

# If Venice Dies: A Reading from the Perspective of Environmental Humanities

## Interview with Salvatore Settis

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Salvatore Settis is Professor Emeritus of the Scuola Normale Superiore of Pisa after having been a professor of history of art and archaeology. He directed the Getty Research Institute in Los Angeles from 1994 to 1999 and the Normale from 1999 to 2010. He was president of the High Council of Cultural Heritage from 2007 to 2009 and since 2010 he has chaired the Scientific Council of the Louvre Museum in Paris.

He has written numerous essays including *Futuro del classico* (Einaudi, 2004), *Paesaggio Costituzione cemento. La battaglia per l'ambiente contro il degrado civile* (Einaudi, 2010), *Azione popolare. Cittadini per il bene comune* (Einaudi, 2012) and his latest volume *In-cursioni. Arte contemporanea e tradizione* (Feltrinelli, 2020).

This interview starts from one of Salvatore Settis' best-known texts, *Se Venezia muore* (Einaudi, 2014),<sup>1</sup> taking one of the many possible angles of analysis offered by this book, that of Environmen-

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**1** *Se Venezia muore* has been translated in English, French, German, Spanish, Portuguese and Chinese. There are three editions in English: *If Venice Dies*. New York: New Vessel Press, 2016; Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 2016; London: Pallas Athene, 2018.



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tal Humanities, understood as a precise multidisciplinary context of studies that has methodologically and theoretically been defining itself in recent years.<sup>2</sup>

The interview combines the content and topic of Settis' book, the stimuli that come from the public debate on Venice and its environment and the analysis perspectives coming from Environmental Humanities. It starts with a question on a theme tackled by literature, and by the arts in general, that is the death in/of Venice. *Death in Venice* by Thomas Mann (1912) and the Futurists' hope of Venice's death (1910) appeared when the city still expressed a living memory of its past but, reread today, they sound like sad omens. The second question starts out from one of the key concepts introduced by the ecological question in the critique of modernity, namely the concept of limit. The idea of the finiteness of the Earth and nature was introduced in 1972 with the publication of the report *The Limits to Growth*, commissioned by the Club of Rome and which became the basis of Donald Worster's latest book, one of the founders of environmental history, entitled *Shrinking the Earth: The Rise and Decline of American Abundance* (Oxford University Press, 2016). The third question reflects on one of the current cruxes of territorial development in recent years: Venice shares with other Italian and foreign cities - I am thinking of Florence and Istanbul - and with other rural areas - above all the Val di Susa - the great pressure with which infrastructure puts socially and ecologically fragile territories at risk. The fourth question is inspired by the text of Piero Bevilacqua *Venezia e le acque. Una metafora planetaria* (Donzelli, 1998) and considers Venice as a powerful metaphorical device and a model on which to measure urban phenomena. If the conversation begins with death, it ends more positively with a line about the future of Venice.

**Roberta Biasillo** Around the 1910s, the destroyed bell tower of San Marco was restored to where it was and how it was. In those years Venice was a model for the design of modern American cities. From the years of Fascism, however, Venice begins to die, that is, it begins to see its memory disavowed and starts to follow a modernisation far from its genetic heritage. What are the stages of the death of Venice in our age and why does death in Venice today capture a reality rather than recalling a literary quotation?

**Salvatore Settis** The agony that Venice lives can be seen not in literature but in the registry office. In the last fifty years the Lagoon

<sup>2</sup> For a definition of Environmental Humanities and a methodological and theoretical introduction see Emmett, R.S.; Nye, D. (2017). *The Environmental Humanities. A Critical Introduction*. Cambridge (MA): MIT Press. A chapter is dedicated to Venice in Iovino, S. (2016). *Ecocriticism and Italy: Ecology, Resistance, and Liberation*. London: Bloomsbury.

city has lost two thirds of its population, and the few survivors (only 50,000 inhabitants) not only decrease with each passing day, but are often dedicated to activities in support of the devastating mass tourism which is one of the destructive forces of the historic city, of its transformation into a kind of sad Disneyland.

**Roberta Biasillo** In the case of Venice, the descending parable that you retrace occurs due to the cancellation, or the attempted cancellation, of two limits, the *forma urbis* on the one hand and the regulatory constraints on the other. Can you explain how the erosion of the *forma urbis* and of the landscape and environmental protection regulations has created a rift between the historic city and the contemporary city?

**Salvatore Settis** We should speak of 'limits' in Venice, above all, to make it clear that the city coexists with the Lagoon in a bio-ecosystem where nature and culture do not overlap, but are identified as one thanks to a centuries-old history. Only by forgetting this can we explain the foolish tendency to consider the Lagoon as a sort of useless appendage of the tourist city, and the plans to dig new canals to allow the passage of large ships to Marghera. A bad idea that has been touted as the awareness of a limit, and is instead its violation, dictated by ignorance or arrogance.

**Roberta Biasillo** The justifications given to projects of port and road development and of tide protection are always about breaking the isolation, of connecting Venice to who-knows-what novelty and of increasing circulation and profits. When and how has the role and perception of water changed in relation to the development of infrastructure in Venice?

**Salvatore Settis** I know too little about it, but I have the impression that it was a slow process, which began with the fall of the Serenissima. The ancient Republic had developed an extremely sophisticated culture of coexistence between urban structures and the Lagoon, between the Lagoon city and the mainland. Venice was then the centre of a small but very prosperous, cultured and civilised state. From one day to the next it became a periphery, first of the Hapsburg Empire, then of Italy. And the uniqueness of its problems, observed from Vienna or Rome, gradually began to blur. But it is certain that in recent decades this process, under the pressure of a plundering tourism, has exceeded (and by a lot) the alert level.

**Roberta Biasillo** Even *Se Venezia muore* starts from this assumption and transforms it into a method of writing and reading. Venice, the Lagoon city par excellence, was able to rise, for better or for worse, through the celebration of its uniqueness and through the reproducibility of some symbolic elements, a synthesis and antithesis of the

idea of a city on a global level. Can you tell us what elements and considerations led you to this idea of Venice? Also, why is it, for you, a key to interpreting different places?

**Salvatore Settis** In Venice, the characteristics of the historic city stand out with exceptional intensity due to an absence, that of car traffic, to which cities around the world have been and are enslaved. Walls demolished, rings and motorway junctions that pass alongside or even over historic districts, and so on: all this has not (yet?) happened in Venice, and its forced pedestrianization is one of the reasons for its incomparable charm. Therefore Venice is particularly suited to represent the otherness of the historic city with respect to the most current model of urban development. It lends itself to a question we should ask ourselves: would we want it as it is, or with a subway dug under the Lagoon? (and I'm not joking - this proposal has been put forward repeatedly).

**Roberta Biasillo** There is an expression that struck me towards the end of your book in which you insist on the need to "think Venice" (p. 150). And also in the recent interview "L'arte è una macchina per pensare" given to Antonio Gnoli for *Robinson - la Repubblica* (1 April 2021), you reiterate the importance of thinking. What does it mean to "think Venice" and what is the task of those who observe and those who live in Venice to save Venice from death, and with Venice, the very idea of the city?

**Salvatore Settis** I use the word 'thinking' in the most literal sense. I am increasingly convinced that it is necessary to stop and reflect, to question ourselves on the customs we practice, the clichés we help to keep alive, the social hierarchies and the injustices that surround us, and which we no longer even notice. The symphony of human history is, after all, a continuous bass on which, from time to time, the voices and sounds of those who have 'thought' are grafted against the grain, and therefore have something to say (which does not mean they will necessarily win, however). To put it another way, 'thinking' is throwing a stone into the quagmire. Or in the Lagoon.

Roberta Biasillo, PhD in History of Modern Europe at the University of Bari, is an environmental historian and currently Max Weber Fellow at the European University Institute in Florence. She has carried out research at the Environmental Humanities Laboratory of the KTH Royal Institute of Technology in Stockholm, the Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society in Munich and the Studies and Research Section of the National Institute of Social Security in Rome. Her research interests are the forestry question in liberal Italy and the environmental history of Italian colonialism, with a focus on Libya.