with all these agencies, thereby exacerbating 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 2010: 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. Indeed, 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.²³ “What emerges here,” Timothy Clark has written, “is a sense of the plurality, multiple agency and unpredictability, and compromised condition of the [...] world” (Clark 2014: 80). From this “compromised condition” there is no possible “outside.”

Echoing (and reversing) Marco Polo’s words to the Khan in Calvino’s *Invisible Cities*, Mann’s Venice is therefore a larger allegory of reality. More precisely, it comes here as a figure of the world’s “compromised condition,” and of the condition of all bodily substances as split between purity and contamination, splendor and decay, in an elementally *hybrid* (namely, *impure*) state depending on the laws of space-time-matter. Venice, hence, is not only body *par excellence*, but also *par excellence* complexity, being itself a “compound individual” (Oppermann 2014), a super-organism made of other organisms, their lives porously connected with its life. The epitome of such interconnect-edness 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 (Tuana 2008: 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, the

hotel manager, the southern joker/singer).²⁴ 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. (Mann 2004: 98–9)

As the boundaries between “clean and unclean, sanitary and unsanitary, or the pure and the dirty” (Sullivan 2012: 528) become more and more dramatically unstable, the “human” part of the truth comes finally 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. (Mann 2004: 122)

The echoes between this story and that of the petrochemical factory are hard to overlook. Here, too, as it will happen in Marghera, “essential precautions” are more intended to protect economic interests than life and health. Here, too, a falsifying narrative based on a “policy of secrecy and denial” provides reassuring discourses which in fact conceal and suppress the materiality of danger. Here, too, the “authorities” try to disable the alarm without really neutralizing the bomb.

In underlying these resonances, however, I am not alluding to a bizarre mimicry between art and life. What I rather mean is that literature, combined with the material texts of reality, provides theory to better understand these texts, exactly as Maurilia, Octavia, Fedora, Hypatia, Leonia, Argia, Zenobia, and all the countless invisible cities Marco Polo describes to the Kahn are

but imaginary faces to better understand the *reality* of Venice. And so, 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 is completely nullified. Both in Mann's Venice and in Porto Marghera, the combination of physical danger, political complicity, and textual falsification of reality produces fatal effects. 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 brutal 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. The result, however, is the same—a lethal bodily mix of environmental exploitation, social recklessness, and cognitive distortion of reality.

Whereas Mann's novel created a conceptual framework to reading Venice's complex corporeality, Andrea Zanzotto and Marco Paolini conjure up narrative categories from Venice's very concreteness. In so doing, literature not only provides a theory to better *see* reality, but—transforming reality itself into its own story—it also provides interpretive keys to *read* reality as a material-discursive continuum, as a text. The way Zanzotto achieves this purpose is by creating a poetic imagination of Venice's invisible natures and wounded body. Paolini in turn socializes these wounds, transforming them into a performative memory that can be shared, cognized, and re-enacted. Their attempts are both permeated by an intensely ethical insight.

Andrea Zanzotto (Pieve di Soligo 1921–2011) is without any doubt one of the greatest contemporary European poets. As the American translator Patrick Barron explains, Zanzotto's "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'" (Barron 2007: 3). A major segment in these archipelagoes, the Venetian lagoon stays there not merely as a place, but also as an organism, a living complexity where space and time intimately mingle in dynamics both human and inhuman.

Among the numerous compositions Zanzotto devotes to Venice, particularly interesting for our discourse are five poems forming a cycle titled “Fu Marghera (?)” (“The Late Marghera (?),” 2009) and a work of narrative prose, “Venezia, forse” (“Perhaps, Venice,” 1976). In these works, Zanzotto—a poet of landscape “as a subject”—emphasizes the diverse and unresolved natures of Venice. In its natural-cultural stratifications, this is one of the places “laden with geologic, human, and nonhuman remains, all jumbled together” (Barron 2007: 4), but this is also a site of abandonment, of interstitial forces suspended between being and non-being, presence and absence.

A muddled place by definition, the lagoon is both Venice and Marghera, overflowing plenum and spectral vacuum. Zanzotto sees these paradoxes, and provides in “Venezia, forse” one of most accomplished portrays of Venice’s binary textuality. As he will do again in his poems of 2009, in this dazzling prose of 1976 he 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: “[E]very thought referring to it has to be located elsewhere” (Zanzotto 2013b: 88), it has to “shatter any confirmed perspective” (Zanzotto 2013b: 87). In other words, to meet Venice entirely we need to uproot ourselves from it, “entering so deep inside as to ‘pierce’ [it], arriving elsewhere, and seeing [this place] anew” (Giancotti 2013: 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 global touristic imagination. But, comprehended from the distance of this elsewhere, Venice appears as a whole, a round universe, in which idealized pictures make way for the material complexity of a *monstrous* ecology. And so we are here in a “world of crossings” (Zanzotto 2013b: 96), a “precarious/eternal” dimension (Zanzotto 2013b: 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” (Zanzotto 2013b: 89), where “pus and

petroleum, phosgene and worms [...], incompetence and vain ambition, are [...] facts” (Zanzotto 2013b: 108). As the poet 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. (Zanzotto 2013b: 103)

To accept Venice’s conflicting natures means to go past the metanarratives enshrouding this place, whether of “absolute beauty” or “industrial progress.” Beauty, Zanzotto maintains along with Mann, is not disconnected from the materiality of its object; it is not *ab-solute*. 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: it is so in that it cuts off its substantive processes of withdrawal, transformation, consumption, and pollution from the concreteness of the world’s bodies. The very success of modern industry depends on this abstraction, and therefore it is, like beauty, not *ab-solute*, not severed from materiality. In that it mesmerizes governments, decision makers, and workers, “industrial progress” is as deceitful as “black magic.” But the world it leaves behind is not simply a world of death. This world is, as Zanzotto suggests in “Fu Marghera (?),” a world *undead*: A “death of deaths” (Zanzotto 2009: 57), a “pure excesses of death of the selfsame death”:

Vacant as cratered teeth
disparate framings and fillings of nullity
[...] dislocation collapse
the stripping away of colors and forms of nullity
that nowhere turned more fertile
than in this wrecked beat welter
[...] forces booted out but hardly
quashed [...]
generative in being
pure excesses of death of the selfsame death.
(Zanzotto 2009: 55, trans. Patrick Barron)²⁵

With its enduring creativity of forces manifesting themselves in the mutagen and teratogenic power of pollutants, this world stays indeed eerily “generative.”

It performs itself in “the zone of restless and perplexing activity from which monsters arrive, a [...] contact zone in which the human reveals the monster always already enfolded in whatever dispersed amalgamation we are” (Cohen 2013b: 273). This “death of deaths” is thus not a domain of life but a world of indefinitely suspended death, a parenthetical question mark after “the late,” a world in which body cells, offended by the toxicity of chemicals and discourses, ask for the ultimate “return of death as a lesser harm” (Zanzotto 2009: 60).

This strange world *undead*, however, also offers 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 coinhabitation and alien thriving of the nonhuman” (Cohen 2013b: 273). In Zanzotto’s prose, this shocking coinhabitation has, always already, 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. (Zanzotto 2013b: 104–5)

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 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” (Agamben 2011: 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 a material-textual 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 recognize them as signifying parts of a whole. It means to recognize the world as a place of unremitting interferences, encounters and concoctions. In this “moving-further,” even beyond the Aristotelian principle

of noncontradiction (“which one is the living, which one is the corpse?” Zanzotto asks), 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 playwrights, 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 socio-environmental catastrophes, both displaying an underground connection to Venice: Vajont and Bhopal).²⁶ In these acts of “narrative resistance,” partly inspired by Nobel laureate Dario Fo’s political theater, a collective civil memory is reconstructed as a necessary operation of cognitive justice. Venice is “implicit” in many of Paolini’s 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). Whereas the first play is an ironic and surreal travel in Venice’s hybrid world as narrated by a weirdly *redivivus* Marco Polo, the latter is about Porto Marghera and it is a unique oeuvre in Italian contemporary dramaturgy.

Parlamento chimico: Storie di plastica is based on an impressive 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 agents” are material. As Paolini says in an interview: “In my narrative style, [individual] characters are [...] the substance; through their bodies and words the story materializes. In *Storie di plastica*, in turn, productive processes and plants play the leading role; finance, chlorine: they have now become my characters” (quoted in Marchiori 2003: 79). 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” (quoted in Marchiori 2003: 38). Looking into this inorganic nudity creates a new, 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 ...²⁷

This obscenity is the same that Zanzotto saw in the ambivalent corpse/body of Venice. The present, for Paolini like for Zanzotto, is obscene. Still more so if one considers the circularity between such obscenity and the discursive obscenity of the Italian industrial narrative: All this is obscene not because it reveals too much, but because it hides what should be shown. This lack of transparency explains the title of the play: Marghera's *Plastic Stories* call into question a *Chemical Parliament*, because they hold accountable for this narrative not only industrials and managers, but also the obscure maneuvers of an entire ruling class. As Fernando Marchiori observes, "moving inside the labyrinth of the petrochemical factory, of its plants, productions, struggles and judicial acts [...] means drawing [...] a geography of environmental crime in the lagoon's fragile ecosystem, a geography of the whole Italian blind industrial development" (Marchiori 2003: 38). This "blind industrial development" would have never been possible outside a thick web of political complicities.

In the play, Paolini connects facts and framework into a narrative "civic" memory, thus creating a game of mirroring and resonances within the naked and wounded bodies of reality. And so Marghera becomes a *figure* of all the Margheras of the world, near and far. It is Bhopal, with its "accidental" fatalities and the policy of "secret and denial" of corporate capitals, but it is also the archetypal category of the global theaters of war, from the First and Second World Wars to more recent conflicts.²⁸ 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 2003: 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 *Parlamento chimico* 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. And so 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.

Put on stage in Venice in 2003, during the Carnival, and right after the second sentence of the Marghera trial, *Parlamento chimico* is the story of a political failure in front of matter’s textuality. As Paolini has said:

The language of politics does 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? (quoted in Marchiori 2003: 155)

Venice’s bodies do, if we read them with honesty. And 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 as intellectuals in general, relate to the material eloquence of the world is important. It involves, in fact, a reflection on the ethical role of the humanities in crafting tools apt to understand the tangles of material agencies, socio-ecological sustainability, and human responsibilities. To read the world as a text, and to perform accurate 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 significance 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 2003: 13)

An alienated relationship (and, therefore, a misinterpretation) of reality is also the one that 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 in that land, or live in houses built on polluted ground. But this happens also when industrial policies are disconnected from their environmental concreteness.

A city always hovering above itself, Venice 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. But, in spite of all this, the picture emerging in the final frame is impossible to control. This final frame is death in Venice, or, if you prefer, the deaths and lives that Venice holds in itself. The aim of this chapter was exactly this: To rewrite or rebuild the narrative about Venice and about death and life in Venice privileging a different logic from that of the “official narratives.” This 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 co-emergence, 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” (Commoner 1971: 33). 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 disquieting bodily presences interact 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 a possible connection between the tiles of the mosaic. Like the cholera and death in Venice, the global warming that threatens to erase a lagoon in northern Italy is also due to concurring factors, which include “natural” agents as well as human discourses, sometimes apparently distant from each other, but deeply intertwined in their effects. Heeding the world's material narratives is the way we, as intellectuals who believe in reality, try to see all these apparently disconnected elements as parts of a wide story, and to make sense of this story.²⁹ As our existential duty, we have to responsibly discard falsifying narratives and follow the eloquence of things. If we listen to it, this eloquence will “force [our] way ‘upstream’ toward the sources of pollution, which are also often the loci of immense social and political power” (Garrard 2012: 509).

In the material story we have drawn here, there is room for the immense power of politics and industry as well as for the lagoon's hybrid forces. We spot in this narrative unchosen elemental proximities, high tide, my PVC boots, San Marco Square at night, Marghera's cracking towers, the workers, tourists, big ships, the cells' unheard voices, and all the invisible natures disguised in forms different from these ones. Maybe not capriciously, we put all these elements into a wider frame, doing as if these apparently disconnected units would be fragments of one picture, chapters of one text. Because, beneath all cities visible and invisible, the text we are called to read is much vaster, and it *is* one. This text is our world.

“What else do you believe I have been talking to you about?”

I libri generano libri. Venice, 2012. Courtesy of Christian Arpaia.

Notes

- 1 The idea of “diffraction” and of “diffractive reading” comes from Haraway (1997; 2008) and Barad (2007), and from the elaboration that material ecocriticism has made of this practice by which text and world, the cultural and the natural, are read “not in separation,” but “through one another” (Iovino and Oppermann 2014a: 9). On this point, see Iovino 2015.
- 2 On the *Serenissima*’s “hunger for wood” and forest management, see Bevilacqua 1998: 70–89.
- 3 On the complex history of the lagoon management, see at least Scano 2009.
- 4 The lagoon lies in a point of the Adriatic Sea where some of the greatest rivers of northern Italy have their natural mouth: Isonzo, Tagliamento, Piave, Sile, Brenta, Adige, and Bacchiglione. Some of these rivers were diverted in order to prevent the silting-up of the lagoon; cf. Bevilacqua 1998: 111–27.
- 5 When Goethe visited Venice, proper sewage systems did not exist, and urban waste was also disposed in the lagoon. Today, however, the situation is not much better. Not only a sewage system is still missing, but the lagoon has

definitely become an open cesspool for collecting all the wastewaters of the mainland region.

- 6 Cf. Bevilacqua 1998: 140; see also De Lucia 2013: 86–90; Salzano 2011.
- 7 Subsidence, natural or human-made land sinking, “is primarily due to the drawing of groundwater [...], 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.” Eustatism, namely the sea-level rise, is due instead to global climatic variations—“from the beginning of the last century to the ’70s, the eustatic rise in Venice was 9 cm [...]. These two processes have contributed to the change over time of the average sea level, which currently is about 26 cm [...] higher than that of 1897.” See <http://www.comune.venezia.it/flex/cm/pages/ServeBLOB.php/L/EN/IDPagina/1844> (accessed December 12, 2014).
- 8 Many of the tiles of this puzzle are the subjects of “Occhi aperti su Venezia,” a series of short but extremely accurate books published (often in Italian and English bilingual version) by Corte del Fontego Editore and authored by some of the major experts of Venice’s history and current crises. On tourism, for example, see Lanapoppi 2011 and Tantucci 2011; on cruise ships, see Testa 2011 and Tattara 2014; on land reclamation and the lagoon’s hydrogeological balance, see Somma 2012 and Fersuoch 2013. For a complete list: http://www.cortedelfontego.it/web/?OCCHI_APERTI_SU_VENEZIA (accessed June 19, 2015). In different methodological perspective compared to this chapter, a very important account on the topic of Venice’s death due to a “loss of memory” comes from Settis 2014, a beautifully written text which also takes the *Serenissima*’s fate as universal cautionary tale.
- 9 See the news on the Italian newspaper *Il Sole 24 ore*’s website (<http://www.ilsole24ore.com/art/notizie/2014-06-05/scandalo-mose-venezia-corrruzione-italia-persiste-e-scoraggia-investitori-esteri-144510.shtml?uuid=ABWAPKOB>) and on the *New York Times*’s site (http://www.nytimes.com/2014/06/05/world/europe/venice-mayor-is-arrested-on-corruption-charges.html?_r=0). Links accessed November 20, 2014. On MOSE see also Fersuoch 2014.
- 10 See Pontani 2011.
- 11 The irony of the word “contain” is here remarkable. Presumably, in fact, Marghera’s site did *not* (and could not) “contain,” namely enclose in itself, these pollutants. I thank Greg Garrard for drawing my attention to this point.
- 12 Montedison, Enimont, Enichem, and more recently Vinyls: These are only some of corporate names of Venice’s petrochemical factory. I will refer to it simply as the “Petrolchimico.”

- 13 Marinetti, like many other Italian intellectuals at the time (i.e. Giuseppe Ungaretti, Luigi Pirandello), was a convinced interventionist in the years conducive to the First World War. In influential texts such as *Zang Tumb Tumb* (1914) and *War: The World's Only Hygiene* (1915), he viewed and represented war as an embodiment of the modern, an aesthetic spectacle, a festive event, and as a means towards a necessary renewal of society. These principles resonate with his hatred of “passéism,” here personified by Venice. For discussing this point with me, I thank Enrico Cesaretti, who—to my knowledge—is also the author of the only ecocritical study on Marinetti written so far (see Cesaretti 2016).
- 14 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 2,500 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 [...] 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 [...]” (<http://en.lsw.n.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 material 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. On this episode, see also Armiero 2011: 174–94.
- 15 On the financial aspects (and conflicts of interests) connected to Marghera’s industrial conversion, see Scano 2009: 15–43; Chinello 1979; Dorigo 1973. Scano explicitly talks of “institutional disaggregation and predatory development” (Scano 2009: 15).
- 16 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. On this history, see e.g. F. Barca 1999; Trento 2012.

- 17 I take these data from Pergolizzi 2012: 43, and from Legambiente 2005: 36–3-7.
- 18 Cf. Fabbri 2003: 70; see also Casson 2007.
- 19 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*. See also Rabitti 1998, and Bettin and Dianese 2003. On Marghera's trial there is also a graphic novel by Claudio Calia, *Porto Marghera: La legge non è uguale per tutti* (2007). Casson 2007 remains a fundamental reference.
- 20 Very clear on this point is Casson 2007: 99–107.
- 21 Founded in 1998, the “Associazione Gabriele Bortolozzo” is active in Mestre, near Marghera. The virtual tour of the Association's museum is available online: <http://agb.provincia.venezia.it/Attivita/Museo/Museo.html> (accessed November 21, 2014). An important documentary titled *Porto Marghera: Inganno letale* [*Porto Marghera: A Lethal Deception*] was shot by Paolo Bonaldi in 2002. Other documentaries include Alessandro Gaeta's *Nero di vongole* (2000), Andreas Pichler's *Teorema Venezia/The Venice Syndrome* (2012), and Irene Sollazzo's *Vinyls: Lavoratori di plastica* (2013).
- 22 For a discussion about these aspects, see, among many others, Schede 2006; Shookman 2003. For a more general overview, see Lenhart and Wessel 2004.
- 23 As 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*” (Morton 2010: 15).
- 24 See Mann 2004: 97–8, 108, 114.
- 25 The complete text of “Fu Marghera (?)”—(1) reads:

Vacant as cratered teeth
disparate framings and fillings of nullity
abandonment is neither
death nor freedom
abandonment is dislocation collapse
the stripping away of colors and forms of nullity
that nowhere turned more fertile
than in this wrecked beat welter

withered flickerings of nothing
 are tongueless mouths burnt skins
 forces booted out but hardly
 quashed or pataphysical in black in ash
 unmasked, detoured, generative in being
 pure excesses of death of the selfsame death.

An English version of the cycle “Fu Marghera (?)” is so far unavailable. Patrick Barron agreed to translate part 1 for me. I am grateful to him for his generous help.

- 26 *Il racconto del Vajont* (1996) and *Bhopal: 6 dicembre 1984* (2003). On Paolini’s theatre, see Marchiori 2003, and Perissinotto 2005 (this latter, more specifically on Venice).
- 27 Excerpts from the play are available online at <http://www.jolefilm.com/produzioni/teatro/parlamento-chimico/>. A reference to Mario Perniola’s *The Sex Appeal of the Inorganic* (2004, Italian edition 2000) is almost mandatory here.
- 28 For an accurate parallel between Marghera and Bhopal, see Casson 2007: 151–61.
- 29 The expression “believe in reality” alludes to Latour’s *Pandora’s Hope*, Chapter 1.