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Caterina Percoto's Italian and Friulan stories

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by

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Abstract

CATERINA PERCOTO'S ITALIAN AND FRIULAN STORIES

by

Lori M. DeVito

Advisor: Professor Hermann W. Haller

This dissertation presents the first English translation of selected Italian and Friulan language stories of Countess Caterina Percoto (1812-1887), with an introductory critical essay that provides a framework for understanding the significance of this bilingual writer from the region of Friuli-Venezia Giulia. The essay approaches the author from various viewpoints in order to suggest further study of each aspect.

Countess Caterina Percoto was born on February 12, 1812, in the small Friulian town of San Lorenzo di Soleschiano. Her work consists of short moralistic stories and legends in the Friulian language, and of longer stories in Italian, the racconti , some of which have the length of a short novel. In both her Friulan and Italian works, the characters are from the poorest class of society. The dissertation details Percoto's contribution to the popular surge of rustic literature as championed by nineteenth-century cultural figures such as Carlo Tenca, Cesare Correnti, and Niccolò Tommaseo, as well as comparing her works to the rustic works, "les nouvelles champêtres" of George Sand. It traces her

thematic and linguistic development as a descendant of Manzonian realism in that recognizable qualities of realism or verismo attest to her search to make each story sound true to life within the literary, linguistic and historical context of the nineteenth-century in Italy.

The essay provides a history of the language, literature, and culture of Friuli-Venezia Giulia as it relates to the content of Percoto's stories in Friulan, particularly the elliptical, oral components. The writer also seeks to define the hybrid quality of Percoto's use of the literary standard, a language that is chosen from a conscious amalgam of Italian and Friulan shared with a regional subconscious knowledge of portions of Venetian, German, and French. Additionally, the writer undertakes a biographical and aesthetic analysis of the feminist aspects of Percoto's works in both languages.

Part II of the dissertation presents three stories translated from the Italian and twelve stories, legends, and traditions translated from the Friulan which demonstrate original philological research into Friulan language dictionaries and linguistic sources.

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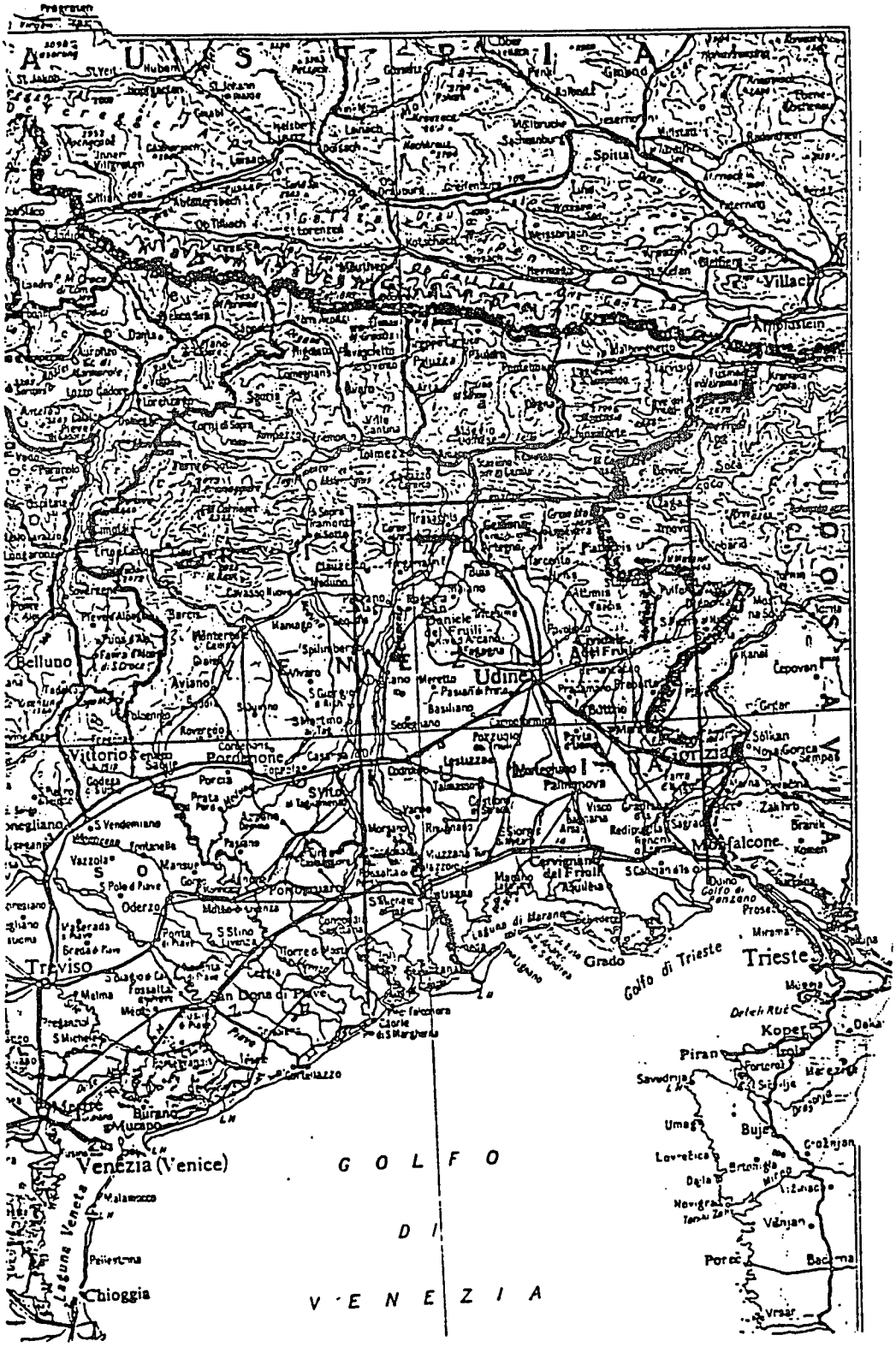

Figure 1 -- Map of the region Friuli-Venezia Giulia. The box indicates the area most noted in Percoto's stories.

For

Arthur, Carmin, Marie,
Derek, and Theodore

PART I: A Nineteenth-Century Bilingual Author

The purpose of this thesis is to clarify the position that the writer Caterina dei Conti di Percoto holds in the literature of nineteenth-century Friuli, Italy, and Europe. It will consider aspects about her life, work, and reputation. To that end, I will explore her writings in the context of nineteenth-century cultural ideology against the backdrop of the literary, linguistic, social, and political climates. The thesis will show that Percoto's work is an overlooked but essential paradigm for several literary modes. First, her realistic characterizations in the Italian stories of the miseries and joys of the people living in the countryside of Friuli are excellent examples of rustic literature that sprouted in Italy and other parts of Europe in the nineteenth century. Much attention is paid to the lives of farmers in that their lives reflect Percoto's own reality; that is, the activities and language of the Friulan countryside.

Second, Percoto is the first writer to establish a Friulan prose for the abundant oral tradition of stories, legends, and fables in Friuli. The decision to write in Friulan was a personal one, based on the language she felt best paid homage to the contemporary and legendary protagonists that populate the Friulan stories. Her claim to originality is her written documentation of the oral literary heritage of Friuli.

Third, the literary mode of her Italian is full of Friulan elements and modulations. Her idiosyncratic language emulates and often achieves a stylistic balance between an archaic, academic, literary Italian syntax and lexicon and the simple, direct, sometimes elliptical syntax and lexicon of Friulan.

Fourth, her writings, both in content and style, contribute to a tradition of women writers throughout Europe. That tradition is abundantly enriched by Percoto's often fine psychological portraits and characterizations, by her intimate descriptions of landscape. She secretly spies into the lives of women who are oppressed by work or by conventional morality, restricting any viable endeavor to women outside of the domestic realm. Percoto's writings feature decidedly modern women, aware of their intellectual and material potential. Conscious of the injustices perpetrated against all women, she is especially cognizant of the subclass represented by the "contadina."

Finally, this thesis will offer the first English translations of selected Italian and Friulan stories written by Percoto. These works were acclaimed by many well-known nineteenth-century cultural figures, such as Francesco Dall'Ongaro, Giosuè Carducci, and Ippolito Nievo, and significantly by Niccolò Tommaseo, who compared her to George Sand, contributing to her subsequent characterization as "la

Sand italiana."[1]

[1]Tommaseo compared her favorably to George Sand in his introduction to the first edition of her collected stories in 1858. Carducci,in a note to his poem In Carnia, writes that he found inspiration for it in a book of Percoto's stories, which he called a "bel libro e forte, che rispecchia la forte bellezza e bontà del Friuli" (Flora 358). Carducci's ideal language was one that would recover strong, pure, national and popular ideals (Devoto 283).

Chapter 1: Solitude and Fellowship

Caterina Percoto's birth in February of 1812 made her the second child and only daughter of what were to be the five children of an ancient noble family in the Friulan town of San Lorenzo di Soleschiano. Her father Antonio Percoto died and left his family with little money and, therefore, limited possibilities to enter into the aristocratic circles to which their name entitled them. At the age of twelve, Caterina was sent to be educated at the Convent of Santa Chiara in Udine. There she remained for seven years, spending most of her adolescence closed within the monastery under the strict social and educational supervision of the convent.

Little is known about the details of her childhood or her activities during her years in the convent. Later in life, she wrote about the failings of her education, but it is difficult to precisely assess whether she felt so for social or intellectual reasons: "L'angusta educazione che le è stata impartita, ha lasciato per sempre su di lei un'impronta di sdegno" (Livi 102). In 1868, she was offered the position of director of the school, but refused it for reasons probably related to her health, but also because her years in the monastery were some of the least happy of her life, "gli anni più ingrati della sua non felice esistenza" (Giacomini xxvi). Though she had been given a strong background in Italian, French and German literature whose authors she was able to

read in the original, hers was not the classical education reserved for noble young men. Her intellectual interests may have surpassed the level considered proper for a well brought up countess in that aristocratic and clerical environment.

After her schooling, she returned to the family's home in the small town of San Lorenzo di Soleschiano, where she lived until the age of 85, venturing out for annual trips to the nearby Carnian Alps, and only occasionally to other destinations, always with a well-defined purpose. In 1856, for example, she journeyed to Turin and stayed a month with the family of Prospero and Marianna Antonini, exiled from Udine for political reasons. There she finally met Niccolò Tommaseo, Ippolito Nievo, and Carlo Tenca. In 1861 she was the guest of Countess Marina Boroni in Florence. She traveled to Genoa in 1863 to consult with the publisher of the second edition of her Racconti. On another occasion, she met Garibaldi in Udine in 1867. In 1871 she obtained the position of the "ispettorato degli educandati veneti" for her merits in educating the young and for that purpose, she went to Rome to meet Cesare Correnti, the Minister of Education. But other than these excursions, hers was a very isolated existence. A respite from her daily solitude were visits from various priests from the surrounding parishes. These priests were family friends and advisors, who sometimes functioned as financial counselors, sometimes as sounding boards for discussions about patriotism and nationalistic spirit.

Various biographers attribute her solitary lifestyle and her refusal to marry to an early great love for a young man which subsequently ended when truncated by the edict of her family. If elements of the novella La Schiarnete [The Flowers of Courtship, 1857] are autobiographical, Percoto's admirer may very well have been Jewish. In this story Suor Maria Eletta tells her own story of falling in love with a young Jewish man. Because of her belief in the Roman Catholic afterlife, she rejects him and closes the door on love, eventually ending up in a convent. In any case, either Percoto's family or the nuns of S. Chiara or she herself disapproved and ended the romance.

Contrary to the usual presentation of Percoto as a young spiritual and religious countess, dedicated to her family and farmers, there are indications that her private life was filled with the passion and bitterness of stifled love. In an 1852 letter to Francesco Dall'Ongaro, Percoto wrote about her family's desire to see her married and about her relationship with a man, Pietro Vianello, whom she, at the time, found quite compatible. Nonetheless, she found that she could not consent to marriage even though the decision caused her grief. "Il mio passato, le mie opinioni ... e la mia età già di troppo avanzata mi rendono impossibile l'acconsentire.... Ma io confesso [sic] ho passato molti giorni assai combattuti e mio malgrado patisco" (Ce fastu? 149, April 1852). She was not quite forty years old.

Another favorite myth of biographers is to ascribe her decision to remain on the family's country estate as motivated by a precise intellectual choice of good wholesome country living over decadent city living. In fact, it appears that at least initially, Percoto lived in the country not necessarily by choice, but because of the economic conditions of her family. It was her duty, if not actual necessity, to work in order to survive. A typical day was spent rising at dawn, organizing the workers for the day, managing the financial supervision of the family estate, caring for her invalid mother, feeding chickens and other animals, and in the spring, raising silkworms. In addition to these activities, she was also responsible for raising and educating her younger siblings, and then, their children. Thus, physical work and family responsibilities clearly had more to do with her choice of environment than intellectual decision.

All these duties were accomplished and continued to be accomplished with the onset of her writing career. When she was twenty-seven years old, she came across a translation by Andrea Maffei of some poems by Klopstock in the Triestine weekly periodical Favilla, directed by the poet, critic, and playwright Francesco Dall'Ongaro.[2] The magazine kept readers informed about the cultural events of Trieste and other

[2]Some of Maffei's published works were Poesie varie, Milan, 1839; Studi poetici, Milan 1831; and Versi editi e inediti, Florence, 1858.

Italian cities, and was also an open forum for discussion and debate about problems such as agriculture, science, and politics. She wrote a critical review of the translation, in that it did not do justice to Klopstock, and she offered her own translations. One of the local parish priests, her friend Don Pietro Comelli, sent the review to Dall'Ongaro and thus began a correspondence which led to the establishment of Percoto as a writer.

Dall'Ongaro at first did not believe that Percoto's initial writings (the translation and some critical analyses of Ariosto, Catullus, and Virgil) were actually the hand of a woman. He thought they were the work of a senile writer, "un letterato barbogio," using a female pseudonym as a novelty (Maier Intro 7). When he realized that the author was indeed a woman, and also a countess whose name belonged to the register of Friulan nobility, he made a request. He asked Percoto to contribute a woman's piece, "qualche scritto da donna" (Maier Intro 7). What exactly did Dall'Ongaro have in mind with this request? Not even Percoto was sure. After three months she wrote to him that she wasn't able to guess what he meant by those words. Perhaps stories intended for a readership of women? Dall'Ongaro, on the other hand, was sure that a countess living in the country could best describe the abundant aspects of nature and the customs, traditions, and activities in the lives of rustic folk in such a way that the reader could be aesthetically edified.

After another long silence, she finally sent, over a period of four years, several short stories, all in Italian: a legend of John the Baptist, Adelina, Il pazzo [The Crazy Man], Il vecchio Osvaldo [Old Oswald], and the full length story, Lis cidulis[3] [The Fireworks, 1844], all of which were immediately published in Favilla. The elements that characterize Lis cidulis and other early works such as L'anno della fame [The Year of Starvation, 1844] and Il refrattario [The Rebel, 1844] are very much characteristic of the majority of her stories. They begin with rigorous observations of actual events; this method was embodied in her title for an 1848 newspaper article published in Giornale di Trieste, "Non una sillaba oltre il vero" (D'Aronco "Contributo" 30). That phrase was already her touchstone. These stories proceed with two sets of plot actions that parallel each other, intersecting only at key moments. The first sequence of events concerns farmers burdened by poverty, hunger, freak accidents, or unemployment. The second sequence concerns noble or bourgeois characters, often women though sometimes priests, who restore a type of social justice in assisting the poor. The two plot lines by some artificial means, converge or cross in that the rich woman (or the town priest) saves the starving farmers at the last minute bridging in some small way

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[3]Cidulis - a courtship custom celebrated during the night preceding a feast day; a wheel made from pine that the young men of Carnia set on fire, causing it to roll along the cliffs above the towns during the night in honor of the girls of the town.

the gap between the rich and the poor, the advantaged and the disadvantaged. The two sets of characters, though separate, are "necessariamente interdipendenti" (Pellegrini Tra lingua 270), of necessity interdependent. Percoto shows that much of the misery of the poor derives from the egoism, blindness, and downright stupidity of rich people who do not know how to administer their wealth. These antagonistic characters are present in the stories; however, Percoto's benevolent heroes and heroines manage to subdue all three of those traits.

A second recurring element in these stories addresses the subject of parental ambition. Though well-meaning, a parent's decision to have a child educated in a boarding school away from the home can spell disaster for a child. That ambition is presented as the motivating factor for the curious diseases and ruined lives of several story protagonists. In Lis Cidulis, for example, Massimina's strange illness is a result of her parents' zeal to make her special, separate, better than her playmates:

> Nata di seme italiano, in una città italiana, i suoi genitori avevano creduto di farla distinguere fra tutte le sue coetanee col procurarle un' educazione peregrina, ed a tal fine, se la tolsero dal seno, e la mandarono ancora bamboletta in un convento nel cuore della Germania. Povero fiore cosí acerbamente trapiantato! (Percoto 1974, 48)

Sickened by the austere environment and further saddened by

not being able to hear or speak the sounds of her native language, she loses her voice, unable to speak anything at all.

Cati in La coltrice nuziale, Reginetta in the story so entitled, as well as Adelina in I gamberi, all suffer similarly from being away from the loving care of the home. But it is the solitary, disturbing life of Prepoco that stands out as the culmination of this theme. In designing the causes of his wretched life, Percoto sees "Premariaco," the name of his hometown, scrawled on the walls of his bedroom. She travels to the town and finds many aspects of the rugged natural surrounding that Prepoco must have longed for. "Qui forse egli gustò qualche rapida gioia che gli si volse in lutto dall' ambizione di chi gli strappò di mano la verga per sostituirgli la penna" (Percoto 1863 I, 65). In all these stories, a child taken away from hearth and home, ends up in a world that is cold, foreign, and harsh.

Another distinguishing thematic feature of the stories is the corrupting, stifling influence of life in the city as opposed to life in the country. The superiority of country living is an important theme in such stories as Pane dei morti, I gamberi, and Il vecchio Osvaldo, among others. Along with a firm belief in the goodness of rustic life, Percoto's characters long for the beauty and simplicity of life as it used to be.

> ...a quei giorni fortunati...era ben altro il

> paese! I monti più verdi, le notti della Carnia più limpide, una luna più lucente del sole che ora ci splende le illuminava, e le stelle più scintillanti ricamavano i cieli. (Percoto 1863 I, 240)

Percoto knows that the city is a place where people can be only caricatures. Ardemia delle Rovere in Il pane dei morti describes them thus: "Quelle frasi melate, quei complimenti smaccati, a cui era costretta opporre in un modo o nell' altro le stesse convenzionali risposte, le pareva un insipido giuoco" (Percoto 1974, 121). Though she voices praise for the Viennese formal gardens, in her heart she prefers the spontaneity of nature:

> ... l' umile pervinca, nata spontanea tra le macerie d'un muricciuolo o sulle sponde d'un capricioso rivoletto, e i balsami delle tante rose silvestri che inghirlandavano le collinette del suo paese. (Percoto 1974, 120)

Percoto's writing career spanned only a part of her long lifetime. Most of her Italian stories were written between 1844 and 1856 and were published in various magazines and journals,[4] until they were finally collected for the 1858 Florence and the 1863 Genoa editions. The Genoa edition

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[4]Favilla, Trieste; La Ricamatrice, Milan; Il Crepuscolo, Milan; Giunta domenicale al Friuli, Udine; Il Contadinello, Gorizia; Giornale di Trieste, among others.

contained all the stories of the 1858 edition except Il contrabbando, but also included for the first time most of her extant Friulan stories, which had been omitted from the 1858 edition. She wrote more stories between 1860 and 1887, but these are all heavily moralistic, and were anthologized as didactic children's stories.

Let us consider the question of Percoto's literary fellowship within the larger orb of nineteenth-century Italy. How do her works fit in with the literary movements that flourished during her time? The nineteenth century brought about experimentation in many different kinds of writing in Italian. The literary giants of nineteenth-century Italian prose included figures such as Ugo Foscolo, Alessandro Manzoni, Ippolito Nievo, and Giovanni Verga. Each author contributed one or more novels considered masterpieces. Yet, none of them can be said to have formed a movement together. None of them can be said to conform to a nineteenth-century tradition of Italian writing.

In addition to these four figures, who form a kind of overall blueprint for the century, are other writers and writing trends no less significant: The Scapigliati of Lombardy and Piedmont represented a coterie of writers whose literary heroes were Edgar Allan Poe and Charles Baudelaire. Active from about 1860 to 1880, their works explored themes of horror, the gothic, the physical versus the psychic world. The Verist writers, toward the end of the century, disciples

of Luigi Capuana and Giovanni Verga, more so than Emile Zola, focused on realistic life situations without minimizing or romanticizing the effects of problems and ill-conceived decisions.[5] An earlier but no less significant genre, that of rustic literature, exemplified by such writers as Giulio Carcano and Cesare Cantù, experienced a surge of popularity for about ten to fifteen years in the middle of the century. Percoto's stories seem to align most closely to this genre. These stories explored the actions, feelings, and problems of the masses of people living in the country by using simple, conversational, colloquial language appropriate to the new protagonists. An underlying theoretical motive for these stories was a desire to create a literature that would sincerely portray the ideals and lives of an entire class of farmers and laborers.

Rustic literature had champions such as Carlo Tenca and Cesare Correnti both of whom promoted a literature founded in the people of the countryside. Correnti's[6] reevaluation of the rustic genre in literature in Della letteratura rusticale (1846) transformed folklore and dialect from quaint relics to

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[5] Several critics propose that Percoto was an essential link between a Romantic Manzonian Realism and Verism, noting her enthusiastic presentation of Verga's Storia di una capinera. See G. Mariani, page 304.

[6] As Italian Minister of Education in 1867, Correnti fought successfully for obligatory elementary education. His policy of mass education was linked to his belief in a literature for the people, about subjects that concerned them, using their language.

reservoirs of new life for Italian literature. He believed that the dialects, seen as a corruption and a cancer of the national language, would insure the future vitality of popular Italian literature. The dialects "si mutino in serbatoi di nuova vita, in vene di succhio fecondatore, in esperimenti e indizi d'un ottima forma di letteratura popolare" (De Luca xxii). His Della letteratura rusticale is a manifesto on the long history of the rustic genre in Italian literature, as opposed to the prevailing mode of cultured literature. Correnti assessed the progression of rustic literature beginning with Virgil, whose Georgics were the crown of Latin poetry. Ancient Italians, he insisted, studied and respected country life. He made it clear that the dialects were a patrimony, an inheritance from which writers would find genuine rustic themes, styles, and forms, motifs that had been unjustly ignored. He maintained that those holding Italian literature in a "toga" of rules and regulations were crippling it, preventing it from leaping into the future (4).

Carlo Tenca's position was even more polemical in that he saw the rebirth of rustic literature, and indeed all literature that speaks to and about the masses in a living, actual language of the people, as the material that would help Italian letters to emerge from its barren cycle. He cried out against holding up French literature as a model, and believed that Italians had their own preserve of themes for a strong literature.

But Tenca's position was more than literary. The very survival of the Risorgimento and the new nation would depend on gaining the support of the people. Many leaders of the new nation feared for the stability of Italy in that the masses of Italians lacked the collective consciousness and common bonds of language, ethnicity, and customs. This consciousness, Tenca posited, could only be accomplished through a combination of instruction and literature, a literature that descended into the popular sphere. Raised to the status of an educational force, this new literature would be able to reestablish harmony between the masses and the intellectuals of the new nation.

Tenca understood that writers and intellectuals had the responsibility to educate the people and convince them of the goodness of the Risorgimento cause. In general, throughout Italy, and perhaps more so in isolated Friuli, the Italian movement for independence did not take hold among the masses. Its propaganda was seen as something that would benefit only the aristocracy. Democratic goals such as freedom of speech and of the press had little to do with the needs of the farmers, who were more concerned about whether or not any new government would try to raise taxes on salt and other such staples.

The intellectual gauntlet thrown down in 1846 by Correnti and Tenca contributed to the rising popularity of letteratura campagnuola. However, Percoto was already committed by

inclination to stories set in the country, addressing the problems of country people. Although Dall'Ongaro had encouraged her to deepen her natural talent as a rustic author by reading the works of George Sand, who enjoyed immense popularity, Carcano, Cantù, and Correnti, it is not clear whether they influenced her in any way. The rustic stories of all these writers, including Sand's nouvelles champêtres, were more or less contemporary with those written by Percoto. Thus, more than likely they merely reinforced her confidence in the kind of work she was already producing.[7]

The interest in the rustic "reservoir" of fertile material for literature, seems to lead inevitably to a form of realism. Percoto's Italian stories, which document rural life in Friuli, clearly took inspiration from the lives, work, customs, and traditions of the Friulan people. Her stories and sketches from real life are indeed exemplary models of the rustic genre documented and exalted by Correnti and Tenca, and epitomized by Ippolito Nievo's Novelliere campagnuolo[8] and George Sand's nouvelles champêtres.

In many ways, Percoto is primarily the literary

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[7]Carcano's Docici novelle was published in 1846. Sand published Jeanne and La mare au diable in 1844 and 1845 respectively. By comparison, Percoto's Il vecchio Osvaldo, Lis cidulis, L' anno della fame, and Prepoco as well as other works were all written before the beginning of 1845.

[8]Nievo wrote that his undeclared model for the novel Il conte pecoraio is "un romanzo contadinesco e non alla Carcano" (DeBenedetto 35). It is possible that Nievo modeled his Conte pecoraio after Percoto, the Contessa contadina.

descendant of Alessandro Manzoni. His Romantic realism, his themes, his humble characters, and his utilization of actual historical events as the motivating source for I Promessi sposi are her inheritance from him. All are present in Percoto's work. As Pietro Pancrazi noted, "tra tanti manzoniani della parola, la Percoto fu manzoniana nello spirito" (123). Numerous other critics have mentioned Manzoni's unmistakable influence. Thematically, providence and conscience loom heavily in stories such as Lis cidulis, L'anno della fame, and La coltrice nuziale [The Wedding Blanket]. But the emphasis placed on edifying the reader is almost too transparent. Though her works cover a wide range of subjects--war, poverty, indifference, hunger, famine, desertion, and contraband--and though these subjects are portrayed with genuine and profound conviction, they dwell on a didactic moralism that Manzoni hid within the fabric of his art.

In addition to thematic influences Manzoni also had made it acceptable to write about historical subjects in prose, and in doing so, he opened the door for stories pivoting on an event (or even a non-event as in the biography of Prepoco) of contemporary history. Stories such as La donna di Osoppo [The Woman of Osoppo] could probably not have been written before 1827. Like Manzoni, Percoto showed scrupulous accuracy in describing the historical and geographical settings. And it seems that she had no misgivings about choosing characters,

indeed some of her best creations, from the lowest class.

Finally, although she indulged in artificial deus ex macchina solutions, she restrained any plot action too improbable or too romantic. For instance, in the dénouement of L'anno della fame, providence in the form of a good priest finally finds Pietro work and stability, rescuing him and his family from certain disaster. Not, however, before his conscience plagues him relentlessly for his attempt to steal some wooden fence posts from a rich man's field in order to keep his family warm on Christmas eve. In his fear of being caught, as two "galantuomini" are stalking him, he leaves his hat while fleeing. That hat becomes the emblem of his guilt:

> Nel domani, giorno di Natale, come avrebbe fatto ad andare alla messa senza cappello? Tutti si sarebbero accorti del ladro; e Pietro, che per la prima volta costretto dal bisogno s'era posto a quella mala via, sentiva tutta la vergogna dell'essere scoperto." (Percoto 1974, 89)

In Lis cidulis, providence first punishes Giacomo for his transgression in performing work on a Sunday--his truck full of wood goes out of control and crashes down the mountain.[9] Cries Rosa, his fiance, "Era festa quest'oggi. Dovevano rispettare la festa!" (Percoto 1974, 78). But finally, a

[9]Some critics have noted this scene as a precursor to Verga's theme of "roba," the evil of material goods exemplified by the disaster of the lupines in I Malavoglia.

merciful providence also provides the solution to their poverty in the form of the sickly but benevolent Massimina, who gives them all her jewels in order that they may begin anew.

La coltrice nuziale is interesting for the myriad themes it encompasses, though that throng of subjects leads to the ultimate failure of the story, an ennui created by its divagatio, its tendency to wander without resolving any one part of the plot. Nevertheless, it is useful as a representative example of Percoto's adherence to Manzoni in theme and subject matter. Just as Manzoni delves into the historical development of plot elements such as the history of the differing classes of the wealthy and the oppressed or the history of the bravi, Percoto also surveys the history of the poor landless farmers, the sottani (or sotâns in Friulan) to clarify their innocence for their miserable condition and to dispel any privileged notion that they deserve their lot. In the history, the reader gets a clear sense of the two existing classes, one with complete power, the other with none:

> I sottani, cotesta piaga delle nostre campagne, sono la più meschina e la più infelice delle classi della società; quella su cui pesa maggiormente il lavoro senza compenso, e dalla quale scaturiscono i mendicanti, i vagabondi, e spesso anche i ladri e gli assassini. I possidenti che vanno in rovina danno sovente origine alla loro esistenza, perché

> cominciano dall'alienare i fondi produttivi, e in ultimo affittano e vendono le case mezzo diroccate a una specie di speculatori che poi le subaffittano a dei miserabili, che, o per disgrazie, o per discordie domestiche divisi, non hanno più la possibilità di condurre una colonia. Questi speculatori, per lo più possidenti di fresca data, a tali orribili tuguri uniscono uno o due campicelli, dei quali esigono affitti spropositati... (Percoto 1974, 140)

By her own admission, Percoto was bored by history: "... è da ridere, perché io mi sono una persona cosí poco dotta, che la Storia mi è sempre stata una grande seccatura" (Epistolario 76). Yet she was careful to describe not only the causes of social or political problems, but also their effects. She successfully de-romanticized war. In La coltrice nuziale, the orphan Mariuccia goes to visit a friend who has returned from the battle in order to learn something about the fate of her fiancé. She discovers the horrifying result of war, in victory and loss:

> Senza un braccio, orribilmente mutilata una gamba, e fuor di modo annerita dalla pioggia e dal sole... "Anche voi, ragazze, eh! venite a congratularvi, disse, della bella fortuna che abbiamo fatta. Oh! quando siamo partiti, pareva che andassimo nel paese della cuccagna. Dovevamo ritornare ricchi

> come Creso! e portare in regalo alle nostre amorose gli anellini e i pendenti delle ribelli!...Invece abbiamo lasciato chi la vita e chi le membra; e quelle pompose fandonie non erano inventate che per farci andare allegri incontro al cannone che ci ha conci [sic] come potete vedere!" (Percoto 1974, 179-180)

Another theme from Manzoni, but also with a long tradition in Italian literature, is the hypocrisy of clergy. La coltrice nuziale implicates individual clerics in their complicity with the Austrians in suppressing the democratic movements toward independence and unification for Italy. In nineteenth-century Friuli, men of the cloth were more likely to be civil servants, loyal to the state, rather than vassals of the Pope (Salimbeni 173). During Mariuccia's delirium over the death of her fiancé, her family sends for the priest who tries to console her with the comforts of religion. She attacks him:

> ... prete sacrilego, predicar dall'altare che noi altri potevamo approfittarci della roba dei ribelli! Che l'incendio e il saccheggio erano giustizia!... Oh!... dir messa cosi, con l'odio nel cuore!...Innalzar l'Ostia consecrata e spalancar l'inferno ai vostri figliuoli! Non mi toccate! le vostre mani grondano sangue... Egli è il sangue dei traditi che vi hanno creduto... E

> venite a predicarmi la misericordia di Dio? Non v'è più misericordia... Se anche ci fosse, io non la voglio!..." --E bestemmiava Dio e i Santi, e malediva l'ora del suo nascimento... (Percoto 1974, 181-182)

In addition to the thematic affinity, providence, war, history, and hypocrisy, quite a few descriptive elements, words and phrases from Manzoni's lexicon in I promessi sposi, can be found in Percoto. Descriptive expressions such as "il lembo estremo," (12) "tutto ghiaia e ciottoloni," (12) "cavalcioni sul muricciolo basso," (14) "camminavano rasente al muro," (71) "la sua bellezza sfiorita," "fiori sbocciati" can be found more or less reproduced in Percoto. She writes in a letter to Pietro Antonini, for example, "sono oltremodo orgoglioso per il mio Friuli, quel estremo lembo d'Italia" (Giornale storico 272). In La donna di Osoppo she describes the fleeing Rosina, "la povera madre rasente il muro, fuggiva..." (Percoto 1974, 197). Likewise in Prepoco she writes, "le fanciulline mie coetanee ... sparse per la chiesa come tanti bei fiori già sbocciati" (Percoto 1863, 58). In addition, similar to the settings in Manzoni's novel, Percoto's world is also full of campi, monti, cime, and osterie.[10]

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[10]Manzoni's revision of I promessi sposi is not simply a lexical or phonetic transcription of Florentine linguistic unit, but a revision made according to Florentine taste and sensibility. He exercised vigorous restraint on all his linguistic structures as

When Percoto finally turns away from the favored conventional themes that inform the nineteenth century--orphans, conscience, and a providence that fluctuates between punishing and providing--her work takes on a deeper dimension, its own excellent shape and purpose. These stories are more like psychological profiles without a fixed narrative substructure. They do not necessarily follow any conventional plot line with a beginning, middle and end. They seem almost literary improvisations, testimonials to nineteenth-century life. They stop telling readers what to think. Percoto forgets her goal of edification, and abandons herself to direct observation of her material without attempting to moralize or to fulfill any programmed ideal. In stories such as Il licof, La donna di Osoppo, and in the veiled autobiography Prepoco, one perceives Percoto's exceptional crafting of narrative reality and her microscopic study of characters. As she says in Prepoco:

> La nostra anima gode nel contemplare le opere del Creatore; e sia che fermiamo lo sguardo sovra gli animali, sulle piante, sulle reliquie del passato, o sovra noi stessi, ci disfavillano da per tutto i raggi della sua sapienza; e colui che ritrasse nel marmo una fanciullina che raccolte sulla spiaggia

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well (Devoto 275). Upon even a cursory reading, one sees that Percoto's works are informed by a Friulan taste and sensibility, though stylistically not as controlled.

> del mare alcune conchiglie ne appressa una all'udito come in atto di spiarne la tenuissima vita, ci ha dato un'idea giusta di questa secreta compiacenza che emana dall'osservazione. (Percoto 1863, 58)

Her writing becomes more refined from the point of view of narrative technique as she focuses on the condition of her characters objectively, with just a hint of sympathy. As Amedeo Giacomini noted in "Quasi una biografia," his introduction to Scritti friulani, when she stops moralizing and abandons herself to direct observation, we finally see real characters, gestures, attitudes, and landscapes:

> ... guarda ai propri personaggi come attraverso una lente d' ingrandimento che le consente di regredire realisticamente al loro livello e di metterne in risalto con una secchezza resa appena trepidante ... (xviii).

An underlying morality is present, but is not strident, and it is not an easily "grasped" clone of conventional morality.

In these several stories Percoto is highly original. She neither comments on the activities of her characters, as would perhaps lesser Manzonian realists, nor does she photographically and impersonally depict their problems in the manner of the Verists.

Much has been made of Percoto's similarities with George Sand since Tommaseo's comparison in his introduction to the

first edition of Percoto's collected stories in 1858. But, by the time Sand began writing her rustic novels, Percoto had already composed some of her major works in the genre of Italian rustic literature. Percoto did not have Sand's advantage of writing in French, a long established language with a strong popular base, and in France, an already established nation.[11] In the regions from Sicily to Piedmont, various languages deriving from Latin prevailed as the spoken languages of the majority. Percoto also cannot claim the sheer volume of Sand's work, her flamboyance, love affairs, and travels, all of which contributed to her notoriety. But both writers' work boasts a kinship in thematic substance and linguistic structure. Specifically, both writers documented with great care some of the ancient traditions, proverbs,

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[11]In terms of Italian as a language, Italy was perhaps the only country in Europe, as the linguist G.I. Ascoli said, where the Italian language had been so static and immobile that even semi-cultured people could read texts from the fourteenth century. Ascoli believed that Italy's problem lay in the concentration of knowledge in only the upper class. In England and France, knowledge of the language seeped down to all classes through the use of royal administrative texts. Italy's language was the language of a "caste of letterati" (Devoto 278). Mid-nineteenth century Italian had the same grammatical structures as archaic Florentine. No other nineteenth-century European from Spain to England could so easily understand ancient texts from his or her language. De Mauro attributes the progress and transformation of a linguistic system to the use of the spoken language (28), and the peoples of the Italian peninsula had no one spoken language, no national koine, in common. Even highly educated people in the various regions spoke either dialect, a hybrid of dialect and old Tuscan, or the language of the ruling country (French or German). Thus, other European languages with both oral and written traditions had undergone tremendous linguistic and phonetic transformations. But in Italy, where the tradition of the language was prevalently literary, no such development had occurred.

songs, customs and language of their native regions. Sand wrote about the traditions of Nohant, her country estate in the region of Berry in central France, where she had been raised by an aristocratic maternal grandmother; Percoto wrote about the lives and traditions of the people of central Friuli around Udine and in the Carnian Alps. Percoto's focus on preserving ancient traditions is evident in that four of her works are entitled with courtship (schiarnete, cidulis) and harvest (licof, pane dei morti) customs. In many of her stories, an essential plot action takes place at a traditional feast such as the Sagra della Madonna di Strada or the Sagra di San Lorenzo, or at the Festa dei Pastori. Percoto's feasts show the quaint and traditional side by side with the Catholic customs. Many of the traditional feasts are also stages where Percoto can set the intermingling of classes (the sotân, bacan, and parôn) in a neutral territory. A living custom or tradition prevails in almost every story. The critic Rienzo Pellegrini calls Percoto's works "poesie dei nostri avi", figurative expressions of "soffocate verità" (Tra lingua 270), traditions that were about to be forgotten, but which she saved from oblivion.

By way of comparison, Sand witnessed in her lifetime more movement in ideas and customs in her native Berry than in all the centuries prior to the late eighteenth-century French revolution. She laments that many of the medieval Celtic ceremonies that she remembered from her childhood had been

lost. Her estimation of the speed of the changes is frightening. Within two years, "Les chemins de fer," she predicts, "passeront leur niveau sur nos vallées profondes, emportant avec la rapidité de la foudre, nos antiques traditions et nos merveilleuses légendes" (Sand 140). Perhaps this prediction is one of the motivations for Sand's thematic shift in emphasis when she begins writing the country novels. Percoto, however, leaves historical analyses aside, preferring to focus on the traditions themselves within the context of the story, rather than to deconstruct the purpose for her writing. In La Mare au Diable [The Devil's Pool, 1845], Sand reserves the description of the marriage customs, the wedding gifts, the songs, and the traditional comedy for an appendix separate from the actual story of the friendship and courtship between Germain and Marie. This dichotomy between the fictional plot and the reality of the customs and traditions is alien to Percoto's work. All the traditions, popular songs, and customs she glorifies are worked into the fabric of her plot and prose.

Just as Tenca and Correnti believed that the language of the people held the key to the revitalization of literature--the lack of which created fractures between regions and classes, Sand also saw her use of the Berry dialect as a liberating element. In Prepoco Percoto hazards a similar compromise between Italian and Friulan as Sand does between French and the Berry dialect in the 1844 novel Jeanne, perhaps

with greater success. Sand writes: "C'est pour moi une cause de désespoir que d'être forcée d'écrire la langue de l'Académie, quand j'en sais beaucoup mieux une autre qui est si supérieure pour rendre tout un ordre d'émotion, de sentiment et de pensées" (Vincent 37). In Jeanne, Sand wants to give local color to her story and uses simple language and dialect words to express the thoughts of her rustic characters. In La Mare au Diable, considered by many to be her best example of the rustic genre, she continues and refines this linguistic research as Percoto continued her integration of Friulan into Italian after Lis cidulis and Prepoco. However, there is a difference in intention between the two writers, though perhaps not in the aesthetic outcome. Sand is embarrassed by her own style and apologizes for it. "Je te demande pardon, lecteur ami, de n'avoir pas su te la traduire mieux; car c'est une véritable traduction qu'il faut au langage antique et naif des paysans de la contrée..." (Sand 139). Percoto (although rather self-effacing in some of her letters to the notable cultural figures with whom she corresponded) does not try to explain how she arrived at her language.

Sand's rustic novels are evidence of her commitment to the countryside of Berry, but also to her alienation from it. She latches on to the culture and patriarchal locutions of Berry, because, as it is located in central France, she believes it retains the nucleus of ancient French. As a place

that has remained stationary for hundreds of years "Le Berry est resté stationnaire" (Sand 140), its language retains an ancient richness. Sand was convinced that the Berry patois was primitive French (Vincent 42).

Percoto has no such illusions about Friulan. Friuli, located as it is in the extreme northeast corner of Italy, was never in the situation of centrally located Berry. Percoto's ostensible purpose was to recreate reality, very simply to effectuate real life, whereas Sand's purpose was more a scientific record of an ancient language, and a general apotheosis of nature, rather than a concrete rendering of it. For example, she wrote "Et pourtant, la nature est éternellement jeune, belle, et généreuse. Elle verse la poésie et la beauté à tous les êtres, à toutes les plantes, qu'on laisse s'y développer à souhait" (Sand 16).

By comparison, Percoto wrote in Prepoco:

> Attraversava le liete praterie che si stendono all'oriente delle colline di Buttrio, udiva il fremito del Nadisone che le taglia senza poter vederne le acque, che l'alveo scende lì assai profondo e le rive gremite di erba dinanzi alla vista si uniscono e fanno tutta una spianata. (Percoto 1863, 64)

These outbursts of Percoto's descriptive art are consistently strong. For Percoto, landscape is not a frame for plot, but a breathing, rustling, babbling, element of the story,

sometimes an emblem of a character's interior life, sometimes a foil for the external plot action. In comparing the two authors, it is easy to see how physically connected Percoto is to the landscape she describes. She understands it, feels it, empathizes with it. This empathy extends into her understanding of the people. She knows at heart the problems of the rural world, and does not simply day dream of the existence of the sweet and simple rustic character and his presumed freedom and happiness. The myth of the rich countryside, of easy, pleasant, profitable work is subverted in the realism of her stories.

Sand on the other hand quotes Virgil's idyllic words twice in La Mare au Diable. Though her characters may be hungry and overworked, they are still happy. "...le rêve d'une existence douce, libre, poétique, laborieuse e simple...Le mot triste e doux de Virgile: O heureux l'homme des champs s'il connaissait son bonheur'" (Sand 17). In addition, she distinguishes between herself and the people of the countryside:

> O fortunatos... agricolas de Virgile... Heureux le laboureur! oui sans doute, je le serais à sa place, si mon bras, devenu tout d'un coup robuste et ma poitrine devenue puissante, pouvaient ainsi féconder e chanter la nature, sans que mes yeux cessassent de voir e mon cerveau de comprendre l'harmonie des couleurs e des sons, la finesse des

> tons, et la grâce des contours, en un mot, la beauté mysterieuse des choses! (Sand 24)

Sand seems to idealize the rustic laborer, and in doing so, limits her portrait. She does not in her heart believe that he is a person, that he has the capacity to appreciate the sublime beauty, the miracle of the eternal youth of nature: "Hélas! Cet homme n'a jamais compris le mystère du beau... Dieu me préserve de croire qu'ils ne soient pas supérieurs aux animaux qu'ils dominent... Il lui manque la connaissance de son sentiment" (Sand 24-25). For Sand, the people of the countryside are indeed somehow incomplete, condemned to an eternal childhood of existence without cognizance.

Percoto knows differently. Her life in the country was an actual partaking in the management, organization, hardships, and daily activity of her family estate. It gave her keen knowledge of the raising of livestock and the silkworm industry, as well as familiarity with the ruthless consequences of nature's changing temperament in the Carnian Alps and in the plains of central Friuli. She has a healthy respect for the power of nature:

> É venuto un nubifragio, che ha fatto straordinariamente gonfiare i due torrenti fra quali vivo ed ha portato dei gravi danni ... il torrentaccio, che ancora mi mugghia negli orecchi, è venuto non a godere ma bensì ad ingoiare i miei poveri contrastati risparmi ... (Bernardi 348).

Percoto's stories demonstrate this more intimate understanding of nature and the people who populate her region. Though she recognizes the gap between the parôn and sotân, she feels strongly that the vast abyss between them must slowly be bridged, albeit through education and the efforts of the benevolent rich. Mutual understanding between the classes in Sand's country novels is not a prominent theme. Percoto's interest in the traditions and class of the rural farmer, if not based on a cultural and political militancy (Pellegrini Tra lingua 308), is instead based on her fervent convictions about the necessity for change in society.

Chapter 2: Regional Culture and Percoto's Works in Friulan

The region of Friuli lies in the Northeastern part of the Italian peninsula with Austria to the North, Veneto to the South, Italy to the West, and Croatia to the East. Geography and historical events tended to isolate the region, detaching it from its neighboring countries. There, the Alps form a semi-circular chain, which overlooks a hollow depression of hilly terrain composed of stony, sandy, apparently desolate glacial moraine. Further south, this land transforms into a spreading plain, which is cut off at the South by the Adriatic Sea, the southern border of Friuli.

Originating in the Alps are a series of mountain streams or "torrents," as they are called. One of them, the Livenza, forms the western boundary of Friuli. Other torrents such as the Isonzo, the Torre, and the Tagliamento are in constant fluctuation with narrow channels that rush down from the Dolomites or the Carnic Alps and furrow the plains. The enormous Tagliamento torrent often swells to a half mile width. Through the centuries it has metamorphosed between dry periods, which leave the gravelly river bed uncovered for weeks, and impetuous floods that inundate everything, sweeping away entire villages from mountains and plains. In his introduction to the Antologia della letteratura friulana, Bindo Chiurlo calls the Tagliamento the "Numen loci" of the region (12). In a concrete sense, one sees this prima facie

aspect of the torrents in many of Percoto's stories. In works such as Lis Aganis di Bourgnan, La Mulinarie, La Donna di Osoppo, and La Schiarnete, the torrential waters of the rivers and irrigation canals decide the fate of the characters, often motivating them to some decisive action, an epiphany of sorts. Extensive cultivation in Friuli has left large tracts of meadows, which replaced the residues of old forests. Indeed, geography and climate in Friuli are severe forces to be reckoned with.

Other factors contributing to the historical harshness of life in Friuli were the long-standing feudal system and the clear cut separation between classes of serfs (i sotâns) and land owners (i parôns). In addition, a succession of foreign encroachments and continual invasions since the time of the Romans plagued the region. The Romans conquered the territory a century or so before the birth of Christ, establishing a colony in Aquileia on the Adriatic Sea, near the Istrian peninsula. Forum Iulii, Julius Caesar's market town, was established in the Natisone Valley by Octavian in 40 B.C. It subsequently became the city of Cividale. However, from the original name, the entire region of Friuli takes its name, Forum Iulii > Friuli. When these colonies were planted, the inhabitants were very different from the conquerors in race and lifestyle. They accepted the language and civilization of the Romans only in part, impressing their own ethnic and linguistic characteristics upon it. Thus was the indigenous

culture preserved.

Cividale and Cormons were cities of armed resistance, established to protect the region against invaders from the East. These were feudal societies with great agricultural holdings. Udine, established in around A.D. 900, became the seat of commerce to and from Germany; slowly it became a financial hub for artisans and craftsmen of the region. Because of its central location within the region, Udine grew in importance just as Aquileia and Cividale, situated too far East to accommodate the needs of growing commerce, declined in economic power.

The first extant mention of Friulan as a language is noted in 1050 A.D. in Aquileia. Described as "latino aquiliese," it is thought to have been a lively variety of Latin, able to embrace the political, economic, maritime and ecclesiastical powers present in the city (Francescato Udine 24). Over the centuries Aquileian Latin became limited to an oral function used mostly by the subordinate classes of serfs and farmers. Classical learned Latin or high Latin was studied only by the privileged class and was entirely restricted to written functions. The entire class of the serf was thus deprived of all participation in higher linguistic levels of written communication.

In addition to the use of learned and vernacular Latin, German was spoken by a great number of royal German aristocrats in the region. By the Middle Ages, several

Austrian feudal farms (Belgrade and Gemona) were established, as well as a chain of settlements and possessions along the Tagliamento. These settlements, the "deutsche Strasse" or "Tirolese corridor," cut through the North Central part of the region. The existence of the German nobility gave German a large diffusion in ecclesiastical and noble circles both as a written language competing with Latin and in certain social circles as a spoken language.

As intricate as this trilingual (Friulan, high Latin, and German) situation was, it did not begin to mirror the complexities that arose when the region began heavy trading with Italian cities to the South and when communities of Slavic people were summoned to repopulate valleys decimated by invasions. The German language spoken by the noble courts was gradually displaced by a local vernacular Latin mixed with Venetian and Tuscan vulgar elements. This new language was developed as the presence of noble Italians and French increased in the region. In time as the region moved from a Germanic-centered culture to an Italian culture, the patrician families spoke less German, moving toward a Venetian type Italian.[12] Economically, the influx of Italians from other parts of Italy led to a strong middle class bourgeoisie; linguistically, these people brought their own language

[12]As a manifestation of this cultural shift, the Patriarch Federico Savorgnano and his descendants were admitted into the Venetian aristocracy in 1384 (Gregor 14).

experiences which enlivened and enriched the spoken language. The local spoken language continued its own growth, but passed only through generations of serfs.

Certain linguistic developments in this era characterize details of Friulan. Unlike the languages of adjacent Northern Italian regions, Friulan retained concrete elements of Latin. One example is the retention of the "s" on plural nouns such as lis striis, lis aganis, and lis cidulis. The "s" is also retained in second person singular verbs. Initial Latin consonant blends, fl, bl, cl, gl, are conserved in their original forms instead of being mutated to eliminate the "l" (Francescato Udine 28). Friulan in these respects is an example of a relatively conservative linguistic group. This conservatism had multiple causes: the physical and geographical isolation of the region, the isolation of the wealthier classes from the serfs who used the language, and the lack of significant stimulation from other parts of Italy, which may have produced Italianized modifications.

In terms of the cohesion of Friulan as a unified language, extant documents from various parts of the region show that there was not one universal Friulan language for the region; the serfs from one town or city spoke a Friulan quite different from that of their neighbors. Any regional identity was not attached to a univeral koine.

Clearly, the salient linguistic influence in this area is that two or more languages from the Romance and Germanic

families influence and shape the oral and written capabilities of its inhabitants. The various historical constellations of bilingualism and trilingualism in Friuli--German, Latin, Friulan, Venetian, Italian, and Slavic--are conditions that make the region substantially different from other parts of Italy. Friulan of course was primarily used in oral speech, but by the fifteenth century, its use had spread upwards from the serfs. Nobles, artisans, merchants, and administrators all spoke Friulan, though they wrote and read Latin and Italian.

The earliest written examples of the dialect are in Latin documents of the twelfth century which incorporate geographical and personal proper nouns in Friulan. By the mid-fourteenth century administrative texts are written in Friulan. The first poems, three poetic "scherzi" in Friulan by an anonymous writer from Cividale, also appear. These extant examples are thought to be precursors to the soneto furlan, the Friulan sonnet (Francescato Udine 28). Other fourteenth century documents from Cividale and Udine are the texts of translation exercises from Latin to Friulan.[13]

Anonymity was breached in the mid-sixteenth century. Like the dialect literature in other parts of Italy, these

[13]The most characteristic aspects of Friulan remain hidden in these documents because of the phonetics and the difficulty of rendering them graphically. This graphic problem is one of the physical shape of the language--hence the Friulan saying, "Furlan mal se po scrivere e pezo legendo pronuntiar" (Francescato Udine 38).

first poems were authored by educated men who had the ability to manage the more prestigious languages of Latin and Italian, but chose Friulan to express sentiments and content that could not be expressed in a literary language. A line was drawn between themes appropriately expressed in a literary language and themes in need of a different mode of expression. The playful and grotesque themes common to the dialect poetry of other regions can be seen in the work of these poets.

Some of the first poets to break anonymity were Girolamo Biancone (1515-1580) and Niccolò Morlupino (1528-1570). Paolo Fistulario (1587-1631) organized a group of twelve young men in Udine who met regularly to recite original poetry and translations from Latin and Italian poets.

Then there are the seventeenth century poets Ermes de Colloredo (1622-1692), "il nostro grande burlone del Seicento" (Cumin iii), and Eusebio Stella (1602-1665). Colloredo's early life was actively spent as a page in the Tuscan court, an officer, a Captain in the Venetian army, and a Courtier in Vienna. He retired to his villa at Gorizzo, and there in addition to many poems, wrote several prose dialogues between rustic characters as theatrical intermezzi. These works highlight Friulan's agility as a spoken language with an ability to accurately verbalize small town regional themes. Stella, rated artistically the equal of Colloredo, also wrote in Italian, Spanish, Latin, and Venetian.

During the eighteenth century, there was little poetic

production in Friulan. Giorgio Comini (1722-1812) is known for a poem about a young girl on the day of her taking monastic vows. The theme and description are precursors to similar elements in Percoto, Manzoni, and Verga. In La monacaziòn as the exquisite young girl dons the habit and has her head shorn, Comini laments her loss of the world not just as a symbolic dying to the world, but as a physical dying as well: "Par fâ jodi che al mont muorta liee era; ma che muart finta a me pareva vera" ["Die to the world is what she's meant to do; but that feigned death to me seem'd all too true"] (Gregor 191).

Poetry flourished again in the nineteenth century with the work of Pietro Zorutti. Caterina Percoto, however, was the first modern prose writer to thrust Friulan narrative and folklore into the literary arena of serious literature. When she decided in the 1850s to actually compose in Friulan, rather than Italian, she did so out of a firm conviction.[14] Rather than borrow words from books in Italian, from "una parlata non mia, una veste che anche assai più gentile non era peraltro nata insieme al concetto" (Livi 112), she chooses to dress the idea in a speech more appropriate to it. She believed that in order to preserve thematic and expressive unity in stories about Friuli, it was imperative to write them in Friulan. "Ne sono oltremodo orgogliosa per il mio Friuli,

[14]Percoto had published the tradition of St. John the Baptist in 1841, but in Italian.

per il povero popolo di questo estremo lembo d'Italia, dalla cui bocca le vado raccogliendo e un pochino anche per me" (Giornale storico 272). The decision was not easy to carry out. These stories, gathered directly from the mouths of the old women of towns, were often incorrect and confusing. It took a certain measure of concentrated effort to reorganize each legend from its various conflicting versions (Pellegrini Tra lingua 174). This situation might be expected from a literary tradition grounded in the oral tradition.

To complicate the composition, writing in Friulan was no easier than writing in Italian. One may surmise that Friulan was Percoto's spoken mother tongue, but Italian was her written mother tongue. Questions about lexicon plagued her. Since most of her writing occurred before the 1871 edition of Jacopo Pirona's Vocabolario Friulano, she was compelled to try to create her own Friulan grammar book and dictionary to consult as needed (Rizzolati 185). Constructing a consistent language was an enormous task. The problems of Friulan as a written literary language were actually physical and historical in nature. Historically, Friulan prose had a sparse tradition. Of note are the humorous dialogue intermezzi by Colloredo along with a few letters written by a notary named Antonio Belloni (1554) and the church homilies of eighteenth-century clerics such as Carlo d'Attems (1701-1774), the first bishop of Gorizia. Thus, there was no model to graphically express some of the sounds that characterize

Friulan. With her stories, Percoto contributed to documenting nineteenth-century Friulan.

A second accomplishment of Percoto's Friulan work is that it addressed contemporary issues in a serious manner. Previous to Percoto, the literature of Friuli lacked any solid indications of political themes. Dialect poets in other regions such as Rome, Lombardy, and Naples had begun to address the perennial problems of famine, poverty, war, and the relationship between the classes; Friulan poetry did not. Percoto was roused to the challenge of writing about realistic, timely issues in her stories written in Friulan, just as she embraced that subject matter in those stories written in Italian.

Bindo Chiurlo has argued in several critical essays that the literature of Friuli, indeed the entire character of the region, its people, history, geography, and natural history, is in some way emblematic of the Friulan language. He initially characterizes the Friulan temper as primitive intelligence rather than cultured politeness, "quel non curarsi delle apparenze, che è dato dalla certezza della sostanza, quella rudezza un po' primitiva anche nelle persone più colte e d'ingegno" (Intro 11). Likewise, Friulan was considered rough and barbaric. Niccolò Tommaseo, in sending his regards to Percoto through a mutual friend, wrote that she ought to be angry at the editors who had decided that her language was "mezzo barbaro, quel dialetto ch'essa scrive sì

atticamente" (Giornale storico 271).

The Italian critic Rienzo Pellegrini credits Percoto as one of the two Friulan writers, along with Pietro Zorutti, considered the "apici dell'intero arco letterario friulano," the apex of Friulan literature (Tra lingua 288). The characters in Percoto's Friulan stories are glorifications of simple, down-to-earth, hard-working people. Their lives are focused on unexaggerated reality, not whimsy or extravagance. In the succinctness and stark drafting of the Friulan stories, Percoto strikes deep into a collective consciousness of the people of her region, a consciousness of legends, folktales, and folklore. Hers are stories, popular legends, and traditions, some of which are simply transcribed from the oral tradition. Her setting is exclusively the Friulan countryside. She draws inspiration from fantastic and miraculous events as well as from people around her, the real life folk heroines and heroes.

None of Percoto's thirty-two Friulan stories exceed four or five pages of print, most of them limited to one or two pages. Twenty were published during her lifetime, from 1851 to 1887. The remaining twelve stories, several of which are fragments of a few sentences, were published in the twentieth century, six by Gianfranco D'Aronco and another six by Amedeo Giacomini. This avocation spanned two decades. An 1857 list of all Percoto's stories available for publication indicates that most of her known Friulan stories had been written by

that time (Giornale storico 259). The publication date of her first short story in Italian is 1841. Significantly, it is entitled S. Giovanni Battista, legenda friulana (D'Aronco "Contributo" 28) and is perhaps an early indication of her future commitment to writing in Friulan.

The genre of the oral story is traditionally a story that does not over explain its meaning. The oral tradition does not give reasons for its existence. Percoto's Friulan tales, from the fantastic to the miraculous to the racconti dal vero do not try to justify themselves by establishing a simple meaning to give purpose to the story. Stories such as Il chian blanc di Alturis [The White Dog of Alturis, 1851] or the stories of the St. Peter cycle stop after the climactic action, before interpreting meaning in some discursive manner. They do not tell the reader what to think, leaving the story open to interpretation and reinterpretation. For modern readers habituated to the reams of information available in the media and accustomed to forming their opinions from editorials, this freedom is novel, perhaps even disconcerting in its complete trust that the listener will interpret and that the listener will be able to interpret. A story told from the oral tradition is sometimes bewildering but often refreshing in its lack of control, its purposely not trying to dictate interpretation with pat phrases, long-winded explanations, or trite morals. Several stories conclude with one gratuitous explanatory statement, such as this final

phrase in La mulinarie, "... fortunadis lis fameis in du là che nascin o s'implantin di cheste sorte di feminis" (Percoto 1988, 42) or at the end of Lis as, "In chest mond, Pieri miôr che lis chiossis e' vàdin un pôc al lôr destin, e lassâ corri, e lassâ vivi dug" (Percoto 1988, 94). But these examples are more a conventional method of concluding, rather than a method of edifying the reader.

Friuli, culturally privileged as few other regions were, was situated at the cultural and linguistic junction of three Mitteleuropean civilizations, Latin, German, and Slavic (G. Pellegrini "L'atlante" 141). Thus, Percoto's stories have received traditional and legendary material from all three civilizations.

Chiurlo seems to have developed his classification of the flabis e liendis or fables and legends based on Percoto's oeuvre. He groups the stories into legends, moralistic stories, and traditions surrounding the lives of the saints. This division accurately describes the breadth of Percoto's work in Friulan. It is also the same grouping of Friulan stories as the 1863 Genoa edition.

The legends are basically fables, stories with a supernatural basis that pivot on some type of magical transformation. In this group of stories, the strength of the fantastic, a more nordic characteristic, prevails over gentle fantasy. Friulan legends often are tied to various landmarks such as castles or grottoes, and natural disasters such as

earthquakes, landslides, or floods. Percoto's stories are no exception. They are linked to grottoes and streams, mountains and wars. Another characteristic of these stories are mythological spirits such as the pagâns or the aganis, vestiges of an ancient mythology common in the Rhaetian and Cadorine Alps. The aganis, witches or fairies living in grottoes or stones are evil naiads who show up in these legends as personifications of the torrential waters that have wiped away so many villages as in Percoto's Lis aganis de Borgnan [The Borgnano Water Sprites]. The pagâns represent the popular tradition of savage men, "i dannati" who live outside of civilization on rugged cliffs and coasts or in caves difficult to access. Percoto's Silverio, for example, in Lis striis di Germanie [The Witches of Germany], furiously uses his mallet to crush stones from the cliffs, then throws them into the Bût River, and returns to the crest of the mountain transformed into a grunting pig. Traditionally, the pâgans came to the towns to attack and torment whomever they came upon.

These romantic fantasies are a contrast to the sober, pragmatic reality of the region. Chiurlo attributes the dichotomy to the turbulence of the region's history. Torn apart by invasions of every sort up to the sixteenth century, by ferocious struggles between nobles, by the tyrannies of feudal land owners who managed to maintain their hold over Friuli long after feudalism had been abandoned in other

regions,[15] and above all by the continuous fearful threats of nature, the region had its share of harsh reality. The images created by those events were stirred into the collective consciousness of the Friulan people.

The humorous-moralistic story usually takes the form of a satire about certain towns, as in La plui biele [The Prettiest, 1863] or about customs and classes of people, as in L'oseladôr [The Bird Hunter, 1863]. Percoto's stories are serious observations of human actions, but with an underlying morality somewhat veiled either by a playful surface narrative, as in L'oseladôr and La plui biele or by close observation of reality, as in La mulinarie. The stories in this group are Percoto's original creations, not part of the oral tradition of fables and legends. They all have the ostensible theme of sacrifice, perseverence, and the need to work hard to improve one's lot in life, especially for the good of one's family.

The stories of the saints focus on events touching the lives of certain domestic saints, like St. Peter, Job, St. Mark, St. John, and the Virgin. These stories are common in other parts of Italy and throughout Europe, especially in the Slavic countries to the East and in Germany to the North.

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[15]The unity between the Pope and Charlemagne, which led to the establishment of the Holy Roman Empire in A.D. 800, inaugurates the integration of political and ecclesiastical power that strengthens the basis of the feudal system (Gensini 93). Feudalism is also fortified by the groups of Slavs brought into colonies along eastern Friuli as a bulwark against invasions from the East.

Percoto's frequent visits to women spinning during the evenings or to the elderly farmers on her estate afforded her the opportunity to hear the various witty renditions of the stories.[16] The most common tales surround the activities of St. Peter, Friuli's popular hero. St. Peter is Everyman next to the "Lord"; together, they represent the juxtaposition of the everyday finite mind with the eternal. The morals of Percoto's stories come out with liveliness and variety. One senses humanity's need for order, explanation, and purpose in some of these stories. The gift of the silk worms in The Worms of Job is the reward for Job's trust and perseverence in the Lord. The story St. Mark reveals the foundation of Venice's steadfast republican movement. The laughter, tolerance, resignation, and also bitterness are all very human. Percoto crafted her stories of all these traditions with equal sympathy. But clearly she concentrates on those that reveal the thoughts and actions of St. Peter.

In Percoto's St. Peter cycle, God is called the "Lord" not Jesus or God, because in these stories Percoto is not attempting to be religious; for Percoto, religion is always

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[16]Tommaseo recommends this method to her in order to collect stories that truly come from the people. "Raccogliete tradizioni e proverbi e frammenti di canti; e scrivete anco in dialetto cose che il popolo possa leggere" (Giornale 252, Nov. 6, 1856) and also "Oggi è il dì di S. Giovanni, bel Santo, che in carcere dava udienza a Erode re e intorno a lui certamente in Friuli corrono tradizioni che voi dovete raccogliere. Raccoglietele tutte e anco frammenti di canti; e ditemi se ce ne sia non d'amore. E i bachi di Giobbe, è egli cosa proprio popolare?" (Giornale 225, June 24, 1856).

subordinate to morality. One senses this underlying conviction in all the Friulan tales. Amedeo Giacomini believes that the stories surrounding the lives of the saints underwent only slight changes in the passage from the oral to the written phase (xxx). However, there is no way to know how much Percoto altered her stories from the original source since hers were the first written testimonies of the stories, while subsequent oral and written examples were probably based on her work. Tommaseo had encouraged her to add to the stories using her own genius whenever the material was sparse. The collection of fragments that Giacomini published at the end of his edition of Racconti friulani (1988) would seem to indicate that these were kernels or ideas of stories that she never had time to elaborate.[17]

These stories, magical or realistic documents of the metamorphosis of witches, spirits, millers, bird hunters, and farmers, constitute a catalogue of the potential destinies of men and women in the stages of their lives where destiny is formed or chosen--childhood, departure from home, the attainment of maturity, the proof of humanity. In all instances, Percoto achieves a freshness and directness based

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[17]One particularly intriguing fragment is the title and initial part of Vere storie di une famee lade in Americhe e tornade a chiase l'an passat [The True Story of a Family Gone to America and Returned Home Last Year] (Percoto 1988 175). It would appear that Percoto, though she never finished what surely would have been one of her moralistic stories, entertained an aristocratic concern about the growing number of emigrants from the region.

on simplicity and flow of the oral language. Giacomini called it "la trepida grazia dell'oralità" (xxxi). Stylistically, she intervenes in the actions of the story with brief descriptions of local color, particularly the landscape or a typical regional expression. These stories are truly continual actions in progress with no reflective, psychological analysis.

Their aesthetic approach is to scrutinize reality until it is found in certain elements that lend a solid, physical quality of truth to the short ephemeral stories. Take several of her opening phrases for instance: Listen to the orality of "Sintistu ce vint? è je la vendeme des fueis ... " [Do you hear the wind? It's the harvest of the leaves ...] in Il chian blanc di Alturis. Or, the concrete place of "Sot la mont di Borgnan al é un sit in du là che il Judri al jentre tal cret e al fâs come une specie di lago"[18] [Under the Borgnano Mountain is a place where the Judrio comes into the rocks and makes a kind of lake there] in Lis aganis di Borgnan. Or, the precise indication of time in "Vué un an gran funerâl te ville di Pavie" [A year ago today there was a big funeral in the town of Pavia] in La mulinarie. Each story is grounded in a firm sense of the present.

Whether a fresh-baked focaccia or geraniums or a pan of birds frying on the fire or the creaking of an old mill or a

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[18]lago - an example of how the Italian influences Percoto's Friulan.

dog barking, the strength and beauty of Percoto's Friulan stories lie in the physical quality of the words that permeate the stories in their best moments. And though Giacomini rightly praises the stories for their rough and rugged gracefulness (xxxiv), he fails to determine Percoto's aesthetic method, the qualities that lead to its lyrical grace and freshness.

A further illustration of Percoto's approach in the Friulan stories can be found in her ways of combining and meshing truth with fantasy. In the Italian stories, truth or idealized truth is her purpose: "[Prendo] sempre dal vero," (Barbieri 27). In the Friulan stories, however, she comfortably combines elements of truth with elements of pure folk fiction. The recognition of truth in these stories is embedded in story content. In all the legends, traditions, and stories, the characters are suddenly decisive, suddenly understanding, suddenly heroic. Truth and fantasy escape into and out of each other with flexible, elegant, controlled skill. Menie Durie's sudden strength and courage is as immense as Paul Bunyan's or John Henry's. The melancholic and yearning white dog of Alturis contains the soul of the soldier who reaped fortune from war, from the anguish of others. St. Peter realistically steals a sausage in secret and then fantastically discovers the Lord's miraculous third eye. In Lis aganis, the flood that actually happened is ascribed to the doings of the water nymphs. The earthquake

and landslide in La fuiazze de Madonne is attributed to the Madonna, while the miracle of the silkworms, so important to the region's economy, is attributed to the steadfastness of Job. The truth encloses and is enclosed by other tales labeled "fantastic."

Nature is Percoto's greatest ally. Natural events in the stories are the greatest of equalizers: A flood or a drought levels all hierarchies, destroying the crops and fields of the rich and poor alike. Whereas her Italian stories seek to subvert the accepted hierarchies of rich over poor, men over women, Austria over Germany, and Italian over Friulan, the Friulan stories accomplish all that but go one step further: They subvert the supremacy of realism over fantasy, the superiority of truth over fiction by skillfully combining both. In the tangible crafting of fantasy with reality is an indisputable measure of truth.

Chapter 3: The Problem of Language

The desire for a national language, a spoken koine with which people from all Italian regions could communicate with each other had existed for centuries. In the nineteenth century, the national necessity for one language reignited one of the greatest polemics in Italian cultural history, the "questione della lingua." The great fragmentation between regions and classes was attributed to the lack of a common language; however, choosing a language among the many languages in Italy that derived from spoken Latin was only part of the problem. The diffusion of a national language created an enormous difficulty in that it was not natural to speak in a language not one's own. In addition, the upper class opposed mass education, somehow fearing an enlightened multitude.

Italian writers outside of Tuscany have in almost every period lived with the condition of diglossia; that is, one language for private use and another for public use. Alessandro Manzoni, for example, whose native language was Milanese, though he also spoke French, worked continually on I Promessi sposi utilizing French-Italian, Latin-Italian, and Milanese-Italian dictionaries. Traditional literary Italian was the language of poetry, and as such it did not at all lend itself to prose. Writing prose required a different set of words and rules, a lexicon that had not been cultivated since

Boccaccio five centuries earlier.

Though I promessi sposi achieved initial success, Manzoni was not happy with it. He writes, "Scrivo male...: Scrivo male a mio dispetto; e se conoscessi il modo di scrivere bene, non lascerei certo di porlo in opera" (Serianni 134). He felt that his language contained too many undigested phrases of Lombard, Latin, French, and Tuscan, words taken from one language and analogously extended into another, often without a philological basis. While he set out to revise its language, he forbade further editions of the text. He strongly believed that Italian literary prose must be drawn from a language currently spoken, not from books. Manzoni chose the Florentine dialect because of its historical use in the vernacular literature of Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio. The trick, he believed, would be for him and other writers to reacquaint themselves with the current living language of Florence. Manzoni's solution was not universally acclaimed in Italy. Some factions became quite politicized, and several other solutions were proposed.[19]

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[19]Among the many solutions proposed were those of Ascoli and Carducci. Manzoni had changed the debate on the language dilemma. His solution was based on a rational and historical argument rather than aesthetic preference. Ascoli felt that for historical and cultural reasons, Manzoni's proposed new language and his subsequent plan for linguistic intervention and dirigismo (the purposeful import of Tuscan teachers into all the other Italian provinces for the purpose of language dissemination) would not be effective. He believed that within the dialects traces of prehistoric civilizations not formed by Latin classicism could be found. The dialects, therefore, ought to be considered in any creation of national koine (Devoto 278). Carducci, on the other

However, none of the discussions about which language to use as a model for a universal Italian mitigated the multiple problems faced by all writers in the nineteenth century. First, all these writers, and Percoto was no exception, were brought up speaking languages that were so different from Italian that they were essentially translating from native languages (dialects of Latin, not dialects of Tuscan Italian) into what amounted to a foreign language.

Second, rather than having the story flow forth in a single outpouring as was common for the French writers--Victor Hugo, George Sand, and Honoré Balzac all considered the act of writing more like speaking their thoughts on paper--Italian writers had to concentrate on the basic structure and lexicon of the language. Stylistic and aesthetic ideas were secondary considerations.

Third, the Italian into which they sought to translate, having been transmitted only through the poetry, did not contain the words so necessary for prose writing. The lexicon was deficient and restricted. Its words, highly abstract, were limited to poetic motifs, skies, gardens, love, glorious battle. The syntax was rigid. The style was highly rhetorical. There were no words to write about common people, events from everyday life or such essentials to realistic prose as household goods, names of family members, customs,

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hand, proposed a form of classical literary Italian without its Medieval "barbarous" elements (Devoto 283).

and traditions. Literary Italian was completely inadequate for the kind of prose nineteenth century writers, including Percoto, wanted to write.

Some authors remedied these problems by writing in their native languages, the dialects. Yet, by writing in dialect, an author restricted his audience. Additionally, the task of codifying spoken dialects was in itself an enormous task.

Percoto's linguistic background included all these problems. But in addition, her native language, Friulan, was different from other dialects spoken in Italy. Friulan lacks a strong similarity with other Gallo-Italic dialects. Since 1790, linguists have noted its stronger affinity with the language of the Swiss Canton Grisons, known as Romantsch, and that of the Dolomites. This group of three linguistic varieties from the area of the Alps once inhabited by the ancient Rhaeti, constitutes a single linguistic family known as Romantsch or Rhaeto-Romantsch.[20] G.I. Ascoli, a late nineteenth-century linguist from Gorizia in Friuli, confirmed the conclusion in 1873 and proclaimed the family "Ladin."[21]

Thus, Percoto's effort to write in Italian was further

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[20]The northern neighbors of the inhabitants of Carnia, the Rhaeti, were thought to be descendants of the Etruscans, who were driven out of Tuscany before the founding of Aquileia. See D.B. Gregor.

[21]Although there are many sources in Italian that deal with the history of Friuli and its language, there is only one book on the subject in English, Friulan Language and Literature by D.B. Gregor. See pp. 18-21.

complicated by the extreme differences between Friulan, a Romantsch language, and Italian, a Latin language. Her situation was more that of a bilingual writer rather than that of a writer raised in a diglossic society. The underlying principle for the existence of diglossia is an affinity between the two spoken languages. This affinity can be said to exist between Tuscan and other languages spoken in Italy, but the rapport between Italian and Friulan is another kind of diglossia, one that many linguists feel excludes affinity. Giuseppe Francescato defines these two diglossias as "intralinguistic" (affinity) and "interlinguistic" (excluding the affinity) (Udine 140), and concludes that interlinguistic diglossia is closer to a state of bilingualism than diglossia.

Percoto never went to Florence to perfect her Italian in the heart of Tuscany. Some critics lament this as her linguistic failing, others favorably compare her work to Manzoni's novel before its fifteen years of revision. In any case, despite the model afforded by Manzoni, Percoto's own lexicon retains a certain number of literary, poetic, and aulic entries which lend a rigidness to her prose. Nonetheless, she often manages to attain the colloquial, spoken language promoted by Manzoni and shows a penchant for familiar expressions to characterize the discourse of the characters.

Percoto's choice of language in her Italian stories will be briefly examined with a review of the variety of ways in

which she introduces foreign words--Friulan, Venetian, German, French, Croatian, and Slavic--, her repetitions, and her reference to country activities. First, her Friulan matrix is foremost. Many Friulan words, traditions, and expressions are introduced in italics, such as Businot and schiarnete. Some are accompanied by an intratextual gloss, some by a translation and explanation in a footnote. Other Friulan words are accompanied by a synonym or an equivalent term in the text that clarifies them as for licof or bianchetta.

However, many words from Friulan and other languages, particularly words that indicate parts of the landscape, household goods, or the character of people, are often admixtured in the text, borrowed from Friulan or another source language for her Italian. Such words are creto from the Friulan cret for the Italian "rupe", grebbani from the Friulan grebbanos for the Italian "dirupi", and cretaglia from the Friulan cret or crete for the Italian "masso" or "roccia" in Prepoco (Percoto 1863). Additionally, she uses marinze for "Slavic girls", ronco for a specific trapping technique in bird hunting, and rebola from the Friulan rebuele for the wine from the region in Il licof (Percoto 1974). Finally, we find words such as kruca (Croatian for bread), svanzica from German "zwanzig", lentima from the Friulan lentime meaning "mattress cover", sottani from the Friulan sotân for the poor landless class of farmers, toelette, paletò, and soiree (from the French), and fraile from German "fraulein" in other

stories.

The feel of the locality becomes even stronger with the description of country habits and past times, such as bird hunting, singing, festive dancing ("Si ballavano sui prati di Soleschiano"), as well as a host of regional customs and traditions.

But Percoto also adds to local color with the repetition of certain words within the story that contribute to her vision of country life, words such as creature, meschine, miserabile, contorni. Thus are customs, habits, Friulan and foreign lexicon woven into the text with a variety of techniques.

Next, Percoto's references in all stories to specific locations--cities, mountains, torrents, plains, villages--where events take place, is of paramount importance and lends legitimacy to the overall language by appointing it to exact localities. None of Percoto's settings are imaginary. Il licof is set in and around Cividale, Manzano, Monte Canino, Carnia, the Nadisone and Isonzo torrents, Gorizia, the hills of Buttrio, and Rosazzo; Prepoco mentions Cividale, Premariaco, the hills of Buttrio, and Businot; La Donna di Osoppo specifies the Tagliamento torrent, Udine, Gemona, and Osoppo. Toponymies, historically one of the first written examples of the Friulan language in medieval administrative texts, and other concrete, descriptive indications of place, characterize all of Percoto's racconti. Locale firmly grounds

these stories in Friulan sensibilities; the author quite skillfully guides us to fall into the specific reality of Friuli.

Another aspect of her language, the nomenclature, adds to the hybrid quality of her language. The richness of toponymies is matched in the names and nicknames of characters: Rosina, Vigi, Vigino, Menica, and Ardemia delle Rovere are all names often used and repeated in different stories. She also uses certain general words for groups of people--sottani, comari, creature.

Diminutive appellations are freely used--corpiciuoli, testolina, piccioletta, giovanina, schiacciatina, aquicelli, praticelli, arconcello, praterelli and fanciullina, just to mention a few among many others. They function as endearing terms, though their use often seems excessive and hyperbolic.

Idiomatic expressions are wide ranging--from sentences like che tu ti cavi il tuo pane di bocca or la ce ne ha fatto di belle, to descriptive phrases such as una donna di cuore or via da brava, to simple words similar to corponone and capponeria. She also uses many reflexives, sometimes substituting an idiomatic use of avere with them as in ch'egli s'ha filato.

Abbreviated words or elisions characteristic of Friulan syncope are also present: Gnor si for "Signor si" and conci for "conciato." But at times she also uses nineteenth century Tuscanisms, such as gli è, la è, and egli avenne.

On a more global level, Percoto's syntax, often complicated and elaborate, but other times exasperatingly simple, indicates an attempt to balance the spoken regional flavor of the racconti with an aulic, academic Italian. To that end, she uses series of dependent clauses which create a somewhat unmeasured syntax. Consider this passage from La Donna di Osoppo:

> Pareva una specie di corteo nuziale, e la sposa, benché non avesse la faccia rivolta allo spettatore, nell' aggraziato movimento della persona, nella leggiadria e nella sveltezza del torso, e nei molti capelli raccolti in trecce, che con alcune linee maestrevoli erano figurati sotto il velo abbozzato cadente sulle spalle, ricordavano cosí caratteristicamente la bella persona della padrona di casa, che subito t'avvedevi com' ella aveva dovuto servire di modello a chi aveva lí delineata quella scena. (Percoto 1974, 194-195)

A compound sentence looms at the beginning, but then the subject of the second part of the compound, la sposa, is left hanging for five dependent clauses and four descriptive prepositional phrases; no verb ever appears for it. The verb that finally does appear, ricordavano, becomes the predicate for a subject composed of the four preceding prepositional phrases. The clustering of dependent clauses is more indicative of the lack of discipline in spoken syntax, while

her use of t'avvedevi helps bring the reader straight into the story.

Another example is in Il licof, where one finds four relative pronoun subordinate "che" clauses, a participle construction, plus three gerund phrases to describe the scene:

> Vollero discoprire l'insetto che ardiva lanciarli [i fili] cosí pel vano, e sostando dove un punto lucido del filo aveva fermato la loro attenzione, videro il ragno navigatore dell'aria che, adagiatosi tra le vele dell'elegante barchetto ch'egli s'ha filato, si abbandona al venticello e passa quasi volando da un albero all'altro, svolgendo come da gomitolo la seta che la natura gli ha posto nel seno. (Percoto 1974, 103)

Later in the text, the spider unravelling its silken web into the abyss becomes one unspoken, eloquent metaphor of the courage and daring required to throw oneself into uncharted territory, as the Countess Ardemia (and perhaps also the Countess Caterina) has done.

These kinds of intricacies are balanced by a propensity to employ parataxis. The use of coordinate structure serves to stretch out the discursive meaning of some of Percoto's paragraphs, often for a temporal purpose indicating the passage of time. This description uses four coordinate conjunctions:

> ...le fanciulline mie coetanee, abbandonati i

> banchi della dottrina, sparse per la chiesa come tanti bei fiori già sbocciati od altre in lor vece le cui fisonomie non aveva più mai vedute, e mille volti nuovi, e que' che brillava per giovinezza già appassiti, ed altri disparsi e tutta quasi la popolazione cangiata. (Percoto 1863, 59)

Despite their complexities and simplicities, this kind of syntax does not stifle Percoto's inventiveness. In her paragraphs, creativity lies in the layering of thought, structuring it in ways that closely and intimately imitate actual thought patterns. The metaphor of the withering flowers, if not woven into the paragraph, would perhaps not achieve the effect of rousing the reader to the immutable passing of time.

One additional word about that passage. The words "tutta quasi" in "tutta quasi la popolazione cangiata" make up an anacoluthon, a phrase out of sequence. The words are reversed, jarringly out of sequence. Perhaps, however, this unnatural sequence is a rhetorical device for Percoto. The reversed words bring about a pause after "tutta" and seem to finalize the temporal quality of the passage.

In conclusion, next to and intertwined among the Friulan words and expressions that so typically add to one's notion of Percoto as a regional writer of letteratura campagnuola, one also catches a glimmer of the complexity of her thinking, the poetry of images and metaphors she used to make that thinking

understood intuitively.

In a large sense, her language is the result of the continual bilingual process of translating between her spoken mother tongue, Friulan, and her written mother language, Italian. Percoto's finest works achieve a mingling of the two separately designated worlds of Friuli and Italy, a comfortable balance between literary Italian, idiomatic Italian, and oral Friulan, and a measured sense of the structure of her images and metaphors.

Chapter 4: Personal and Literary Feminism

Feminism is a twentieth century historical movement which has been inclined to bringing women to a plane equal to men regarding socio-economic conditions, civil and political rights. In literature, this implies reevaluating the work of women authors past and present to discover and assess the presence of feminine characteristics, features that are not traditionally valued. As such to focus solely on Percoto's end product--her stories--analyzing them in the context of other similar works would seem to be sufficient to establish the feminist qualities of her works.

But this would not be telling the entire story. In a country as fragmented and underdeveloped as Italy was in the early nineteenth century, the significance of Caterina Percoto takes on immense critical importance. In light of the cultural milieu in which she was nourished, her formal education, the many daily interferences she endured, and the anguish of her solitude, her achievement as a writer grows. To this end I have used her own words, largely taken from her correspondence with Francesco Dall'Ongaro, her first champion in writing; Carlo Tenca; and Niccolò Tommaseo, as well as the words of those correspondents.

The second part of this section will focus on the outcomes, the patterns of her plot and character development that prevail in the women's literature of other European

countries, and in the details that inform those patterns.

Caterina Percoto was a great woman whom legend has monotonously depicted in slacks, riding horseback, enjoying a glass of wine, and smoking an occasional cigar. There is of course a basis of truth in the legend. Her appearance and behavior carry the weight of androgyny, the manly woman or the womanly man who projects a wholly masculine image both in activities and appearance. Likewise, the critical assessment of her works is equally monotonous, though in a different key. Her admirers and then she herself describe her stories as soft, sweet, "semplice e leggiadro" (Levi 118-119), women's work: educational, moralistic, patriotic. She is further stifled by the stereotype of the "contessa contadina,"[22] the simple hard-working countess who sacrificed the good life and dedicated herself to domestic charity for her impoverished nieces and nephews, who went about doing good deeds and helping those less fortunate.

Ostensibly, Percoto accepted the label on her work and character, and added to it her own estimation: "novelette, umili fiori" that she donates to the women of the world (Levi 118). To her good friend Prospero Antonini, exiled from Udine to Turin she wrote, "I miei poveri lavori i quali a dirla schietta sono pagine di giornale, fiori se volete di un giorno e sarà facile che non meritino di vivere più oltre" (Giornale

[22]Pietro Valussi, a colleague and editor at Favilla gives her this nickname.

storico 225).

Stylistically, Dall'Ongaro and Tommaseo both criticize her language as impure. After praising the content of her stories, Tommaseo notes her "improprietà di linguaggio mezzo erudito e affettazioncello di stile quasi accademico" (vii). Dall'Ongaro appeals to her for certain changes in language and lets her know that Valussi will take care of it. "Nella vostra leggenda, Valussi trovò alcune parole un po' signorili e forse se permetterà di mutarle" (Ce fastu? 118, Jan 31, 1846). His stylistic assistance continues for all of Percoto's association with him. "Ho letto il vostro Licov che mi piace assai ancorchè debba convenire che c'è qualche menduccia di stile ... Se lo permettete, e se vi fidate di me, ritoccherò o cangerò quelle dieci parole" (Ce fastu? 126, March 8, 1947).

With all the criticism focused on her language and all the praise on the sweetness of the works, is there any reason for her to value the work? They are not, after all, true art, not were they meant to be. "Non vi domando già erudizione, cosa che deve essere straniera ad una donzella" (Ce fastu? 58, n.d.) And again, "Questa è lettera da donna! ... Brava! Ce l'avete azzeccata! Le vostre due lettere sono proprio da donna" (Ce fastu? 63-64, Nov. 12, 1841, Jan. 11, 1842)

Marianne Hirsh writes that the solution of the Künstleroman, a variation of the novel of development, the Bildungsroman, was not available to female protagonists in

nineteenth-century literature. There is no tradition of heroines who, although dissatisfied with life, could be satisfied in art (28). Likewise in Italy, there was no opportunity for the woman artist to be taken seriously, certainly not by men more concerned with presenting her as a woman than as a writer. They did not deny the existence of the woman writer, but saw her in a patronizing manner, graciously and cavalierly offering their advice and guidance.

Even Percoto's seven years of formal schooling at the Convent of S. Chiara would not expand her academic options. The education of women, even upper class aristocrats, was impoverished. Pietro Valussi wrote "A' miei tempi in Friuli alle donne non s'insegnava né ortografia, né calligrafia, né grammatica" (Epistolario 14). How can one be expected to write at all much less write well with no foundation in spelling, penmanship, and grammar? None of Percoto's upbringing was geared toward the instruction necessary for cultivating genius in a writer. Her mind was actively focused on the current chatter of necessary, practical daily activities, not refined by significant hours of study. Every attempt to know herself and define herself was in a sense stifled.

In an 1853 letter to Gioacchino Pompilji, she analyzed her life since childhood, comparing it to slavery. "Vorrei che vedeste tutti voi altri che amate il nostro paese come si torca, si snaturi e si maltratti fino agli anni più teneri la

povera donna; questa pianta dalla quale aspettate il frutto della futura civiltà ... Avrei anch'io ...funesti abusi di forza e terribili ingiustizie ... e questo tra bianchi ... O i schiavi non sono, no, nella sola America!" (Livi 118). Yet despite this retrospective analysis, she herself yielded to the opinions and suggestions of men. When Dall'Ongaro tells her to leave criticism to the hard-hearted, she stops her critical analyses completely. "Lasci la critica ai nostri cuori indurati," says Dall'Ongaro (Ce fastu? 59, May 5, 1840). Man alone is formed by the critical spirit of cold impartiality, reason, refined intellect. Capuana himself in 1907 concurred with this estimation when he wrote, "Dove non occorrono la grande riflessione e l'intelletto immaginativo ... la donna può riuscire benissimo" (20). Aside from an unedited attempt to write her own autobiography, she never wrote any serious reflections on her own work, perhaps never realizing how serious her work was.

Percoto endured all the pressures that mold women into certain roles. Having been educated for the domestic sphere, she herself had no faith in the worth of her writings. She achieved literary authority by superficially conforming to male standards. Her self-deprecation continued to Carlo Tenca: "Le povere cose che scrivo ... debole scrittrice ... certamente non sono a proposito per le vostre pagine ... le tanti inegualianze e salti di stile che troverete" (Epistolario 37, Oct. 3, 1855). She was conscious of having

no formal education in the art of writing. "Non conosco le regole dell'arte!" (Giornale 278, Oct. 12, 1857). And still to Tommaseo. "Io debole donna, non educata agli studi avevo già consumato la vita senza potere" (Giornale 248, Sept. 1856).

Tommaseo intended high praise for her when he compared her favorably to George Sand, whose work he considered one of the touchstones of nineteenth-century European writing, but who suffered from a "perpetua querela ... di rancore ... di vendetta" (Tommaseo v). But no one with all the best intentions could change the pace of her daily activities or make her believe in the myth of the woman writer. She interpreted herself as the domestic nucleus of her family. Her numerous nieces and nephews as well as her own brothers and their wives returned to her time and again during her long life for both financial and personal assistance in supporting their families. Percoto seriously pondered family responsibility and wrote in 1863, "Io che sono sola a questo mondo ho una numerosa serie di nipoti tutti bisognosi e che fanno piangere il cuore col pensiero che non c'è modo né di educarli, né tampoco di provveder loro il pane necessario" (Bernardi 346). She became personally involved in the lives of all her siblings' children. Towards the end of her life, she wrote about her niece Giulia's medical condition, and how she planned to assist her in the cure: "Un dolore artritico che quest'inverno ha tormentato la mia nipote Giulia, la quale

doveva curarsi per non perdere la mano al lavoro" (Bernardi 350).

Daily activities forced her to put off her writing. She longed for the spring, believing that then she would be able to compose. "Quando tornerà la buona stagione e io potrò godermi la vista dei campi e piantare la mia scrivania in qualche sito un po' più ameno di cotesta[23] affumicata cucina della quale adesso vi scrivo in mezzo a mille strepiti e mille distrazioni, vi darò La schiarnete" (Epistolario 47, Nov 14, 1855). However, her need for writing was obstinate and tenacious. She felt propelled deep down inside her to continue writing at all costs, not to wait until spring:

> Sono stanca finita avendo fatto quest'oggi in tredici ore 22 miglia a piedi delle quali dieci di aspra montagna.... io mi propongo, dopoche avrò finita le facende della giornata, e mandato a dormire la famigliuola, di mettermi qui presso al fuoco e di passare la notte scrivendo, e parmi di potervi promettere per la fine dell'anno una novella, perchè, amico mio, a scrivere ad onta de' miei tanti impicci e della mutata fortuna, io mi ho nel cuore proprio quest'istessa ostinazione che voi dite di sentire a non voler morire. (Epistolario

[23]cotesto - an example of one of her improprieties in language. She uses cotesto instead of questo throughout her stories and letters.

51, Nov. 23, 1855)

At times her writing was cathartic, a type of therapy for an undetermined despair. Writing became a bulwark against depression: "Scrivo perché gettando il mio dolore sulla carta parmi sollevare la montagna che da più mesi mi pesa sull'anima (Livi 107).

In the confusion of daily activities it was Percoto who managed her invalid mother, her brothers, her sisters-in-law, her nieces and her nephews. As Dall'Ongaro wrote, "Voi siete l'uomo della famiglia Percoto; oso dire la mente--come ne foste sempre il cuore" (Ce fastu? 124, Feb. 5, 1847). Though she firmly stood by her upbringing of duty and sacrifice, she also nurtured an awareness, however slight, of the imbalance these virtues instilled on her life. "Noi abbiamo doveri verso gli altri," she wrote in her journal quoted in Livi, "ma ne abbiamo anche verso noi stessi" (116-117). However much she was cognizant of her predicament, she was powerless to change the set of rules by which she had knowingly or unknowingly agreed to live. Thus even the method she allowed for her work had to be cursory, quick, and possibly for those reasons, ephemeral. In a letter to the Venetian writer Luigia Codemo she wrote,

> Sa come lavora la povera Percoto? Immagino un fatto, prendo sempre dal vero i personaggi che fingo attori, li metto in un paese da me noto, e poi tiro via a correre con la penna come se si

> trattasse di fare un racconto di conversazione. Ecco tutta l'arte mia. (Barbieri 27)

For twentieth-century critics, this method of abandonment to the event, bordering at times on stream of consciousness, may indeed be the source of genius in her best stories. But the fragmented, busy context of her life also necessitated this working method. It was less a reasoned choice than an irrevocable fact of life.

Despite her lack of time for reflection, and despite the constant flow of people in her house and around her estate, people with whom she had personal business each day, despite all the outward duties she embraced and accepted, Percoto was personally alone. Her solitude stemmed perhaps from her refusal to accept a marriage of convenience--she played out variations of that theme in the characters of Ardemia delle Rovere, Countess Giulia and her mother-in-law in L'album della suocera, and the "fraile" Cati in La coltrice nuziale.[24] Of her own engagement to a wealthy old man from whose money her family could certainly have benefitted, she wrote in her journal: "Ho dovuto sopportare tutte quelle sciocchissime carezze ... mi mette il ghiaccio nell' anima (Livi 102). But this is not to say that the lack of a partner, sexual or otherwise, did not cause her anguish or cause her to quell the passion she dared to feel at various other subsequent moments

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[24]fraile - dialectism, German "fraulein".

in life. Gianfranco D'Aronco wrote of Percoto's secret life of passion in "Vita sentimentale segreta di Caterina Percoto," quoted in Livi:

> "Questi ultimi momenti ricordati che li voglio miei: li ho comperati con sette anni di patimento con lagrime infinita colla mia pena e fors'anche cola mia vita e coll'anima mia ... Questa fiamma che mi divora è nata nel mio cuore ad onta di tutti sforzi della mia ragione, ha calpestato i sentimenti piu sacri ... Entrai con lui. Era oscura la casa abbandonata. Ei precedette facendomi invito a salire, restai sulla soglia aspettando il lume ma vedendo che niuna veniva ascesi. Il fuoco era spento, ei tentava di accendere un fosforo ma indarno: solo sulla parete appariva a sghimbescio sette or otto strisce di sbiadato fulgore e qualche ondata di putido fumo. Forse ei tremava. Presi io stessa l'accenditoio e alla prima prova apparve la fiamma. Vidi allora la sua faccia pallida conturbata. Eravamo soli. Quante volte non abbiamo noi desiderato invano di trovarci insieme e di poter con libertà parlarci del nostro amore.... L'amore è un'amara catena che se si frange una volta mai più si riannoda." (Livi 107)

It's this kind of passion, whether real or imagined that along

with her acute sense of observation contributed to her style giving her work its solid narrative flavor. Moreover, it is this strength that has been ignored by virtually all critics who preferred to highlight the simple sweetness of her real life stories: trivial works from a second-rate author for an inconsequential audience. Percoto's actual work belies their assessment. She was not the sterile, simple, androgynous being perpetrated by critics and biographers. The stories that spring from the wit of Percoto, whose portrait has, I hope, been altered here, can be said with confidence to spring from an intimate knowledge of rural life and from personal experience of desire and yearning.

Percoto's heroines are women in various stages of growth and development. Prevailing patterns in the development of female protagonists is the theme of The Voyage In, a collection of essays that seek to describe and clarify ways in which gender qualifies the literary creation. The prototypical heroine generally seeks self knowledge and fulfillment in a move from the world within her to the world outside, from introspection to activity. This general tendency is precisely opposite that experienced by male protagonists in the traditional bildungsroman. In a hero's search for self-knowledge and perfection, he moves from activity in the public sphere to private introspection. Only through refuge in himself is the hero convinced to accept a responsible role in the social community. The traditional

bildungsroman requires the existence of a social context that nurtures the hero and facilitates the maturation of his inner capabilities. He achieves a self-reliant success, consequently leading him to wisdom and adulthood. (Abel 6). Female protagonists, unable to resolve their personal dilemmas in a nurturing social context, seek a different kind of resolution. Heroines see themselves as a part of a relationship, within a community of women whose goals and value systems are based on mutual empathy.

In Percoto's stories, both these archetypes of female development are at work. With Adelina in I gamberi, Cati in La coltrice nuziale, and Ardemia in Il licof, for example, the characters' melancholy is assuaged and their sense of exclusion dissipates when they move from the personal to the public sphere. When they allow themselves to take part in the community, melancholy and ostracism, two isolating factors, diminish. Additionally, many of Percoto's heroines are convinced of the importance of friendship, empathy, and comradeship as a source of comfort and instruction in their lives. Percoto's heroines find their lives revitalized once they establish relationships with other women of their communities: Cati with Oliva, Ardemia with Menica and Rosa. Mariuccia, who denies community with Oliva in La coltrice nuziale, placing all her trust on her relationship with her fiance, eventually dies. A correlative motif is that Percoto's female protagonists exhibit strong ties to their

birth places; birthplace and the homeland are synonymous with the foundation of character, intimately molding and shaping the heroine's life. Cati, Ardemia, Adelina all become convinced that their identities lie in the close, familiar relationships of childhood.

As such, it is significant to emphasize how many of Percoto's heroines are orphans. The orphan is a rather conventional nineteenth-century figure in European literature, but this status does not mitigate its thematic importance. The loss of parents at an early age emphasizes the isolation of the orphan who has never even had the benefit of a mother or sister to give her a sense of community. Consequently, the orphaned heroine can more markedly move from a state of brooding introspection to a state of community as she finds a group of people who function as her surrogate family.

Some of Percoto's heroines suffer painful illnesses, and stereotypically, often end up dead or, death's social equivalent, in a convent. This denouement, however, is not a developmental failure of the plot or a convenient conclusion so much as Percoto's refusal to allow her heroines to accept an adulthood that denies them the desires and convictions that they have finally come to realize. When the heroine returns to the fold of the community, whether from an illness or a trip or a hallucination, she finds that the role reserved for her leaves no room for the self she has discovered through the course of the story. Faced with the dichotomy and discord

between the social imperatives and her own psychological needs, the heroine must withdraw from society in some way. Thus, Mariuccia dies and Massimina in Lis cidulis remains gravely ill, both of them embracing death. Suor Maria Eletta and Cati both willingly choose the veil. Although their choice is significantly different from the situation of Gertrude in I promessi sposi or Maria in Verga's Storia di una capinera--both of whom are forced into the convent against their wills--it is, nevertheless, a function of a female character's limited choices in a society that considers her more a piece of property to be bartered than a contributing member of society, requiring nurturing and development. Countess Giulia and Oliva, though they consider embracing death, have children, and thus the necessity of domestic sacrifice for one's children precludes death.

Finally, woven into the fabric of these patterns of development is Caterina Percoto staking her claim for the necessity of significant, viable work in order for a woman to fulfill and complete her life. The work she concocts for her protagonists is directed toward the domestic sphere. Percoto's heroines learn to consolidate their nurturing roles in domestic and charitable ways that do not significantly increase their intellectual options. The work is fulfilling in that it contributes to the good of the family or the community. These heroines all face tough choices: They can submit to a repressive normality--marriage and sacrifice to

the community--or succumb to an inner life of madness, hallucination, dreams, or death.

The significance of Percoto's writing is that among these admittedly stereotypical pieces of plot and character is the absolute originality of La donna di Osoppo and Prepoco in all their freshness of language and sentiment, and the utopia of Il licof, where the heroine, Ardemia delle Rovere's journey to self-awareness begins after her divorce, after the conventional expectation of marriage has been fulfilled and found lacking. Here the heroine breaks conventions and embraces country life; here the men entrusted with government are actually wise men; here people both rich and poor sit together at the same table "come se fossero stati uguali" (Percoto 1974, 105).

In The Harvest Banquet, Percoto confronts the overwhelming diversity between the condition of farmers and that of the aristocracy. At the same time, she tackles the theme of women's position in society, this time with the divorced Countess Ardemia delle Rovere. The young Countess, whose father has died and mother has remarried--she is virtually an orphan--faces her family's disapproval and disparagement because of her dismissal of the role assigned to her by her family. She is unseemingly independent. She has lost her status in society because of her divorce from a womanizing husband. Virtually cast out of her own society, she recasts herself anew. She rejects her old carefree and

irresponsible life and takes charge of herself, her pleasures, and her land, which is subdivided into tenant farms.

The facets of her new life include some leisure activities--horseback riding, hiking, and bird hunting--but also a work ethic, a dedication to the reorganization of her farm and a personal interest in the prosperity and well-being of her farmers. She works personally with the bailiff to insure that the farmers flourish on their land. She encourages her dependents who wish to work overtime on special projects by rewarding their motivation.

But her reform does not stop with these vital economic changes. She lovingly chides the reactionary customs and habits of the farmers regarding their women. She reinstates an old Friulan custom, the licof, a traditional feast served to one's dependents after the final harvest and settling of accounts, but she updates it. She invites the farmers' wives, traditionally excluded from their husbands' tables even on feast days. She additionally institutes the custom of gift-giving. Treating her subjects with respect and love, she works to make the microcosm of her small world a model for relations between the classes in the macrocosm of the larger society. Thus, Countess Ardemia delle Rovere, the etymology of whose name actually means the "burning of the durmast oak" (a durable and resistent wood), shows courageous disregard for her own social position by choosing divorce, smoking cigars, wearing pants, leaving her hair loose on her shoulders--all

symbols of emancipated women--and by her penchant for work, for spending time with people beneath her station.

The solid feminine viewpoint is central to this story. Percoto shows women both rich and poor, who are oppressed materially and conventionally. Yet they all possess a productive capacity (unrelated to procreation) associated with work and achievement.

Despite Percoto's apparent understanding of the needs and capacities of women both rich and poor, she did not seem to advocate total democratic reform. Percoto made it clear that change and reorganization was necessary so that the system would survive into the future. She did not endorse the complete dismantling of the tenant farm system. Ardemia's paternalistic presence, albeit benevolent and generous, is necessary for the farmers' well-being. Imbued as they are in tradition and centuries-old lifestyles and standards of living, they first rebel against her reforms. Only her authority forces the issue and obliges them to submit to her wishes to reduce the amount of land distributed to each farm. She is still, finally, their mistress. Only after they learn the advantages of cultivating a smaller tract of land for a season do they realize that her decision was valid, that they now earn more and enjoy more leisure time. However, without the authorized direction, they would never have been able to reorganize on their own.

Finally, for all Ardemia's work, she is not truly free to

explore the world beyond her domestic sphere. In that protected place of her estate, where she is loved and respected because she is good, but also because she is her father's daughter, she affirms woman's traditional social role as surely as she reconceives woman's age old expectation of marriage and family. Ardemia's values both profoundly challenge and profoundly affirm the values of her culture. In seeming to conform to patriarchal standards, she also manages to supercede and subvert them.

In conclusion, many literary roles are suitable to Caterina Percoto: She was a paragon of rustic literature, a follower of Manzoni both linguistically and thematically, a writer whose experiments wrought in language led to passages of exquisite and powerful lyricism. She was the first author of serious prose literature in the Friulan language, setting down the fables and legends of its oral tradition. Finally, her stories provide a framework and a pretext for an all-embracing analysis of social and feminist ideas in the nineteenth century.

She did not believe then in her success. Yet, the fundamental literary qualities of her work, analyzed here and portrayed in the following translations, ought to assure Caterina Percoto of a place in posterity.

PART II: THE TRANSLATIONS

I have not subscribed to any particular theory in the translation of these stories, but I have attempted to remain faithful to both the colloquial and the eloquent tones of the original, trying to keep in mind Percoto's own description of her method, that of writing a story in conversation. The language is modern with commonly used expressions, exclamations, figures of speech, and proverbs. Any words or phrases that seem to require additional clarification are in footnotes.

Prepoco was translated from the text as it appeared in the 1863 Genoa edition. The Harvest Banquet and The Woman of Osoppo were translated from the 1974 edition of Novelle selected and edited by Bruno Maier. These are based on the 1880 definitive edition.

The Friulan stories are based on and have been translated from the 1988 edition of Racconti friulani edited by Amedeo Giacomini. I have also consulted some texts of the 1863 Genoa edition. For all translations from Friulan into English, I relied on the Friulan-Italian Dictionary, Il nuovo Pirona, Udine, 1983. In quite a number of entries, Pirona quotes Percoto's use of a word as the model of usage for that particular lexical element.

Enclosed in brackets after each title are the date and place of each story's first publication.

ITALIAN STORIES

PRIESTIE

Prepoco[25] was written in December 1844. Percoto sent it to Francesco Dall'Ongaro, who had read the story when he wrote on December 20, 1844: "Mi mandaste una toccante biografia che mi strappò le lagrime.... Quello scritto è tale da compensarne più d'una delle notti vegliate. Perciò acceppisti mercedem tuam et satis" (Ce fastu? 111). Prepoco is the story of a priest, Don Pietro Saccavini (1764-1842), who lived more than fifty years in Percoto's village. His melancholic personality, his hermit-like existence, and a hidden shame that consumes his very being bring him the scorn and disdain of the villagers, who saddle him with the disparaging nickname, "Priestie" or "Bitsy Priest", despite his many acts of charity. Percoto portrays his life, depicting various aspects of his persona: his solitary existence, his unchanging dress and demeanor, his tone deaf voice, the physical impression he made, as well as his generosity to the poor and the general suffering and defeat of his life. The story moves in a spiral-like fashion from the outward impression to the inner cause of the priest's anxiety and self-abnegation.

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[25]An abbreviated form of "prete poco" meaning little or bitsy priest, hence, "priestie." A Friulan or regional characteristic is the syncope of "pre" for "prete."

All the images Percoto describes in the story are not only emblems of the drama of this priest's solitary intimate life, but are also symbols and images close to Percoto's own reality, for this priest's biography is a veiled autobiography of Percoto's own life: Misunderstood, locked in a situation of filial and familial duty, her youth wilted and past without her consent, she often felt completely alone, without the comfort of congenial company.

The basis of this biographical or autobiographical portrait is Percoto's own keen sense of observation and, as she herself writes, her "delight in the works of the Creator... the secret pleasure that emanates from observation" (Percoto 1863 58). Accordingly, in a letter to Monseigneur Jacopo Bernardi (June 9, 1883), she states:

> in Prepoco non c'è sillaba che non sia vera. Io l'ho conosciuto di persona; il suo nome era Don Pietro Saccarini (sic), ma nessuno lo chiamava altrimenti che per il nomignolo che la gente gli aveva affibbiato. Io stessa, dopo uscita di convento, in piena buona fede, gli dissi una volta Prepoco. Era il dì di S. Lorenzo; la sagra del mio villaggio, e mi trovavo a pranzo in canonica con la mia buona mamma. Non dimenticherò mai l'espressione di malinconico rimprovero della guardata che per tutta risposta egli mi diede. Capii allora come nella mia spensierataggine avevo

> profondamente offeso quell'anima, che in quel momento mi si rivelò tutta intera in quei grandi occhi limpidi, ch'egli teneva di consueto sempre avvallati, e ch'io non avevo per l'innanzi mai più veduti. Forse fu quello sguardo che due anni dopo la sua morte m'ispirò la pagina che voi leggeste con tanta indulgenza. (Ce fastu? 183)

In this translation from the Italian, I have followed the 1863 Genoa edition of Prepoco. Slight differences in emphasis and expression exist between the 1863 and the 1883 edition, and these I have noted in footnotes. The following bibliography is the story's publication history.

PUBLICATION HISTORY

C.P. "Biografia." Favilla X (1845):33-39.

C.P. "Prete Poco--Biografia." Racconti. Florence: LeMonnier, 1858.

C.P. "Prepoco--Biografia." Racconti. Genoa: La Donna e la Famiglia, 1863.

C.P. "Prepoco (Biografia)." Novelle popolari di C.P. Milan: Carrara, 1883.

C.P. "Prepoco--Biografia." Ce fastu? XVI (1940):183-190.

C.P. "Prete Poco." L'album della suocera e altri racconti. Milan: Muggiani, 1945.

C.P. "Prete Poco" Racconti. Ed. Michele Prisco. Novara: Edizioni per il Club del Libro, 1972.

PRIESTIE [Trieste, 1845]

Priestie, so they used to mockingly call a poor priest who lived fifty years or more in our parish. He was a man who seemed born to be the social pariah, such was the scorn that completely filled to the brim every moment of his long life. He's been resting for two years now in the cemetery, and it would be difficult to find his grave, because he left no one to bathe it with tears or to scatter a flower or a prayer there. He lived without the consolation of friendship, nor did he leave a legacy of affection. By chance I visited the little room where he lived. Closed within those four walls like in a stone box, there lived a thinking soul years and years, whose thoughts never fell into any other living soul. Like a brook that flows into itself, like a spark that dies out in the hearth of the same ashes from whence it was lit, these thoughts were born and died in the skull of that man without anyone scrutinizing them. Who knows what solitary joys, dreams, phantasms he saw unfold, one after the other on the dusky walls of this poor little room! Who knows what sorrows and how many tears were shed!

It's a very cold night: from the crevices of the doors and the shutters of the windows, one can hear a shrill whistle: it's the December wind whirling across the naked countryside, breaking against the walls in great waves. I woke up, lit the lantern, and in these sleepy and solitary

hours, my thought painted the life of this poor priest. I feel a kind of pleasure in recalling him and investigating his actions and his feelings, in retracing, in other words, the light track he left on earth before he disappeared. My heart enjoys contemplating the works of the Creator; and whether we fix our gaze on the animals, plants, the relics of the past, or on ourselves, the rays of his wisdom sparkle[26] over us; and the one who sculpted a little girl in marble who, having gathered some shells on the seashore, presses a conch close to her ear so as to spy on its tenuous life, gave us a perfect idea of the secret pleasure that emanates from observation. While seated on my bed, I am here drafting a kind of bizarre biography, most likely no one else has any memory of him. And yet for more than fifty years he was invariably seen taking part in sacred functions. Always in the same place with the same robes, this singular figure was the last among the ministers of the Church, and he bore continual disdain without ever changing his peaceful expression. When after an absence of seven years I returned from boarding school[27], I found the parish changed. The acolytes were different; the catechism benches, once filled with girls my age, now had others

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[26]disfavillano - or sfavillare, a construct of favilla, spark, and dis, dispersion; sparkle over, send sparks.

[27]collegio - a convent boarding school. Percoto was sent at the age of 12 to the Educando S. Chiara, St. Clare's Monastery, in Udine. The experience was less than positive.

instead, whose faces I didn't recognize, and the girls my age were scattered throughout the church like so many lovely flowers already blossomed. And a thousand new faces, some that glowed with faded youth, and others, of youth vanished. Almost the whole population had changed. Only this man had remained there immobile. Seven years flown by had done nothing but make his face slightly more pale, and his thin hair whiter, and his old robe a bit greyer. It seemed that time had merely discolored the shape. Otherwise, among all the upheavals he was still the same, like the pillars of the altar, like the statues that adorn it. Dressed in the most wrinkled, shabby tunic, his eyes, continually lowered, stared only at the ground--whether he was coming out of the sacristy carrying the incense burner or kneeling at the foot of the altar serving Mass, or after the service, crossing the middle of the church nave behind a crowd of priests. In other words, they seemed numb to all the surrounding objects without the strength to embrace[28] the image.

Even his voice was out of harmony with other sounds, like that of a deaf man for whom all of nature is mute. When on Sunday vespers he sang as always the last line of the antiphon, the broken, unequal words, spoken with an almost foreign accent, seemed like the sound of a bell hung at an enormous height whose voice is carried off by the furious wind

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[28]accorne - accogliere, receive, embrace, accept.

as soon as it tolls. You would have thought that in front of that man's mind there was still a memory of other places and other times, and that in his ears rang other harmonies. And perhaps for that reason, he was helpless to unite himself with the reality that surrounded him. He was like the thirsty man in Dante's Hell, who in the midst of torments, kept seeing green fields and the little streams of the Casentino. But what memories could they have been? He had come to live here since his early youth, and as far as is known, he never again left the parish. His life was spent precisely between church and home. An uncle had left him a fortune when he died as the village chaplain. He had left him an inheritance of some fields and the little house where he had his room.[29] No one offered him even the smallest help. He lived like the most austere anchorite of unseasoned greens or of some fruit or potatoes and turnips that he roasted alone in his little fireplace. No one ever saw him dress in a new outfit. The clothes he wore were so out-dated and faded that you would have taken him for one of those ancient portraits of our

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[29]The 1940 reprinting in Ce fastu? of the 1883 edition of the story notes that the chaplain lived in a house, "coperta di coppi con tre stanze, solaio e un cortiletto...vicina alla canonica attuale (1940) del cappellano, che ha tuttora il ballatoio di pietra sporgente in fuori sulla facciata." The 1605 law of Veneto forbid religious places to acquire real estate and auctioned off all those lands that had no proof of deed or title. With no proof that the Church possessed this house before the law, it was auctioned and purchased by the chaplain Don Giuseppe Saccavini, who lived there until his death when his nephew Don Pietro Saccavini inherited it and lived there" (Ce fastu? 186).

grandparents, where time has nibbled away the colors. He slept on a straw mattress and on a pillow that was worse than a stone. That little house where he lived is situated closely behind the church in the most deserted and melancholic street of the village. It hardly ever sees the sun; and during this season[30] only after noon time, after passing over the church steeple, the sun throws a splash of light that breaks in an angle[31] from the shadow of the bell tower.

I remember once seeing him as he was reading, sitting on the narrow landing outside where the wooden steps lead up to his room. He wore his glasses, his forehead uncovered: he looked profoundly absorbed, not so much in the reading as in some great thought that it had stirred in him. In his pale face, on his half-open, immobile lips, there was a sense of tranquil sadness, like that of a man subjected to a great injustice who doesn't deign to complain, or of a man betrayed by fortune who feels a long-desired hope die in his heart. At the top of that broken ladder, I still seem to see that meditating figure, his big book, and the sweet reflection of the sun that gilded the wall. Fantasy paints me a picture with this inscription--"Annos aeternos in mente habui."[32]

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[30]The season is winter; it's December. See p. 1.

[31]una zona di luce che si rompe in angolo - in the 1883 edition reprinted in Ce fastu?, these words are changed to una zona di luce che é rotta ad angolo, "is broken at an angle".

[32]Latin - I had eternal years in my mind, or M. Prisco (1972) translates it as "I meditated on eternity".

During Lent he taught catechism to the children; on Sundays after Mass throughout the year, he taught the youngest children. He unfailingly participated in all the services except funerals and those where donations were required. But, if a beggar died, it was he who prayed for mercy at his grave. He didn't celebrate Mass; they say that he celebrated it only for eight days just after having been ordained, and another time much later out of respect for the late parish pastor, a man of rare piety and holy judgement who left behind a memory more blessed and dear with each passing day. But then he was seen giving back the donations to the devoted who had made the offering.[33] And when he allowed himself to go back to saying Mass again, he approached the altar trembling, weeping, and so distraught that the good pastor never spoke to him about it again, realizing that this was a punishment greater than he could bear. Occasionally on Holy Thursday, he received Communion with the other priests. Thinner than usual, he came to the altar so humble and contrite that it wasn't possible to look at him without feeling compassion. It seemed that cognizant of his nothingness, he considered himself unworthy of belonging to the clergy, or that memory flung in his face some great sin committed, or that in his heart was some awesome passion which nothing could tame, neither years, nor

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[33]comesso il sacrificio - requested the Mass or made the offering.

sufferings, nor the horrible life to which he was naturally condemned. Among the common folk, he was despised for not saying Mass and not ever progressing a single step in the priestly career. Add that people often judge even moral capacity from the exterior, and he, slim and shabby looking, dressed in an old-fashioned way with faded clothes and always the same rancid hat, without friends or influence of any sort, had earned the nickname "Priestie" and came to be teased publicly. His austere life came to be considered sordid avarice; no one made any scruples about ridiculing him or bringing him shame. After the pastor, his protector, died, these disparaging remarks grew to such a degree that he did not appear in the presbyter anymore on the days the clergy was invited as he used to previously. Perhaps he understood that his age, his silence, his constant melancholy made him hateful and could disturb the merriment of the others; and he lived more alone and more withdrawn. There were some people in his last years when he had lost all strength, ailing and feeble, barely dragging himself to church, when his trembling head seemed to beg for the silence of the tomb, there were even some who dared to mock him with an obscene song chanted through the streets, perhaps wounding the ears of the old moribund.[34] This was the last drop of his awful chalice.

[34]The manuscript copy of this song or satire, supposedly unprintable because of its vulgar expressions, was in the possession of a Dr. Gaetano Perusini in 1940. It doesn't speak directly of Pre' Pieri of Manzano, but of Don Valentin of Flaibano.

Then, stretched out on the straw mattress of his miserable bunk, he begged to be consoled by the Lord who is the Father even of the most unfortunate: he was seen gathering all his strength to kneel and receive the consolation of death, and extending his hand to the offenders, he prayed for peace and pardon for all brothers, the peace and pardon that men would not grant him. Oh if some of these had only visited his room with me a few days after his death, and had read on his desk, stuck between the pages of an old, worn out Bible this message handwritten from his younger years, as becomes clear from the 1784[35] date!

"To heal...

"Rise unfailingly every day at four in the morning

"Recite Prayers, read a chapter of Kempis[36], then two hours of meditation, thereafter off to Church to assist at Holy Mass.

Since there was no priest by the name of Valentino in Flaibano, it could be poetic license on the part of the author (Ce fastu? 188).

[35]1784 - date omitted from the 1883 edition.

[36]Thomas a Kempis - 1380-1471, Thomas Hammerken or Hemerken, German priest and writer, born in Kempen near Dusseldorf, son of a peasant, educated at the Deventer School , Netherlands, by Brothers of the Common Life. Entered new Augustinian convent of Mount St. Agnes, Zwolle, Netherlands in 1399. He was ordained in 1413, and became a sub-prior in 1424. Among his writings are biographies, treatises on monastic life, three collections of hymns and sermons. Imitatio Christi is his masterpiece and has been translated into more foreign languages than any other book except the Bible. Its popularity is said to be based on its simple language, sincerity, and anti-worldly religious humility.

"On the days when I don't teach Catechism and there is spare time after sacred duties, occupy my time with devout readings.

"After lunch study the Bible, then again two hours of meditation.

"In the evening, read kneeling until ten o'clock.

"At midnight, get up to recite the psalms and to weep at the foot of the Crucifix."

Had he only seen the floor in front of the Chapel worn down by dint of so much kneeling, and the color on the table changed from the many tears shed where the cross was placed; had he only thought a moment about the soul that lived there buried more than fifty years, struggling all that time against a thought or an affection that must have been stronger than his will...Oh! instead of mocking, he would have surely commiserated with him! On the shelves of his bookcase were many Patristic works of the Holy Fathers, the Summa of Angelico, St. Augustine's Confessions, and a little booklet, all unstitched, St. Jerome's Letter to Nepoziano. I found a book of accounts where it appeared that all his savings went to pay off a debt that his uncle made to keep him in the College of the Somaschi at Cividale[37] and to establish his inheritance. A few days before his death, in town there was

[37]Cividale - one of the two more ancient cities of eastern Friuli (along with Aquileia). Noted for its Medieval ecclesiastical communities.

talk about an anonymous bequest to the Company of Jesus; thus, a house would probably be built in Cividale; and on his lectern, a copy of Clement XIV's famous Letter was displayed.

In several places the name Primariaco[38], his native village, was handwritten on the wall. This prompted me to visit it. I left at dawn the next day. I crossed the fertile fields that extend to the east of the hills of Buttrio; I heard the murmur of the Nadisone Torrent that cuts the hills without being seen because the river bed descends so low and the banks of the river are so overgrown with grass that it looks as if they unite and form level ground. The village is a delight for all the greenery and for the many poplar groves that border the waters. A short walk beyond the borders of the village is a small bridge erected on two enormous sandstone boulders that jut out towards each other. Entombed between them, as if in an abyss, the whole torrent of the river passes, bellowing with magnificent energy. It comes from ancient Cividale, straight as an arrow. Near Premariaco, it breaks on the clay and spreads out, forming a kind of oasis of fine gravel that makes the forest reeds and surrounding willows seem even greener. Then, making an acute angle and folding into itself, it rushes under the bridge and disappears in a thousand gushes on an immense heap of clay stones that the torrent had torn from the shores and that for a long

[38]Primariaco - town in the province of Udine about six kilometers from Cividale.

stretch had been crowding its bed. Those rocks[39] show themselves in various bizarre forms. Some rise in a pyramid; others which hang from the banks seem ready to crash headlong; some are flat, floating on the wave which they later penetrate, diving under, into the large grotto-shaped hollow; others, plunging into the middle, form little islands on which some ancient poplars still survive, bending in the rush of the waterfall, part of their branches lightly grazing the current. One poplar is right there in the middle rising like a church belfry with its top perforated, and on the cone, a shoot is growing. Others, naked and bristling with thorns, are split apart and broken, and the waters close over their hearts, the inner part, forming puddles that you judge to be quite deep from their dark green color. The natives call this place, Businot, a name that in Friulan indicates the deafening roar that it sends; and those brought up around these parts[40] have something of the ruggedness of this roar in their pronunciation. Priestie kept this accent until his death. Nothing made him forget it, neither his long residence in the seminary nor the life he led completely outside of his hometown. This man, who lived the first years of his youth here, who must have roamed a thousand times just for pleasure

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[39]grebbani - in the 1883 edition (reprinted in Ce fastu? 1940), the word "massi" is used instead of the Friulan derivative "grebbani" from "grebanos".

[40]i qui nutriti - this subject phrase is left out of the 1883 edition.

along these shores and shepherded the flock through the meadows that garland them, who in his dark room on all the walls had traced the name of the town, most likely had it always before him. It is here perhaps that he tasted some quick joy that turned to mourning, due to the ambition of whoever tore the twig from his hand and replaced it with the pen. Looking down from the bridge at the humble home where he was born, I thought about the betrayed hopes of his poor parents. He was their only child. They must have scraped[41] together all their savings to put along with the uncle's to one day or another make a good priest, so that they could live near him comfortably in their last years. Who knows how many beautiful dreams his mother, Tomasa, must have made when she saw him for the first time there dressed before her in his clerical robes. It must have been the time when this poor priest, so very disdained, shone for his elegance and neatness, perhaps even for the insight of his intellect. First, those same never-mended rips in his vestments revealed themselves, since it was necessary that his other belongings[42] be quite rich if they were to last almost sixty years; second, born a farmer, he was placed in a celebrated seminary where he served Mass at a very young age; and the books that he read are enough to make us understand that his mind must have been

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[41]ragrannelato - scraped, in sense of harvesting grain.

[42]il suo mobile - changed to "il suo corredo" in the 1883 edition.

worth something more than zero. In this soul a catastrophe happened that clipped his wings and drove him to wait for the end of his life without ever taking one more step.

There are people who know how to live according to the times, who change friends and opinions with the same facility with which one changes shirts. There are people who know how to keep fortune as a slave and know how to create an Eden for themselves anywhere in the world, an Eden that surrounds them with blessings. But there are those whose heart, once wounded, never heals again, and for whom an attachment is destiny. The world calls them crazy. This word once and for all takes away the ability to see their suffering; it's like a stone that you cast in the mouth of a grave to hide the cadaver. Perhaps the world is right, but it will forgive me if I pity them.

THE HARVEST BANQUET

The Harvest Banquet[43] was first published January 19, 1851, in the Giunta domenicale al Friuli, a weekly magazine of cultural news in Udine. The hybrid language Percoto employs in Il licof is particularly evident. She builds sentences that range in lexicon from dialect words in Friulan, Slavic, and Venetian such as "villotte," "ronco," "rebola," "tremerella," and "marinze" to literary Italian like "assenzio," "guisa," "alari," and "forosetta," to antiquated Italian like "conversazione," "tosto," and "occasionare." There is also a sprinkling of French and Latin.

Juxtaposed next to idiomatic expressions are sentences which maintain the long period of academic or literary Italian. The syntax of these sentences sometimes becomes unmeasured and unbalanced, and seems to lose or change its original focus. As in other texts, the story also employs nineteenth-century and classical Tuscanisms. Other structural elements: She will use past participles alone without a helping verb in dependent clauses much as one would use a participial phrase to introduce independent clauses--constructs such as "giunte a portata dei pali e veduto giocare nell'erba il zimbello, si lasciarono cadere ad ali abbandonate sulle paniuzze..." (Percoto 1974, 103) and "deposti i cesti

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[43]licof - as C.P. explains in the narrative, the feast offered by the farm owner to his tenant farmers after the harvest is finished at the end of autumn is called a licof in Friulan.

sull'erba cominciarono a cavarne fuori la farina, etc..." (Percoto 1974, 104). Consequently, though some phrases are long and complex, this elliptical element may be an attempt to condense and focus meaning more efficiently. On the other hand, Percoto will use a whole phrase to describe what she means when one word would suffice, such as "la madre era passata a seconde nozze" to describe "risposato." And she sometimes builds redundant explanation into the phrase, for example "zigomi delle guancie" (Percoto 1974, 106).

Percoto also makes use of words with a Boccaccian flavor such as "brigata," "ponderare," "rammemorare," and "aggradire." These match the Boccaccian essence in the outdoor picnic on the grass, in the juxtaposing of the nobility with the servants, and in the telling of stories after the picnic. Boccaccio may be a silent but present partner in this story about a noble woman creating herself and her community anew, redeeming both from the cultural disease of conventional morality and regulated modes of behavior for the privileged and the peasant class.

Finally, here as in the Friulan story L'oseladôr, the regional past time of bird hunting takes center stage. Thus, there is an additional need to explain all the trappings of the hunt in order to facilitate a fuller understanding of both stories. Percoto can easily detail the world of the bird hunt because both Friulan and Italian boast vocabularies rich in bird hunting terminology and jargon. Both languages include

nouns and verbs to designate the bird hunter as well as the action of bird hunting. The hunt is actually more of a catch or a trap. The hunter chooses a spot where he may set up a little cabin of leafy branches, replete with all the necessary tools to attract the birds flying overhead. These include various whistles, decoys and calling birds (often a small owl) tethered to a cage. He has already prepared a sticky, viscous substance called birdlime, made from boiling and distilling the juice of holly bark or mistletoe berries. He spreads the birdlime on the twigs and branches of various bushes behind the calling birds. When birds fly overhead and hear the chirping of the caged birds, they descend to meet them and often come to rest right on the snare (the bush smeared with birdlime). Consequently as desperately as they try, they cannot free their wings or their feet from the birdlime which glues them to the twigs.

Other variations of the bird hunt include the use of nets spread out either low or at the tops of trees (bressane and rocul in Friulan). The Italian lexicon is as follows: uccellare, uccellatore, uccellanda, zirli, richiami, zimbelli, pania, panione, and paniuzza. In Friulan, the words are oselâ, oseladôr, oselànde, uít, riclams, ..., vischiadis, vergons, and then bressane and rocul for the hunt with nets. Friulan also includes a word for the bird seller, oselìn.

The nineteenth century claims four publications of The Harvest Banquet. Neither of the two post-World War II

editions of selected stories published in 1945 included it, focusing on stories of hunger and oppression more attune to post-Fascist Italy. Finally, two recent editions, Michele Prisco's reediting of the 1858 Le Monnier edition in 1972 and Bruno Maier's publication of a selection of stories from the 1880 Carrara edition in 1974 brought the story to light, close to one hundred years since the it had last appeared in print.

PUBLICATION HISTORY

C.P. "Il licof." Giunta domenicale al Friuli. Udine, 1851.

C.P. Racconti. Florence: Le Monnier, 1858

C.P. Racconti. Genoa: La Donna e la Famiglia, 1863

C.P. Novelle scelte di Caterina Percoto. Milan: Carrara, 1880. C.P. Racconti. Ed. Michele Prisco. Novara: Il Club del libro, 1972.

C.P. Novelle. Ed. Bruno Maier. Bologna: Cappelli, 1974.

THE HARVEST BANQUET [Trieste, 1851]

To possess charm, wealth, and youth at the same time must be that much of earthly paradise that fate can concede to mortals. Countess Ardemia della Rovere had received these three beautiful gifts of fortune from God's hand, and moreover, a heart capable of loving, a rather lively spirit, a distinguished nobility of birth. But despite it all, she was everything but happy. In order to obey her relatives, and to satisfy other family interests, she had agreed quite young to a marriage against her will; then, she couldn't stand the weight of it. She was not of those women who, as long as they enjoy a brilliant position in society, know how to swallow even the most bitter pills. A precious necklace, a cashmere from the Indies, any gift rich and elegant as it may be, were of no use in pacifying her when her pride had been offended or when she believed something missing in the respect that was owed to her. Add to this that she was of a quite spirited character and a bit arrogant and a bit capricious, so that within a few years she found it necessary to separate from her husband. A young and beautiful woman who lives alone in the middle of a city, is soon the object of malicious gossip, even of slander. She had understood the entire difficulty of her position, and to avoid it, she lived most of the year in a small villa, happy with making some joyful excursion in one or another of the neighboring cities, with doing anything she

pleased with objects both fashionable and luxurious, with expensive carriages, the most beautiful horses and other prettiness. These together with her rare beauty brought her admiration and applause from the crowd everywhere she would show up. Later, she realized that these frivolous pleasures were too scant a reward for the bitterness of her poor wounded heart, and that the one who has the misfortune to have lost the family that the Lord had destined for her, if she can find some comfort in earthly things, it's only in trying to be useful to others. On the other hand, with the kind of light-hearted and almost irresponsible life to which she had clung in the first moments of her crisis, her sacrifice was not strong enough to impose silence on the world. It would have been necessary that at age twenty, she should have led the life of a fifty year old woman, that happily she should have buried herself in her solitude or that at least she would not appear in society with those ornaments that so emphasized her lovely figure and that stirred the envy of her rivals. If they had seen her deprived of all pleasures, with an old-fashioned dress, disheveled, old before her time, they would have pardoned her loveliness, her wealth, they would have perhaps also sympathized with her past, and they would have been gratified to regard her as an unhappy and betrayed victim. But if there were people who harbored such feelings for her, most others spoke instead differently of her. For them she was an eccentric and capricious woman, unwilling to accept the

obligations of her position;--she was a shrew who hadn't been able to forgive her husband the errors that in their views she herself had occasioned with her bad behavior. For them she was a coquette who found it to her advantage to live outside of every subjection; and they didn't fail to scrutinize all her steps, and also to shred her reputation with the most malign interpretations. This gossip, compounded by the reproaches that she received from time to time from her mother, who, still a little doll, had remarried and had given her a half-sister and two half-brothers envious of her much richer patrimony, shed bitterness on many of her days. Fortunately, her brain was a fertile terrain of flowers that at every wrench of sadness, promptly produced others more animated and more brightly colored. First, she fancied horseback riding, and dressed like an amazon and accompanied by friends, she roamed on a spirited jennet throughout her country estate, until a little sermon from her mother or from some relative forced her to stop. Then she decided to try the strength of her legs; after befriending the pharmacist's wife or the curate's niece, she went every day for long walks in a frock tucked in at the waist, and with a wide straw hat smoking some cigar, and compromising the decorum of her most noble descent and that of her husband by deigning to enter in some poor inn of the villages that she ran across. Thus her relatives raised their noses offended by these pedestrian outings of hers, and by the force of their rebukes, managed to

persuade her of their unsuitability. But the worst occurred in autumn when her former friends, an aunt, Great Lady of the Star Spangled Cross,[44] and the Marquis del Verde, her mother's husband who had his country house a few miles away from hers, came to vacation in the neighboring towns. They came to pay her calls, and always remained discontent of some novelty that they found either in the villa or in the people that she spent time with or in her lifestyle. One year, there was a great uproar and it almost estranged her for good from her noble kindred. She had decided to have set up a little cabin of leafy branches in a vast meadow at the foot of the hills, and after procuring the proper license, each morning before dawn, she went out to hunt birds. The first to realize the scandal was her aunt, Great Lady of the Star Spangled Cross. She had come to pay her a call and not finding her at home, asked the maid about her, a bit out of concern to know about her niece, and a bit out of curiosity about her affairs. This maid told her about the young mistress's new fancy, and Madame, outraged at such baseness, decided to get even for the visit made in vain by complaining about her to her parents, something she did the same evening at the Marquis del Verde's soiree[45], where most of the gentlemen and ladies of the area convened.

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[44]croce stellata - an Austrian chivalric order, instituted in 1668.

[45]conversazione - antique usage, a circle of people who gather frequently on a regular basis in a private home to discuss various subjects, party or soiree.

The thing seemed so odd that she wasn't fully believed: The idea that a Countess of the Rovere, descendent of a most ancient family, kindred to the highest nobility of the town should go bird hunting for meadow larks didn't fit with their ideas nor with the proud and haughty character that they believed to have always known in her. It's true that after her "false step"--that was the name for her divorce--Ardemia had committed all sorts of blunders, but this one seemed too much, and they confined themselves to believing the story a malicious jest of Madame Aunt. Two days later, however, they had to admit that the story was completely true[46]. The Marquis del Verde, with some friends and with the curate, toward noon found himself by chance in the spice seller's shop, when he saw her returning home followed by the bird hunter who carried on a long staff straddling his shoulders, the calling cages, the decoys, the camouflaged birdlime[47] and other bird trap tools. She wore leather boots and a little green outfit, fashionable, sharp, and tucked in at the waist that fit her perfectly. She had hidden her curls in a pretty velvet turban of the same color, beneath it that beautiful

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[46]non era stata aggiunta sillaba al fatto - The phrase echoes Percoto's words in several stories bringing attention to the details of absolute fact, her adhesion to reality and realist writing; "Non una sillaba oltre il vero" is also the title of an essay of hers.

[47]paniuzze - a word that combines pania, "birdlime," and pagliuzza, "straw" or "twigs," in other words, the slender twigs smeared with birdlime.

fresh face of hers, smiling and then a bit reddened on account of the sun and the long walk, seemed a dewy strawberry half-hidden among the leaves. She herself carried the prey consisting of a nice bunch of meadow larks and wagtails[48], and on her breast in the guise of an ornament was a string tied to a buttonhole on which hung various little sterling whistles and thrush whistles. This was more than enough to provoke the war against her. The Marquis particularly could not forgive her the idea of passing through the village in that get up, when, to go home, she had another even shorter way. To his eyes that was just her desire to draw public indignation to herself and to prostitute the decorum of the family. The evening at the soiree they did nothing but talk about the scandal, and it was resolved that the next day the Marquise, assisted by the aunt, would have made their protests in a letter. No one wanted any longer to expose themselves to a contact that could end up stormy, since the bad feeling was so great as to make it difficult, not to say impossible, to maintain composure. On the next day while the ladies composed the sermon, the two brothers, accompanied by another young man, their school friend and house guest, decided to pay a short visit to the bird trap. It was one of those most beautiful autumn days that usually flourish at the end of a

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[48]cutrettole - wagtails, any number of small birds related to pipits, mostly native to Europe, characterized by long wing feathers and a very long tail that wags up and down, or any that resembles it like the water thrush.

good summer, as if nature still wanted to give us one last good-by before ceding the field to winter. The three young men set out on a winding path that came out to a brook, and through the hedges, still green, they saw it pass sparkling, and they heard the gentle whisper that harmonized with a far-off chorus of voices that seemed to come down from one of the hills nearby . People were finishing gathering grapes, and while harvesting, they sang their villottes.[49] Infinite cheer spread through all creation with the rays of the sun that, stripped of their warmth but splendid and clear as the most intense of the summer, rained on the lap of the green fields and almost caressed the limbs. Without clouds the placid atmosphere was moved only by a solitary puff of air, but so slight that it didn't manage to stir the leafy branches, except those of the aspen and poplar, that on the highest peaks appeared first white, and then green depending on the light turning them silver. At the distance of some steps, they discovered from time to time some threads of fine silk gently swaying across the path. They tried to find the insect that dared to throw them thus into the empty space, and stopping where a bright point of the thread had held their attention, they saw the spider, navigator of the air, who settling among the sails of the elegant little boat it had woven, abandoning itself to the breeze, and passing almost

[49]villotte - dialect name of popular friulan songs; choral songs and dances, simple words of anonymous poets set to music.

flying from one tree to the other, while unraveling the silk that nature placed in its breast like a ball of yarn. Thus chatting and observing, they arrived at the brook. They forded it with the help of some stones thrown against the current, and found themselves on the wide meadow that extends from the foothills of Buttrio to Rosazzo.[50] They walked quickly through the grass trying to discover where their sister's little cabin could be. At the end almost under the hills, they saw a black point and they headed in that direction. When they were not more distant than a stone's throw away[51], they saw her at the door of the little cabin hidden among the leafy branches, looking up, with the whistle at her lips. Quietly they came to a stop. Five or six meadow larks down from the eastern part of the hills were coming in little spurts, flying through the air; having arrived at the top of the posts, and seeing the decoy playing in the grass, they let themselves fall with wings abandoned on the birdlime snares. The countess and the bird hunter came out quickly to gather them, and as if by an involuntary impulse, they, too, ran to help them. Some, with their weight having bent the weak little twig, dangled together with it from the tip of the post; one or two had fallen on the grass and fluttering about, sought to free themselves from the birdlime. Cheerfully they

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[50]Buttrio - approximately eight km. southeast of Udine.

[51]un tiro di fucile - gun shot, but used idiomatically to indicate "a stone's throw away."

brought them into the little cabin and hadn't yet finished greeting each other when the bird hunter alerted that others were passing by. Immediately they grabbed[52] the whistles and decoys, but these birds, becoming malicious, raised their flight when they were at the level of the posts, and went to alight farther off on the meadow. Then, some children who were at pasture from the western part went to make them turn back[53] and managed to make them fly again toward the birdlime[54]; they saw them hop through the grass, and with them were some wagtails that they discerned from the wagging of their long white tails. Finally, they began their flight again, and most of them like the first ones, threw themselves on the snare.[55] The young men began to enjoy the fun and found it even more pardonable when Ardemia, showing that morning's abundant prey on a long string, proposed a luncheon on the meadow to them. They accepted cheerfully and set about dressing the little birds. She sent some of those shepherds to gather wood and ordered one of them to go to her farm, which was the one at the foot of the closest hill, to tell Betta to come down at once and to bring with her a good flask

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[52]dare mano - idiomatic, to grab, to begin an undertaking.

[53]a prender loro la volta - take them the turn, make them turn around.

[54]pania - birdlime, but also figuratively used for snare or trap.

[55]paniuzze.

of wine[56] and everything necessary for the birds and the polenta. Meanwhile, the bird hunter was doing his best to construct a kind of skewer with a long stick, and then, driving two stakes into the ground, made them in the form of wings and with the strength of willow branches, fixed a third one transversely that acted as a fire chain. They were still involved in these preparations when in the midst of the greenery they saw a sprightly farmer woman appear who was hand-carrying a copper bucket and on her shoulders hanging on a bow, two baskets covered by two clean napkins. They ran to meet her and placing the baskets on the grass, began to dig out the flour, salt, oil, cracklings, sage; Betta had remembered everything and had added as well a nice plate of fresh grapes and some fruit that gently tickled their appetite with its delicate color and spreading fragrance. They lit the fire: Betta began to prepare the polenta and in an instant the frugal banquet was ready. Then they sat in a circle on the grass that served as table, carpet, and chair, and merrily began to taste the catch. The countess glanced at Betta who, a bit behind, all red from the sun and from the work of the polenta, was drying her face with the edges of her head scarf; and she invited her to sit with them and to take part in the luncheon; but the good girl refused, seeming to her unsuitable to mix with those gentlemen.

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[56]rebola - wine made with the rebola variety of grape, rebola in Venetian, and rebuele in Friulan.

"Come on now," Ardemia said to her, "here we're all equal; and how would it look[57] if after having helped us until this point, now you went away with an empty tummy!" The country lass's graceful manners and charming answers made the boys find the comment true, so that they too joined to persuade her making such a fuss that they forced her to take part in the feast. But when they saw that Ardemia wasn't confining herself to the young woman, and that she wanted to make the bird hunter sit in company, they noted that this was going a bit too far, and almost blushing, they thought about the comments that it would have drawn from the Great Star-Spangled Cross aunt. By now, they couldn't withdraw, and they adjusted as best they could to this little whim of their sister. And finally, the excellent wine and the delicious little birds, cooked just the right amount, silenced the noble blood that began to boil in their veins, and put them in unison with the merry company that surrounded them. Little by little the chatter became more and more natural and at the end, without any more distinctions of birth, they talked as if they had been equals. Much of their discussion fell on bird hunting, on the meadow larks, on the way to preserve the attractions. The countess wanted to know where they came from and why they came down so invariably during that season. The

[57]sarebbe bella - essere bella being used idiomatically to mean it would not be nice; spoken intonation would create the idiomatic meaning.

bird hunter professed to know why and to have also been in their town.

"In the meadow larks' town!" replied one of the young men, "and what town is this?"[58]

"There's a mountain standing at the Friulan frontier, two good days above Cividale.[59] That's where it is, that crown that emerges on Signor ***'s vineyard on the slope of the hill."[60]

"That white one higher than all the rest?

"No," said the bird catcher. "That's one of the summits of Monte Canino. We're too far under the hills, but if you look further down toward Manzano,[61] you'll see that beak that seems like the point of a steeple. And there is Monte Maggiore."

"And the meadow larks make their home there?"

"Yes sir[62], and the finches, and the woodcocks, and the grey partridges, and a great many other game that it's just a glory. They go there in the

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[58]cotesto - codesto, used especially in bureaucratic language to mean this, in sense of this here the undersigned.

[59]Cividale - a small city 15 km. east, northeast of Udine.

[60]ronco - from the Friulan "ronc," a vineyard or an orchard terraced on the slope of a hill.

[61]Manzano - small town 13 km. southeast of Udine between Buttrio and Cormons.

[62]Gnor si - regional abbreviation for Signor si, typical of the characteristic Friulan syncope.

summer to make their nests because that mountain, gentlemen, is covered with immense shrubs; there's a meadow where the most beautiful colts are at pasture; there are grottos from which gush springs of water that keep a delicious freshness and always soft and perennial green during the summer. It's behind those dewlaps that the Natisone springs from one side and comes down among the crags[63] to Cividale, and from the other side further in, the Isonzo, which runs to Gorizia showing like a great horse shoe among mountains that touch the sky with their peaks..."

"And what did you do in those parts?"

"Supply calling birds," responded the bird hunter, "I went there with some friends, and on that road we amused ourselves a bit hunting. What delightful places![64] The woodcocks came down among our feet at every minute. And among those orchards at the foot of those knolls, in those little meadows irrigated by so many streams, flocks of geese and wild ducks took off around us."

"But if they make their nest there..."

"And it's from there that those blond Slavic girls[65] with the small lively eyes, red and white like a beautiful apple

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[63]grebbani - from the Friulan grebanos; crags, cliffs, precipices, a wild, rocky, savage place.

[64]sito - one example of Percoto's use of a literary lexicon.

[65]marinze - Slavic for the regional Italian "mariette", in sense of young women in general.

from Carnia[66], to whom nature purposely made their heads flat so that they could carry those enormous[67] baskets on top there more easily ..."

"Hey, rather say that such a custom is the reason for which they are shaped like that.[68] But anyway, it's the same. Go ahead, go on."

"No sir! " he said, "it is really a particularity of the town that is worth a lot to them for the transportation of goods among those cliffs where there are no roads. Hey, me too, looking at the young girls passing here summers with the fruit, I was thinking that it was the pressure of the weight squeezing the skull that had squashed their foreheads to only two inches wide and made their cheekbones jut out. But it's not true. I was up there, and I had to convince myself that they are born just like that, and that it was God's hand that gave them such a little squash." And thoughtlessly, he continued to give them lessons in natural history, God knows how exact, but seasoned with the story of his trip and the impression that the sight of that strip of our Friuli that borders with the Slavic people had left in his soul, amused

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[66]Carnia - city in the northeastern part of Friuli, borders are Austria to the North and Slovenia to the East

[67]immane - literary lexicon, enormous.

[68]conformate - This discussion of the shape of the girls' heads being appropriate to their environment and their work precedes Darwin's findings in the 1850s concerning natural selection, and the effect of environment as opposed to genetics in evolution.

them and made them find the conversation of that man, whom they considered not more than a rough country yokel[69], pleasant.

When the luncheon was finished, the young men took leave and returned home less hostile toward their sister, whose whims in good conscience they did not then find so much in bad taste. In such a disposition of soul, during dinner at which the aunt was also present, at the usual rehashing of the accusations and complaints against Ardemia, they dared venture some word in favor of her; but it was pouring oil into fire. They had miscalculated the strength of the opposing party. Besides the two ladies, who with the writing of the morning's letter and thus recalling and considering together all the rash actions of the girl, had ended up being more and more disgusted, there was the marquis, he too completely displeased, and even her sister, despite her great love, joined to blame her that day. For a while, she unwillingly tolerated all the gossip; it seemed to her that in some way it poured on to her and that, together with the notorious step of the divorce and the bad reputation that Ardemia had acquired in society, it increased all the more the difficulty of a good match for her.[70] Thus it was that the story that the boys

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[69]rozzo bifolco - another instance of Percoto's pyramiding of meaning. Bifolco means "persona rozza," so the addition of "rozza" is either superfluous or a way of reinforcing the meaning.

[70]collocamento - commercial jargon; sale, marketing. The younger sister is a piece of merchandise to be traded.

told of the pleasure enjoyed was only a new reason for accusations. According to them, such outings, as well as inappropriate for a woman, did not have the merit of showing a well-formed, civilized heart at all. Then, spending time in the company of a bird hunter who was nothing but a cloddish farmer was found to be entirely vulgar and plebeian: sitting down to have a snack on the meadow, mixing with people so much lower by birth and by upbringing. And everyone together burst out in outrage against this new crime of injured nobility. The aunt, Great Lady of the Star-Spangled Cross, showed herself particularly offended, and in a surge eloquence even came to the conclusion that these bad habits, and the tendency of the young to so easily forget their station, had to arise from the practice by now so fatally diffuse of the vaccination, through which the most noble and well bred races found themselves in the terrible predicament of seeing themselves inoculated and in contact with the blood of a rotten ploughman.[71] However much this acute observation had the advantage of making the Marquis' thin, ironic lips smile just a bit, nonetheless, he resolved to punish Ardemia by breaking every friendly relationship with her for the time being, and he even ordered the boys to remember well not to set foot in her house.

When she read her mother's letter, the young countess was

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[71]pratica...del vaccino - the vaccination was already in use against certain diseases, though it was not wholly trusted.

at first sorry to have involuntarily brought about so serious a loathing; and she was almost on the verge of going to her at once to promise that she would renounce bird-hunting. But then, she changed her mind, thinking that if she took this step to keep the peace, it would have been necessary for her to sacrifice still another pleasure that she herself had thought of, and that certainly was not going to meet with their approval. By now, autumn was about to end; it was only a matter of a few days, and in her mind since they were already vexed for the meadow larks, it was worthwhile that they endured that wrath and thus left her more freedom for the accomplishment of her project. After that, she would have accommodated all their wishes, and one sole pardon and peace would have paid for the necessary patching up.

In many places in Friuli there is an ancient custom, according to which at the end of autumn, after the harvest is over and the tenant farmers have been paid, the owner invites to dinner every head of the families subject to him, and this banquet is called the licof.[72] Now that year Ardemia had decided to celebrate this harvest banquet with all possible solemnity; and since she was a woman, she had invited not only all the family heads among her lessees, but also all the women of the houses. In her unconventional little head, she had

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[72]licof - according to the Friulan dictionary Il Nuovo Pirona, it is the drinking party or the small dinner that the owner offers to the workers after the principle harvests.

planned to set an example with this, so that the ugly custom which favors excluding women from their husbands' table, condemning them to eat separately or in a corner of the hearth, even in solemn days of weddings or baptism, should disappear among the farmers. She had ordered some little gifts that she intended to dispense to all the guests at the end of dinner, and particularly to those men and women who had best gained her approval, distinguishing themselves either in some agricultural skill or in domestic thrift or in the raising of livestock or finally with exemplary conduct or with some good deed of which she was informed by her bailiff, a man of high integrity and greatly loved in the town.

At this banquet, which is usually set up in the Master's kitchen, but which she had planned to arrange in a first floor drawing room that opened to her little garden, decorated for the occasion, she planned to sit surrounded by her good tenants and to take part, whatever her illustrious relatives might have to say. In the past among the whims and peculiarities with which she had often estranged her family, she had, however, always shown herself affectionate and even docile at their scolding. To see her now take no notice of the reproaches received and continue bird-hunting seemed like a mute protest with which she in her soul had decided to defy them. And so, the bad feeling grew, reaching its climax when they heard about the planned harvest banquet, particularly since like on other occasions, there was no lack of

exaggerated nonsense and of the usual indirect backhanded deeds against her, describing the event as a bacchanal unbecoming to her condition and her birth. The rumor went that the players for the dinner music had already been hired, which made them fear that it would end with a dance at which she would perhaps also deign to take part. Various coffers of provisions had been carried to her house, and everyone wanted to have his say about what they could contain. They had heard about a visit to the parish priest aimed at obtaining permission for a solemn mass in the morning, which she would attend in great pomp accompanied by her bailiff and followed by all her dependents. They spared no malice in gossiping about the oddness of the outfit that she would have worn that day, which apparently had already been ordered from the seamstress. This gave grounds for discussion, particularly to the ladies of the area, her acquaintances and friends who, at the hint of such a subject[73] did not refrain from recalling all the instances that she had shown herself in a rather capricious outfit. And they burst out against her mania of inventing new fashions and making herself unique the more the men, to defend her, sustained that even despite all the rules of fashion and good taste, she knew very well how to choose those clothes that best suited her character and made her untouchable beauty all the more striking. Then they became

[73]toccarsi di una tal corda - idiomatic, touching, hinting at that subject.

madder than hornets:[74] They brought up all her past affairs, they recriminated all her actions, her life was read, sentenced, and condemned, and instead of diminishing the fire, they stoked it, and the discontent of her family, already much exacerbated, grew gigantic. It so happened that precisely on the eve of this dinner that provoked so much uproar, the Cavalier of F***, then named governor at N***, turned up at the home of the Marquis.[75] He had known Ardemia's father at the University of Bologna, and they had become bound in one of those intimate friendships that youthful fervor of affection induces to last forever, but that then too often dissolve in the changes of life. In fact, after that time, the two young men, separated and jerked into very different careers, had maintained only a rare correspondence, and this, too, diminished in time. In the Cavalier's heart a vivid, pleasant memory of his friend had remained however; and now that on his trip from Vienna to N*** he passed through his lands and heard mentioned the names of villages that the Count had repeated a thousand times to him, he wanted to see the young widow again and get to know his daughter, of whose affairs he had heard something in the city of R*** where he had asked about them and where he had stopped for several days in order to inspect

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[74]Or "That stirred up the wasp's nest" or "then the hornets' nest was provoked."

[75]cavaliere - an honorary, non-hereditary title given to people for certain diplomatic missions or accomplishments.

an Institute recently built there.

Nature had given the Cavalier of F*** an extremely good mind and a warm heart, for which all that he considered useful became valuable to society. He possessed the rare privilege of making others adopt almost unconsciously his own opinions and beliefs. Even in the midst of weaknesses and follies, his sharp and inquisitive eye discerned at first glance that spark of goodness that provident nature set in every human brain, and that often, however encumbered and hidden in ashes, when set in action, becomes even more productive. For him there wasn't a man, however unrestrained and wicked, who did not possess some secret virtue capable of redeeming him, and he knew how to assess it and profit from it, even in those who were his enemies and opponents. In short, he was one of those rare men who know how to make themselves the center of movement and life in any position, but who, if destiny causes their rise to power and to the head of things, are a blessing to the country that possesses them, marking an epoch sure of progress and universal well-being. Having rapidly risen in his career and honored with an important task because of his merit and services, he returned to the province entrusted to his governance, where his responsibilities now had grown in proportion to his rank and could be compared to the pin that makes the wheel turn or to the powerful locomotive that pulls the train along the iron tracks. The Marquis was sensitive to the honor that this unexpected visit brought him, and every

utmost care was set in motion in his house so that he should find superb hospitality. All the most refined ladies of the area showed up as guests at that evening's reception, nor did the sweet chords of the piano and harp--this latter specially played with much grace by the Marquis's young daughter--fail to enchant the company.

The Cavalier, who was seated next to the mother, in giving her his greeting, inquired about the other sister, his friend's daughter. At the short reply that he received and the quick change of topic, he realized that he had hit upon a touchy subject. Then, remembering how a few days earlier in the city of R*** he had vaguely heard tell about her unfortunate marriage, he suspected that she was unhappy and perhaps also guilty, and he felt his heart ache for the memory of old friendship. The next day, then, when they were alone, he sought to be better informed about it. To the evasive answers with which the countess tried to dodge his questions, he set forth his desire to pay a visit before leaving to his friend's daughter, whom he had seen only one time when she was still a baby, before her father's death. Thus, mortified, they told him about her behavior, about her eccentricities. Very sorrowfully, they recounted to him the displeasures that they had recently received; nor were they silent about the plebeian banquet which just that day was supposed to be eaten. The Cavalier listened to all these complaints quietly, asked some questions about her past life and about the character of

the husband that they had given her; then he finished by begging that the Marquis be willing to accompany him after dinner to the villa where she lived. It wasn't possible to refuse any longer, and as soon as dinner was finished and the horses harnessed, they left.

In crossing the little garden that lead to the house, their hearing was struck by a cheery chattering that joined the hubbub of many people, the bustling of plates, the clinking of glasses and silverware, the playing of violins; and as the door was opened, all these noises together with the light of the chandeliers, came out like a river's surge, redoubled and fused into one alone, a movement to stun a deaf mute's head. The first object that presented itself to their view was the young countess, who, seated at the head of the table and just opposite the door, had her numerous guests in two long lines at her sides. Her black dress was high at the neck around which was a little satin collar knotted with a ribbon like a tie; her hair, parted in the middle and falling down simply, gave her such a masculine look that together with her strong resemblance to her father struck the Cavalier and almost moved him to tears. He seemed to see his friend resurrected. He seemed to still be in those youthful years so full of energetic affection when so many hopes smiled on both of them, and his heart already ran to that beautiful creature who rose to meet him a bit confused, a bit blushing, but hearing him her father's friend, took heart, made him sit next

to her, and with childlike trust, made him part of the innocent pleasure she enjoyed. Meanwhile, thrown into confusion by that visit, several of those farmers had risen and drawing back, left space for the Marquis, who, not knowing how to get his bearings, exchanged some words with the old bailiff. The countess motioned to him with her eyes and making him bring a chair closer, invited him to sit down; then, she turned to the farmers and said:

"Come now, people, take your places again without bashfulness, for these gentlemen allow us to continue our merrymaking." Turning toward the Cavalier she added, "Isn't it true that you won't mind if instead of leading you immediately into the living room, I keep you here with these good people? Because... we still have a small ceremony to carry out."

"On the contrary, we thank you for it," answered the Cavalier. "To have come here when we knew you were busy was an indiscretion... but I didn't want to leave without seeing you and you will pardon me for the friendship that bound me to your father..." And he fixed his tender look in her eyes, which became more trusting at hearing her father's name again, like at the sight of a person already known and loved for a long time. She reached out her hand and without other formalities, she started talking with him.

"This fall banquet is an ancient custom that my father did not allow to fall into disuse, and this year I wanted to

reinstate it. Then, I added my touches, a bit on my own, which everyone knows, a bit according to the advice of my bailiff, who is an excellent upright man, and who sometimes thinks to profit, imagine!, even from my whims. Signor Giovanni!" she called, "I'm talking about you, understand?"

"At your command, little countess!" responded the old man who, at that appeal immediately rose from sitting and came to hear her orders.

"Stay, stay! I just wanted to acknowledge you here to this gentleman; but since I see you on your feet," she added lowering her voice, "have the coffers brought in and get ready to complete the ceremony." She continued talking to the Cavalier. "We have provided some little gifts to give these good people at the end of dinner, as testimony of my gratitude for their work in cultivating my fields, for their good behavior.... With this method, Signor Giovanni wants to foster agriculture, diligence, industry,[76] what can I tell you? We'll let him decide on his own who he believes best deserves a watch or a new hat or boots. As for myself, I've reserved giving only two among the men--Old Gregorio dressed in the so-called "bianchetta"[77] with the scarlet waistcoat, and the young man down there fourth from the end on that same

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[76]industria - effort, diligence, industry. I have chosen to translate both meanings in that the silkworm industry was a large part of the estate's activities in the spring.

[77]bianchetta - Friulan, traditional white wool jacket.

side.

"That blond man, almost beardless, with his hair cut about to the middle of his cheek and all on one side?

"Yes," she said. "He's a bit cheeky if you like, and I came close to arguing with Signor Giovanni because he didn't want him in the number of guests. Oh, but Signor Giovanni! If you knew! He wanted to restrict me to the heads of family only, to my tenants only; for him then, the women couldn't come! It seemed a dreadful novelty to him, almost sacrilege; and he brought up a jumble of reasons, according to him very convincing. But tell the truth, dear sir, doesn't it give pleasure to see them here mingling with their husbands, with their children? And where would merriment be if in this house, where the owner is a woman, all those good women had been excluded? Look how happy Menica is! How her pretty eyes are twinkling! She's that brown-haired one with the pink scarf down there on the left. Poor Menica! Oh if you knew what a wonderful person! If you don't fear you'll get bored, I'd like to tell you a few things about her."

"On the contrary, I'm listening to you with great pleasure," said the Cavalier. "But since you seem so willing, first I'd like you to tell me why, despite Signor Giovanni's opinion, you had wanted that young man that you mentioned to me among your guests!"

"Because," she replied, "in the midst of his eccentricities, I discovered a good heart in him; and now that

I've completely adapted to country life, I want him among my friends, certain that he'll make judicious decisions and will become a respectable young man. With his lynx eye and his claim to know them all, Signor Giovanni did nothing but tell me the worst possible stories[78] that he was the first one in the uproars at the feasts, that Sundays he showed up on the piazza with a pipe in his mouth, in shirt sleeves, that he spent time at the inn, that he was a bit quarrelsome, a bit rough.... But I too have my spies; and sometimes it's a comedy," she added smiling, "to see how Signor Giovanni is dumbfounded at finding me as well-informed as he is and even better. And the good man can't understand how in heavens I come to know so much gossip."

"I bet that your whim of bird hunting this year wasn't without its purpose," the Cavalier whispered to her.

The countess ended laughing, "The fact remains that my bailiff doesn't have much malice and that without him I was able to discover Ermagora's kind character trait, which I keep in mind about him and which in my eyes redeems him of his many roguish escapades. Last winter, he and nine other young men of the village got permission from the bailiff to work after hours in their free time on an irrigation canal in one of my farms that was surrounded by a blackberry brier hedge, and that he wanted to change into a grove of dwarf mulberry trees;

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[78]dire plagas di qualcuno - pl. Latin, idiomatic for telling all the worst possible stories about someone.

and every evening, after the day's work was finished, instead of staying near the fire, they went down there to warm themselves up working three or four hours by the light of the moon. With that money they intended to enjoy themselves at Mardi Gras, doing a masked parade and going around with the players first through the village, then through the mills, and finishing, one already knows, with a nice supper. Ermagora was the leader of it: they had already prepared the costumes and God knows in what glory they anticipated that day! Now, his father, in climbing a stepladder to drag down from the hayloft I don't know what household goods, fell and dislocated a foot. Now guess! Ermagora immediately went to his friends to get out of the masquerade. And for as much as they tried to force him to take part, making him admit that the accident was of no consequence, that they themselves would have obtained permission from his family, there was no chance. To all their entreaties, the good young man answered that knowing his father in bed with pain, his heart couldn't enjoy the dancing; and since they didn't want to keep his part of the earnings, Ermagora used it to provide everything necessary for the injured man." The Cavalier looked in silence for a few minutes at that young man, then turned to the countess:

"And Menica? Didn't you want to tell me about her, too?" he asked.

"Oh Menica also is a woman with a big heart!" the countess exclaimed with tears in her eyes. "The sort of woman

one would wish for every family! Aside from being a good housewife, thrifty, clever, kind as an angel, she knows how to empathize with others, and in her small way, deep down she feels mercy for everyone. Four years ago a vagabond arrived here in town and with him he had his wife, close to childbirth. One sent him to the hospital, another sidestepped, demonstrating the impossibility of taking him in with a woman in that condition. Menica welcomed him and with a charity that we nobles don't know, she gave up her own bed to the poor woman and treated her as if she were one of her sisters. She sought alms for the new mother, she went about supplying diapers for the baby, she spun during the night more than usual, and she said so much about it to that man, and made so much of it, that she persuaded him to give up his ugly occupation, and for once to begin to earn his bread with his own sweat. When the woman was ready to work, she made her a partner in the domestic affairs, and with her kind ways, she knew how to convince her husband and in-laws so that they agreed to keep them at home until they could otherwise provide for themselves. Signor Giovanni rented them some fields and a little house, and now thanks to that good woman, they too live honorably with their work.

"Poor Menica! Oh if you only knew how much I love her! And she loves me, too! Oh yes! Despite the difference of status, of the insurmountable obstacle that destiny has placed between the rich and the poor, her heart is one of the few

that has always truly loved me.

"In the first moments of my misfortune," the countess continued, giving in to one of those heartfelt effusions that escape so spontaneously, almost inadvertently, at the mention of certain subjects and in the presence of certain people, "in the first moments of my misfortune, when it was no longer worth fighting the ruthless war that had shattered my awful world, I came here to seek refuge in this solitude, forced to see before me the phony faces of so many false friends who came to console me in order to dig out material to compound my faults.... Misunderstood and denigrated, I took comfort in the impartial and sincere love of this poor farm woman! Oh if you only knew the times that under the pretext of bringing me some flowers, or selling me some eggs, she saw that I was alone and stayed to look after me with the commiserating eye of a mother looking after her poor sick little child!..."

She remained in silence a moment, and then continued, "I have a little gold cross that I want to give her; but don't think for a minute that I pretend to reward the goodness that I've told you! Only God and the knowledge of having done it can compensate for it! And besides, it would make her suffer to be reminded about it. I only want to give her a token of friendship which, although she may appreciate it, she certainly won't wear it around her neck with an affection greater than the one I feel in my heart at the sight of the year's first violets and little meadow daisies which she

sometimes gives to me."

The free outpouring that she had indulged in had moved her somewhat, and to compose herself, she looked toward the guests who, having finished the banquet, were chatting in different groups: The repeated sound "Yes, Illustrissimo; No, Illustrissimo" of two or three farmers struck her. After the bailiff left, the Marquis had placed himself in their midst, trying his best to balance himself in that atmosphere so awkward for him. From time to time, he made some fitting inquiries to those who were nearest to him. In order to cause a diversion and to restore the common cheerfulness of the talk that by now had become too divided, Ardemia called to that venerable old man whom she had previously pointed out to the Cavalier, and raising her glass toward him said, "Gregorio! Come now! Let's you and I propose a toast to this gentleman, my father's friend, who was so kind to make us happier on this beautiful day with his visit. And then I want you with your usual frankness to tell me the truth. How did you enjoy this day?

"Stuffed!"[79] answered the farmer, "served and treated like princes in the company of our mistress..."

"No, no," she said, "I know that my idea of inviting the women to the harvest banquet didn't please you at all..."

"Ah, you rascal, Gregorio!" exclaimed some women. "So,

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[79]corponone - idiomatic, stuffed full.

he didn't want us at the harvest banquet?"

"And I know that you didn't want to bring your wife Lucia under any terms," continued the countess.

"But it's a fact that women must stay home," murmured the old man. "But, I promise you that if we're alive another year, Lucia will be part of the happy event, too, and by Jove! If this year it was a whisper to make us lose our hearing, with the addition of my wife's tongue... particularly if she's a bit tipsy..." Here he was interrupted by a round of bursts of laughter, for Lucia's happy disposition was universally known.

"Listen, countess!" exclaimed the old man so as to overcome the commotion. "As always, you've created a novelty to which we, as always, were reluctant, and it finished like always, that is, with being happier than before."

"So then, good man," interrogated the Cavalier, " your young mistress often creates some novelty for you?"

"Her? Little and young as you see her, I can tell you that she stirred up the whole town and made a quite a commotion. Eh! One thing in particular angered me for a bit! And if it wasn't that she's the daughter of my good little master--may God bless him--and that she resembles him like a split apple! I would have resolved to get out of her tenant farm completely, and...and I would have made a huge blunder![80]

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[80]capponeria - idiomatic for bad mistake or blunder, literally, castration or making a capon.

Imagine, Sir, the first year that she came to stay here, she and Signor Giovanni decided to reduce all the colonies to only twenty fields each! A family like mine, that, one can say always worked the same land for many centuries, to see it cut by half!"

"And then?" the countess asked laughing.

"And then... and then, one already knows, now we're happy! We thought we'd die of hunger, we thought we'd have nowhere to sow grain... and instead those twenty fields now yield us more than the old land, we pay our rent, and everyone is less oppressed by work. In fact... it was good! And that little head there is worth all of ours."

Meanwhile, Signor Giovanni had arranged to have a long covered table brought into the parlor, and withdrawing to one of the ends with his eyeglasses on his nose, he scoured a scribbled page of notes in great confusion, preparing himself to carry out the ceremony according to the orders received from the countess. She saw him, sensed his embarrassment caused by the presence of the two noblemen, and in order to free him she said: "Here is the bailiff awaiting my orders to distribute the gifts. But as the event is ending up a bit long, because he has his little sermons and recommendations to make, I'll begin, and then, if you please, we will withdraw into the adjoining room.

The Cavalier took her hand gently and said, "I would like to ask you a favor. They're waiting for me at the

Marquis's home, and I'm already very late. Very early tomorrow morning I must leave, and my work will most likely not allow me to visit your town again. I would regret to spend my last hours away from you.... Let's do this. You climb into the carriage and let's finish this beautiful day together in the midst of your family!...

She was undecided an instant, she lightly bit her lower lip and cast an involuntary glance toward the Marquis.... The Cavalier saw it and turned to the Marquis and with the self-assurance that was natural to him, begged him to champion his cause, giving the speech the air of an expression of amiable gallantry. The other for a while was on pins and needles and was thinking that at home they would not be at ease still not seeing them arrive at the soiree, which he knew had to be numerous that night, with people already gathered to pay homage to his guest. To him it didn't seem possible to be able to get out so easily, and he insisted so that Ardemia without any other delays accepted the invitation immediately. The countess then realized that she shouldn't give up this perfect opportunity to patch things up with her family; and while they were harnessing the horses, she rapidly said some words to Signor Giovanni, so that he would take her place, and she began the distribution by presenting Gregorio with a comfortable overcoat with hood and sleeves. "For me!" marveled the old man.

"Certainly for you," answered the countess. "You are the

oldest of my dependents, the town patriarch, an honest man and a good master of his house, whom I insist on keeping in good health for many years so that the others should imitate your example. And now, good friend, that the years are passing,[81] you must try to keep well protected from the cold. This overcoat," she added lightly tapping his shoulder with her little hand, "you can be sure that it will keep you warmer than your bianchetta, and even though neither your grandfather nor your father were used to it in their days, you will do as I say and you'll wear it particularly when you go to the markets or travel and stay out at night."

The old man, after examining it on all sides, threw it on his shoulders, strutting about and kissing the hand of his little mistress with affectionate exaggeration. "Gregorio in an overcoat!" he exclaimed. "Truly this is big news, but even I would be a great dummy if I didn't know how to adapt myself to it!" Everyone shouted "Hurrah," and the countess slipped on her overcoat[82] and tying the little hood, bade a cordial farewell to the guests, excusing herself for not being able to finish the ceremony. Accompanied by the two guests, she climbed into the carriage among the happy acclamations of all those people who got up to escort her, and they continued

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[81]i carnovali pesano - pl. idiomatic, the years, counted by spring times, are weighing, many years have passed, Gregorio is old.

[82]paletò - French from paletot meaning overcoat, heavy coat.

to bless her even after she left.

At the Marquis's estate, as he had foreseen, they had been waiting for some time. They found most of the women of town who, like so many beautiful spring flowers, already adorned the room. Their more than usually careful coiffeurs, some of their flaunted outfits, and their clothes, all somewhat pretentious, gave away that they had not forgotten about the stranger.

At the beginning, there were some malicious little glances at the countess's toelette[83], which seemed to them and in fact was very simple; nor would there have been missing a bit of criticism if the continued distinctions and the preference that the Cavalier granted her had not imposed a kind of awe on them. Seeing her treated with all that respect by such a man, they instead decided to court her and rivaled for who would better be able to win her friendship. Also her mother and sister, forgetting to pout about her, were very affable with her; and even her aunt Great Lady of the Great Star-Spangled Cross allowed herself to speak to her niece several times. So that the evening passed happily, and without need of other means, Ardemia found herself, thanks to the Cavalier, at least for the time being, fully reconciled with her noble family.

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[83]toelette - From the French, toilette, the overall care given to appearance.

THE WOMAN OF OSOPPO

The Woman of Osoppo was written some time after August 1848, though it was not published until 1858. By Percoto's own contention, it is based on an actual event of the republican uprisings of Italy in 1848 and 1849. It documents the story of Giovanna Savio del Cet who was actually killed by a Croatian soldier on August 7, 1848, in the town of Osoppo (Maier 18). Thus, although Percoto embellishes the cold facts of the story, the material event has a concrete source. The climax of the story is based completely on truth, as Percoto tells in a note at the end of the story: "Qui la narrazione in ogni suo più minuto particolare s'attiene alla piu scrupolosa verità" (Percoto 1974, 198). She writes of the atrocities committed by soldiers in Friuli after the 1848 uprising in an article entitled "Non una sillaba oltre il vero," published in 1848 in the Giornale di Trieste (D'Aronco Contributo 30).

Osoppo boasted over two thousand inhabitants in 1847 and was situated on a bank of the Tagliamento River at the foot of a fortress built by the Savorgnano family. The isolated, rocky mountain peak could be reached only by one well-guarded road. The Austrians starved the village by forbidding any of the inhabitants to come out, thereby attaining the surrender of the village and the fortress, which they subsequently dismantled (Maier 199). Osoppo was held by the Italian volunteers from April to October of 1848. The story recounts

the mental and physical anguish of its heroine, a young mother named Rosina, who cannot feed her children in the war-starved town. It pivots around her decision to remain in Osoppo and watch her children die of hunger and starvation or to risk capture by enemy soldiers in a desperate attempt to find food beyond enemy lines. Rosina's heroism lies in her courage to make the decision to leave and then to face the barbarous soldiers when confronted. This heroism is of course her undoing.

Percoto's inventiveness lies in two distinct yet related areas. First, her use of figurative art to detail character motivation and organic images of youth shrivelling into old age and death. Second, her use of historical fact as the foundation of her work. The unity of the story is very strong in generative patterns. Rosa's children will soon die of starvation. Natalia, the neighbor, is already so emaciated that she looks like the symbol of death itself, a skull and crossed bones. Losing control of her instincts, she devours the children's small bit of food. The passage describing Natalia's frenzy is one of Percoto's great moments, a fine example of just how far her attachment to reality extends into the facts of mortality.

The story has been published eight times, three of those during Percoto's lifetime, twice following World War I, and once after World War II.

PUBLICATION HISTORY

C.P. Racconti. Florence: LeMonnier, 1858.

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C.P. Novelle scelte. Milan: Carrara, 1880.

C.P. Sotto l'Austria in Friuli. Florence: Bemporad, 1918.

C.P. "La Veuve d'Osoppo" . In Petites vérités aux jeunes personnes. Paris, 1920.

C.P. L'album della suocera e altri racconti. Milan: Muggiani, 1945.

C.P. Racconti. Racconti. Ed. Michele Prisco. Novara: Il Club del Libro, 1972.

C.P. Novelle. Ed. Bruno Maier. Bologna: Cappelli, 1974.

THE WOMAN OF OSOPPO [Florence, 1858]

"Deus meus, Deus meus, ut quid dereliquisti me?"

St. Matthew, XXVI

"God knows, Maddalena, how grateful I am to you!.... But I can't any longer let you give your food to us!"[84]

"Oh don't worry about me, I beg you! For sure the Lord will provide..." Two young women exchanged these words with melancholic affection in a ground floor room in the town of Osoppo. From the long tables, from the wooden benches situated at two sides of the room, one could tell that in other times that place had been used as an inn. But now it was empty, nor did you see other people there except the two women. The first, the lady of the house, seated with her body slumping and her head hidden between her hands, a head drooping like a withered flower, her hands bony and pale almost like wax. The other was a pretty girl, vivacious, smiling, her cheeks fresh as an apple, but with a tear running down. She had placed a basket of grapes and a napkin filled with flour on the table near her friend.

"These are the last grapes from my trellis" she said, "and I'm giving them to your babies because I don't need them any more. Come out a moment, my dear Rosina, and you'll see

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[84]noialtri - us, us others, all of us. In Rome la festa dei noialtri?

that I'm not lying." And taking her by the arm, she gently forced her to go out with her in the courtyard. The sun was close to its setting, a band of dark clouds covered the crest of Peonis Mountain, some wisps of fog rose from the Tagliamento[85] and went up the barren back of the mountain to gather with the clouds that every so often were giving a flash of lightening.

"Look!" said the young girl, "tonight, without a doubt, it'll storm; therefore, I won't be afraid of the soldiers, I'll leave the village, go to Udine, start working, and I will not die of hunger any more."

"Oh! If only I didn't have those two wretched babies..." cried the desperate mother.

"Listen, Rosina, when I get to Udine, I'll look around for your husband, let him know your horrible predicament... and who knows? He might be able to come visit you and bring you some help, throwing himself into the waters of the Tagliamento further up and getting here by swimming like those courageous people from the fort...."

But Rosina shook her head and the other didn't dare continue because she felt in her aching heart that such hope was too vain, and ah! she had nothing but tears to console the

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[85]Tagliamento - a torrential river that runs from northwest Friuli east to Carnia. At Carnia it makes a 90 degree turn toward the south, passing through central Friuli from Carnia to the bay. The modern day town of Osoppo is on the eastern shore of the Tagliamento in the north central part several miles from Carnia.

immense grief of this unfortunate girl who already foresaw all the horrors of irreparable destiny. They hugged each other crying; silently they separated without even being able to say a good-by that both sadly felt would be the last down here on earth.

Back inside, Rosina went to sit in her chair and mournfully thought over her past. Two little children played at her feet, innocent creatures, ignorant of their fate, sprightly and happy as the lamb that doesn't know that he's being taken to the slaughterhouse. They climbed on her knees, every so often they wanted to kiss her, and she, caressing first one, then the other, cried unwittingly on their white forehead. An impetuous wind meanwhile had risen, the thunder grew louder and more frequent, and at intervals the window behind the hearth, the one that looked out over the mountain, appeared illuminated by the lightening. Some heavy drops of rain began to strike the windowpanes, the door burst open with a rush letting in a surge of the storm that raged outside.

"Bad weather's coming!" shouted the children, and the woman ran to close the shutters and lit a small lantern. Then again seated, she seemed to listen with a kind of secret satisfaction to the roar of the rain that already fell in torrents, and to the shout and din of the thunder. She thought about her friend, and the hope that storm was useful in protecting her escape had cheered her up for a moment. The lantern she had lit was not enough to brighten the entire

rather wide and old-fashioned room, with its bare beams.[86] It lit up the little children's sweet heads, and her own sad face, then softly it lost itself in the shadows, letting only one of the walls appear, the one opposite where the strokes of an expert hand had depicted with charcoal some life-size figures.

It seemed a kind of bridal procession, and although the bride wasn't facing the viewer, in the figure's graceful movement, in the torso's loveliness and quickness, and in the thick hair gathered into braids drawn with some masterful lines under the sketched veil falling on her shoulders, she so characteristically resembled the pretty mistress of the house that you immediately perceived that she must have been the model for whoever had drawn that scene there. Perhaps that sketch, improvised on the smokey wall without artistry, was the loving outburst of a contented soul for his good friends' happiness. Perhaps it had been created among the merriment of toasts by a painter who had thus wanted to consecrate the domestic joy of his blood relatives or faithful friends. And who knows with what golden dreams and sweet hopes the mind smiled on them that day, a mind full of the poetry of youthful years, intoxicated by love's enthusiasm.

The future that they then so gladly foresaw had meanwhile arrived, but now where were the people portrayed here? Where

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[86]alla Sansovino - very rustic, unfinished beams not covered with rack and mortar or mud

was the painter? One person only remained at her place, the poor woman, but how changed! That noble head, erect and so full of youthful vivacity, was hanging like a rose stripped of petals to look at the ground. Joy, love, hope, all had vanished. Of her smiling past nothing remained but these two poor children, a memory of her most beautiful days, her heart's blood and life, epilogue of all her affection, and destined unfortunately to a fatal lot. She who loved them more than herself would soon have to see them die of starvation... just like the seedling that a hot summer day burns in the womb of a parched earth, she was soon going to see them wither on her knees, without being able to offer a drop of relief... She took them in her arms, pressed them to her heart with a rush of desperate sorrow, and bathing them with tears, put them to bed in the crib next to her, begging God's mercy for them.

Eight days passed. The food brought to her by her friend was already at its end. After that day, there had been no news of her. She must have passed the frontier without danger. Oh! if only she could do the same and provide a bit of bread for her dying little children! Desperation, hunger, a mother's love won over her natural timidity, and she, too, set about trying to get out. By now there was no other way. There you undoubtedly died. No help, no other hope. The self-preservation instinct had already closed all hearts. The little children's prolonged cries, asking for bread, had

become unbearable torture for her. She resolved to pass through the lines of soldiers and procure them some bread at every cost. With the last fistful of flour she had prepared them a bit of food. While they were eating, she wept. The older child saw her and leaving his spoon, climbed between her arms to kiss her and did everything he could to dry her tears with her bodice handkerchief.

"Aren't you hungry any more, Vigino?" asked the woman with a choking voice.

"Yes, sure I'm hungry! But you're crying..."

"Come now, my sweetheart, finish eating supper and then we'll go nighty night, and first we'll say prayers together."

"Prayers with me too, mamma, me too!" the other little one babbled with a full mouth.

"Yes, you, too, this evening, because tomorrow I have to go out, and you must be good and sleep quiet in your crib until the neighbor Natalia comes to dress you."

"Will you make us say the long prayer, that one for Daddy's return?"

She didn't answer, but with the little one in her arms, she climbed the stairs crying, while Vigino, attached to her skirt, dragged himself behind. Upstairs she made them kneel in front of a Madonna, and she recited some prayers that they repeated babbling with their hands folded and their eyes thrust on the holy image. Then she put them to bed. She could never stop kissing them, caressing first one, then the

other of those two fair little heads; she hugged those two dear little bodies among the blankets, and every time that they opened their sleepy eyes to gaze at her, she felt the desire for a new embrace and whispered to them all those sweet names, those words of immense love that belong only in a mother's language. Then, when they seemed to have dozed off, she knelt at their feet and prayed with her heart:

"Sleep, my angels, sleep peacefully! Oh! if only I could feed you with my last breath...My God, You who gave them to me, You who blessed the love of my youth in giving life to these two children who are the blood and life of the man I have loved so much, I place them in your hands; you take care of them and don't let me see them die of hunger! Blessed Mother, for the love of that baby that you hold in your arms, have pity for these two poor wretches!...Oh look what sweet sleep! They know nothing of their cruel destiny. They've stretched out in their little bed all happy, given themselves to sleep in full trust as if they were the children of a rich queen... and tomorrow not even a bread crumb to feed them!... Oh my children, so beautiful, so loving!... will you have to die of hunger? And will there no longer be mercy on earth or in heaven? I ask nothing but a piece of bread for your life! Could it be that a mother's tears are not heard? Blessed mother, you who have experienced being a mother, shield them with your mantle, keep them at your breast together with your baby, until I return to save them..."

And all in tears she got up, wrapped herself in a dark scarf, then before leaving, went back still another time near their cribs, blessed them both with the sign of the cross, and went out hushed and cautious leaving the door half-closed. It was the middle of the night: Throughout the village a deathlike silence; all the houses in darkness and the streets entirely deserted. After a few steps the woman stopped in front of a house and threw a stone at the window. A kind of faint cry that finished in a death rattle answered her. She stayed a moment waiting, but no one moved. Then she threw a second stone and, "Natalia!" she called, "Natalia, come to the window."

The cry came again stronger and seemed accompanied by impatient words; finally, the shutters creaked and a raucous voice, almost hissing, asked: "You've decided then? You really want to go?"

"But of course, Natalia, otherwise they die of hunger."

"Alas! Alas!... and if they stop you? Remember that they took Giulia and Godmother[87] Teresa to prison in Gemona.[88] And you're fooling yourself," she continued raising her voice like a whistle, "you're fooling yourself if you believe that I can feed your children for you. I haven't seen

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[87]comare - godmother, but also used as an intimately known neighbor or midwife.

[88]Gemona - a small city 21 km north of Udine.

a bread crumb for eight days, and when there isn't any, one can't give any, understand!"

"My God, Natalia, I'm not asking for bread! Just go look after them tomorrow. By this time, I'll already be back."

"And tomorrow," asked the old woman, "how will they survive tomorrow?"

"These apples here will be enough to keep them alive tomorrow." And stepping back, she threw them into the window, a bundle wrapped in a handkerchief.

Meanwhile, the moon showed itself dimly in the sky between the broken clouds. The two women said good-by, and the poor mother, ran away silently, close to the wall, like a shadow in search of the darkest places.

The other, with her elbows at the window, and her head between her hands, remained still a bit to watch her. In that moment, the moonlight illuminated her, and that emaciated face, those whitish and pointy features drawn on a dark square as if on a mortuary cloth, had something sinister about it. It seemed the symbol of death, just as they used would draw it on the catafalques: a skull and two crossed bones. Hunger had tormented that poor living skeleton for many days. Now the fragrance of the apples had revived her. As soon as she heard the thud of their fall on the floor, her bony hand, like a hook, ran to seize them, and by a kind of instinct she drew them immediately to her lips. Then she murmured, "One, two, three, four apples! It's really something--she still has

apples for her simpering babies! Who could have given them to her? Ah my God! When you're young, you find compassion, but me, I could knock at all the doors of the village and I wouldn't get even a handful of flour. They'd say that I'd lived enough... No one has given anything for many days! Oh my God! Hunger! Hunger!... it's a dog barking in my stomach." And she pressed her dry lips on the fruit. She savored their perfume in a kind of ecstasy... All of a sudden, as if she were drunk, as if her mind had vanished, as if the animal instinct only had taken her over, she started to gnaw them. She moved her jaws up and down with a kind of frenzy, nor did she stop until she had completely swallowed them.

The poor mother had meanwhile passed the extreme border of the town. She heard the monotonous step of the Austrian sentries. More than ever cautious, she proceeded slowly, weighing her life. She held her breath, prayed with her soul, and at the smallest gust of wind that would move the foliage or make her clothes rustle, she threw herself on the ground. A shiver of fear invaded her and she was fearful of the sound of her very own trembling heartbeats. Then, she continued to advance, dragging herself on her hands and knees. She had barely passed beyond the first echelon[89] when she realized that she had been discovered. She gathered her skirt with

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[89]scaglione - military jargon, echelon, group.

both hands and got ready to flee, but the shout of the sentry, the noise of the weapon that he had lowered, and the fear of running up against the other one, who had also come out to hunt for her, made her stop although she was already almost out of range. Seeing herself lost, the wretched woman knelt down, and looking at the dreadful eye of the rifle that menacingly threatened her, she stretched out her hand and cried in desolation, "Bread for my poor little children! I ask only for bread!..."

"Bread? Kruca!"[90] the soldier repeated, and showing her a piece of a rationed loaf, he invited her with a savage smile to come and take it from his hands. The woman rose and hadn't taken two steps when the bullet whistled and struck her on the forehead. She fell backwards and her long tumbled hair made a pillow for that pale face on which, even after the spirit fled, her thought wandered toward her young children, betrayed and dying of hunger.

A few days later, driven out by the long fast, two wretched children were shrieking along the road to Osoppo. In night shirts with hollow eyes and thin, shaggy, ashen-colored hair, they were asking for their mamma; and their voice, always weaker and hoarser, was becoming a kind of tremble that penetrated the soul. Those limbs, skin and bones, that neck,

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[90]kruca - Croatian, bread. It is interesting to note that only Croatians kill in Percoto's stories, not Austrians. See La coltrice nuziale and La resurrezione di Marco Craglievich.

long and thin where you almost saw the breath pass through, those bones that you could count one by one, were a spectacle of infinite compassion. After much wandering about, guided by a kind of instinct, they dragged themselves on the poor woman's dead body. In their innocence they believed that she slept, and, "Come, mamma!" they shouted, "Come, wake up! Let's go home, mamma! Natalia hasn't come to dress us. No one has come to look after us... --No one has given us anything! Mamma, come, let's go, move for once!..."

Oh! if the man who had begotten them had been present at this tearful scene! Perhaps he'll come one day when, after many unspeakable misadventures, drawn by desire for his native mountains, he'll return to see once again this poor betrayed land. He'll return!... and in front of the village desolated by flames and plunder, in front of the dismantled fort[91] on the plain that they call "Campo," a small wooden cross will point out to him all that was dearest to him down here on earth... But then his anguished heart will have to cry many other more awful disasters!

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[91]fortezza - C.P. writes that this fort was the work of a simple private, but such that he merited Napoleon's honor. It belonged to one of the Savorgnan descendants and was donated to the Republic of Venice so that it would become the Italian bulwark against the northern eruptions. The donator was buried at the top of the fortified hill. After the fall of the Republic of Venice, the French invaders were seen playing bocce with the venerable skull in which had sprung forth that generous patriotic spirit. The Austrians demolished the fort immediately.

FRIULAN STORIES

The Friulan stories are presented in three groups: the fables, the racconti dal vero, and the traditions of the saints. Within each story type, the works are presented chronologically. All these stories are characterized by a spontaneity that is in direct contrast to Percoto's assessment of her stories in Italian. Apropos of one of the Friulan tales, La maladizione dei lupini, she writes, "Non par cara e commovente anche a voi ben più assai nel dialetto, come l'avrete mille volte sentite nelle vostre campagne, che non nell'Italiano in cui io mi sono indarno ingegnata di renderla?" (Morgana 301).

THE WATER NYMPHS OF BORGNANO

This story was Percoto's first published Friulan work. Of the two magical stories presented here, The Water Nymphs can be considered in light of feminist theory. In this story, a young man imposes his romantic heterosexual love on each of the four sister nymphs, destroying the sisterly cohesion of their single sex community. The ensuing reestablishment of their loyalty and love to each other wreaks havoc on the town in the form of a destructive flood, and the flapping of the clean, continually washed and purified laundry may be a symbol of their renewed commitment to one another.

THE WATER NYMPHS OF BORGNANO [Trieste, 1846]

Under Mount Borgnano there's a place where the Judrio comes into the rock and makes a kind of lake. The right bank is thick with little willows and vines; on the other side, a small poplar grove. In that shade, the water seems green and you wouldn't realize that it's running, if not for the white foam that congeals at the edges. Just before a storm, the poplars, blown by the wind, lower their top branches and let you see the black cavernous mountain behind them that seems like an ugly house. They say the water nymphs live in there. Whoever passes on that side will have seen more than once the white laundry drying on the banks of the Judrio and on the willows--they continually wash.

One hears them flapping that laundry more than a mile

away. Sometimes they sing a little song, accompanied by the music of the water and by the flapping of the laundry. They say that they used to be girls and very beautiful. That cliff was their house, and at that time, the town of Borgnano was all around it because the Judrio didn't run on that side. Each evening a young man went to visit them. Today he courted the first, tomorrow the second, day after tomorrow the third, another day the fourth. All four of them fell in love with him, and from jealousy the sisters began to hate each other. They were consumed by rage and because of their envy, they turned into witches. The young man continued to go visit them. But when it became dusk, they sent him home.

One evening he placed his arms on a table and pretended to sleep with his head hidden in his hands.

"Going home?" one of them asked.

"Come now, young man, it's getting late, said another.

And another added, "Go with God's blessing," and all together they sought to send him away. He persisted and answered that he wanted to stay longer so that the moon would already be shining and he wouldn't be afraid of going home. He stayed until almost midnight. After he went away and they secured the door behind him, in a flash he saw all four in the road. Each one had a lit torch in her hand, all nude, hair loose on their shoulders and, two on one side, two on the other, they accompanied him home dancing the ancient friulan dance and singing:

Though the moon is shining

It's very, very night.

On the next day the Judrio flooded through the town, half of the houses collapsed, and that of the water nymphs remained behind the tree trunk. With the passing of time it turned into stone, the poplars and willows grew, the place became savage, and whoever passes by sees that dark water, that shadow, feels a shiver for his life and escapes in fear.

THE WHITE DOG OF ALTURIS

This story immediately engages the reader, pulling him directly into the Friulan matrix: "Do you hear the wind? ... We won't venture along that path." The story depicts themes close to Percoto--homeland, family, yearning, war. The war is not set in the current struggle between Austria and the Italian republics, but in an earlier struggle involving France and Italy. Images of blood, bones, the spring, and the spirit of the slain soldier, images of mortality and immortality, bring this story to its tragic conclusion, a proverb about the misery of success built on the misfortune of others.

THE WHITE DOG OF ALTURIS [Udine, 1851]

Do you hear what wind? It's the harvest of the leaves, and the earth, as if it had some great anguish in its heart, is old before its time this year. The jujube tree didn't wait for the frost to throw off its tresses. There it already spreads its limbs, empty, black and tangled, as if they were claws. On the branches[92] of the mulberry trees, some curled up leaf rustles for a moment in the wind, then sows itself through the countryside. St. Martin's poor horse won't find anything to graze upon this year! It's Saturday, the night is

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[92]bacchettis - has two meanings, slender branch and silkworm cocoon. Percoto in 1863 edition translates it "verga," twig or stick. Giacomini in 1988 edition translates it "vermene," literary for a slender young branch, but close to "verme," silkworm.

dark; we won't venture along that path. Each Saturday, along that path near the springs, appears a white dog, and far off on the new road, one hears a carriage running that never comes forward.

That dog, after barking his best and raking the earth with his claws, raises his muzzle, and begins to howl a long time, so that he seems to call it; but it rumbles always stopped in the same point, and at midnight the noise becomes dull and melancholic, as if it were sinking into the earth. Then the cur gives a cry, jumps into the current, struggles a bit under the thicket and then disappears in the eddy. Several years ago while working in that area, they found a rusty shovel, a skull, and several human bones, which disintegrated like burnt straw as soon as they were exposed to the sun. They say that on that path, a soldier was killed at the time of the Napoleonic wars. He had come from Paris and had sent home a chest of money with a letter to his mother in which he said that the war had been good to him and that he had become a wealthy man.

In her glory, the woman quit her job and began to wait for him at the window.

She thought relentlessly about her son's good fortune, about the loot he had sent; and at night she dreamed of herself dressed in silk, her neck adorned with gold, her hands full of rings, her head covered with diamonds, and she saw him married to a beautiful queen. She waited today, she waited

tomorrow; everyone returned from the war, but not her son. Then, she bought a carriage and horses and left to search for him throughout the world. She crossed the mountains, entering Italy. She looked at the meadows there, strewn with daisies, the trees that foretold of spring, the little birds that flew around singing on the hedges already in bloom, drank in the perfume of the meadow all in love. A raven came and perched on the coachman's seat. It had a bloody claw, a beak bloody up to the eyes; under its wing a letter with a black seal. It dropped the envelope on her lap and flew away croaking, as if it had smelled a cadaver. The letter told of the miserable soldier's final moments.

In that instant she felt all the blood of the cursed war trickle in her heart. She became white as a sheet and withered in her carriage. After that day, by God's will she runs every Saturday night to that place to meet her son; and he rises from the earth in the form of a white dog and cries, longing for his far away homeland and yearning to kiss his mother. But it's in vain because both enchained to destiny, they cannot see each other on this side of Judgement Day.

> Miserable are those who believe in fortune built on others' tears!
>
> Miserable those who die far from their homeland!

THE PRETTIEST

Bindo Chiurlo believes that The Prettiest, stylistically and thematically is one of Percoto's earliest works in Friulan, and thus, I have placed it first in the group of realistic stories, although it was not published until 1863. It is a dialogue of three farm women chatting in town one evening. Similar to the language used by Ermes di Colloredo in his prose dialogues, Percoto's language shows the agiliity and elasticity of Friulan in portraying a wide range of themes. The language is fresh, immediate, and un-selfconscious, and the anti-materialistic theme is a common one in Percoto's racconti dal vero.

THE PRETTIEST [Genoa, 1863]

(Chitchat of three farm women)

Catine: Where are you going in such a hurry? Look[93] what a beautiful evening! Sit here with us.

Pascute: Are you there listening to the silly prattle of the women at the fountain? Or are you criticizing[94] those who are returning from the feast?

Lucie: As you choose. But you--I thought you too had gone to the feast!

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[93]cee - literally eyebrow or spy

[94]tarizaiso - criticize, but A. Giacomini adds color to his Italian version by translating it "tagliate i panni."

Pascute: A joke![95] I could really go! Eh, since I got married, I really don't have these crazy ideas[96] any more!... I was preparing food for the oxen till now, understand?

Catine: Poor Pascute! And to think of all the beautiful skirts you have to make a good impression! I remember when you got married: Your mother had supplied you with ...

Lucie: But what's the use of having them when she can't wear them? I wouldn't be able to stand being tied to the pole/chained to the house this way! Master Titre could have shouted all he wanted... If I were you, I would have taken my turn to dance four steps on the dance floor today!

Catine: Listen to that! You're sitting here, too!...

Lucie: You want to bet? I wouldn't have the rowdy mob, I wouldn't!

Pascute: And me, you see, I'm happy to stay home. There at my house one works; there are no days off. Master Tite is severe, but he loves us all and he doesn't

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[95]Sipo! 'O podevi la! - A. Giacomini notes that in the manuscript Percoto writes "sipo 'o podevi oh!" The 1863 edition replaces the elliptical and perhaps more musical oh with la "to go" (Giacomini 53). "Sipo" is a kind of game. The word is used in the locution "sipionazbrubefututut!" meaning a trick or practical joke.

[96]matetaz - Giacomini adds to the metaphor by translating this simple word meaning craziness as "grilli per la testa," crickets buzzing in my head.

let us lack anything/we lack nothing. Except for the bad years, we don't need polenta. They've always liked working: It would be really nice if I were come now to break the tradition! And then look, poor man! On holidays, instead of going alone to the inn, as so many do, he gathers us all around him; my mother-in-law prepares a bit of a meal, and there we exchange a few words and we enjoy ourselves together. And also today, do you understand?

Catine: Are those two miller women passing down there?

Pascute: One is the blacksmith's wife from Percud.[97]

Lucie: What luxury though! And what earrings! And the taller one has a silk pinafore that shimmers. I'd like one just like that for this Easter.

Pascute: And would you believe that you seem prettier having that flag with a thousand colors down there?

Catine: I bet that those earrings weigh double mine! It's a pity that they twist her ears.

Pascute: God forbid! I've never been able to understand what thrill there might be in piercing ones's ears to hang all that bit of brilliance.

Lucie: But I honestly like them! Here's another one coming up behind! And she too has a beautiful

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[97]Percud - Percoto

circle of gold around her neck! Let's see if Pascute doesn't like necklaces either?...

Pascute: I used to, yes. But remember that vicious guard dog that my family kept chained at the end of the courtyard?

Catine: What are you getting at with this?

Pascute: I'm trying to tell you that one day, I was looking at how that dog's chain was made and you see it was just like a gold necklace! Since then, I've never liked wearing one around my neck. Even if I were a rich lady, I wouldn't at all, even a bit want those bracelets of gold and pearls they wear around their arms. They look like prisoners' chains!

Catine: That's a nice thought you have! Look, Lucie, look at that girl passing now!...

Lucie: Not at all pretty! She's pale as a rag.

Pascute: And with a scarlet scarf!

Lucie: Poor thing! She probably did it to wear a bit of red...

Pascute: You know who she is? From Trevignano--Meni Bros' fiance. See him back there with the other women...

Lucie: Those too from Trevignano: I recognize them from their style of dressing. In Trevignano they all dress up like rich ladies!

Catine: With those wide flytrap skirts!... The other day I was in Udine and I sat down in the piazza waiting

for my brother-in-law to return from the last mass: If you had seen those women who were coming out of St. Jacun's! Full skirts, all frills, veiled hats and little umbrellas that flapped in the wind... They looked like such sailboats!...

Pascute: You see then? And does it seem right for us poor folk, destined to work, to make like monkeys imitating their fashion!

Lucie: Of course not! But still one enjoys seeing a girl clean and well-dressed!..

Catine: Lucie, look at the gracefulness of Mastro Toni's daughter. By God she's pretty, that one.

Pascute: And yet in town, there's another better than she.

Lucie: Who do you mean? Ghite or maybe Tine?

Pascute: It's a married woman. I saw her just this evening while I was coming home with the sorghum[98], and she seemed just a beauty!

Lucie: Who could it be? Of the married women it could only be Menie Grisute.

Catine: What are you thinking? Menie wasn't at the feast: An hour ago she was here at the well still dressed in her everyday clothes.

Lucie: Then it'll be Gervas's daughter, the sacristan's wife, who when she feels like it, dresses up like

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[98]sorgo - common corn, Indian mullet, sorghum used to feed livestock.

a lady!

Pascute: Prettier than Muinie, much prettier[99]... At least it seemed to me...

Catine: I bet it's Stelle?

Pascute: She was better than Stelle. Better, really, than when Stelle has her fingers full of rings and wears her wedding dress and weaves all her silver trinkets in her braids, and throws on that beautiful tulle shawl with the three circles of embroidery and all the fringe.

Catine: Who the devil is she? Around here truthfully no one dresses in all this elegance.

Pascute: It's Tunine Beltramine.

Lucie: Oh Lord! Poor Tunine!... She must have stayed at home all day like a witch!...

Catine: At home for sure! Her sister-in-law, Marianne, went to the feast, but she stayed home to look after the children...

Pascute: And yet, I swear to you that I saw her a little while ago, beautiful as an angel and she seemed better than all those who passed by here...

Lucie: Knock it off, crazy lady! Are you teasing us?..

Catine: Tell, tell us! How was poor Tunine dressed to dazzle in that way?

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[99]ma un mont - by a mountain.

Pascute: In yesterday's clothes. But she was sitting on the kitchen stoop, she kept her son near her in the walker and in her arms she had her sister-in-law's son and was nursing him. The little baby, curly-haired, white and red as an apple, was caressing her and hugged her with his little hands as if she were his mother, and she looked at him with so much love that at that moment, it seemed so beautiful to me!... more beautiful than the Blessed Mother on the altar of our church.

THE MILLER WOMAN

The Miller Woman is one of Percoto's most well developed stories in Friulan. The story's action turns on an epiphany of sorts, an instillment of courage that the protagonist experiences after a family disaster. Menie Durie's heroism is founded in the domestic values of hard work, accepting one's lot in life, and always sacrificing for one's family.

THE MILLER WOMAN [Rovigno, 1862]

A year ago today there was a big funeral in the town of Pavia. The parish priest's eighty year old mother had died. There were all the priests from the area, a great many torches and lanterns, a long procession of people, and behind, the relatives, at least seventy between grandchildren and great grandchildren. Menie Durie[100] had been a courageous woman who, after having saved her father's house[101], admirably managed that of her husband and saw through four families with her offspring. At sixteen, Menie was clever and good like all girls. She obeyed, she worked, she took care of her younger brothers and sisters. She helped her mother with the cattle; if necessary, she gave a hand in the mill. She knew the

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[100]Donne - lady; a form of address or title meaning lady of the house, mistress, or Mrs.; however, the title "lady" in English would indicate someone of noble as opposed to humble birth.

[101]la chiase di so pari - the house of her father, meaning his seed, the stock that ensures the family's survival in future generations.

Bible; for the rest, in her head were petticoats, scarves, and holiday pinafores, and the basil box and geraniums. A great misfortune came to awaken her. Ser[102] Cecco, her father, a native of Brazzano, had rented a mill over our irrigation canals. When they moved to these parts, Menie was a little baby, and her mother carried her in her apron. An industrious and honest man, he had quickly gained many customers.

Nine brothers and sisters were born after Menie, and the old, dilapidated mill with only two small rooms was very small to house the growing family. Cecco had gone to talk to the owner[103] many times: The children could wait, but the leaky roof let rain in everywhere, the sacks of flour got soaked, and the machinery was rusting. The owner wasn't too eager to spend, he promised, he took the rent, and so it went on as if nothing happened.

It was St. Andrew's eve, the rainy season: for more than a month, the sirocco had continued to blow, and that night it poured rain. Cecco had gone to sleep. Only two children had remained in the mill: Jacumin, 13 years old, and Mignette, younger still. They were looking after the millstone, and a lantern hung among the grain hoppers made a bit of light for them. Many times they seemed to hear creaking, when suddenly, one millstone came to a halt. They took the lantern down and

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[102]Sâr - Ser in Italian, a shortened form of signor, title signifying master or owner of a house.

[103]parôn - land owner.

ran to look. An avalanche of rubble fallen down from the wall had buried the cogwheel, and two boulders collapsed from the ceiling cornice held nailed tight the paddle wheel axle. Jacumin, frightened, ran upstairs to alert his father. Cecco, who had just that day been to the owner to say that the wall was caving in and that he couldn't postpone repairs any longer, fed up with so many useless trips, dead tired and half asleep, answered his son: "What do you want me to do about it? I'm not a mason, you know!" And turning over, he sank into sleep. They were his last words because the boy, back at the mill, saw the lantern dancing, the beams shaking; and as if by instinct, he grabbed his sister by the arm, ran out the door, and then in an instant, the whole mill collapsed into the canal.

It was in the heart of night, it poured buckets; the lowlands were flooded, and those who had heard the noise of the crash and the screams of those poor children didn't dare cross the fields to see what had happened. But at daybreak, a good many people were already in the courtyard, sprung out from everywhere, and everybody helped try to free them from the ruins. A supporting beam, hurled down across the bed, had killed Cecco. As if by miracle, they pulled his wife Anna out alive with a nursing infant. The others in nightshirts shivered in the rain and trembled desperately over the disfigured cadaver of their poor father.

A young man who was coming along the banks of the

irrigation canal from the mill below saw a cradle floating down on the current; he managed to grab it at the embankment before it overturned and saved the little girl in it. He put her into the arms of her mother who already believed she had lost her. It was that same day that a miller, who for some time had his heart set on that mill, went to the owner and offered to rent it for a bit more money so that he could go in that place. He figured that Anna, with ten children none yet able to work and without a husband, had to resort to charity. Cecco was still in the casket when a friend came to alert her. The poor woman put her hands through her hair in despair and looking at the children who were crying around her, said: "Ah my poor children, poor orphans all out on the street, all beggars!"

But Menie, who until then had been silent with a crushed heart without saying a word, threw herself on her knees and swore: "No mother, with God's blessing we will not go begging!" And in that moment, she felt her soul grow as if God had placed her at the helm of the family. To that man who asked to rent the mill, the owner had replied: "First I want to see what this widow will do."

Menie began running the mill. Young and strong, she lifted sacks of flour as if she were a man. She passed through those towns on her mule like a thunderbolt and slept entire nights on the millstone crate to tend to the flour. In winter when the canal froze over, she tucked up her skirt at

the waist and with the hatchet, freed the paddle wheel. Around here, people still remember seeing her cross the waters of the Torre[104] on the sacks that she was bringing to Percoto. She had the courage to come down from the granary with nine bushels on her back and with clogs on her feet.

Menie wasn't beautiful, but when sitting on her mule she galloped through those towns, and the wind blew her hair that fell on her shoulders in curls, people stopped to greet the brave miller woman who had saved her father's house. Her older sisters, Giulie and Mignette, backed her up; her brothers obeyed her; and the mill, instead of losing customers, gained them. In that mill everything worked in an orderly fashion. Anna, a hard-working woman, raised a great many livestock, and on Mardi Gras her pigs were the biggest from the canal district[105], and she always sold them at a good price.[106]

Thanks to Menie, all the children were brought up strictly, and Anna, before dying, could see them all well established. Giulie and Cici married two energetic millers along the same canal; Mignetta, a wealthy farmer in the village of Cerneglons; Miutte, the one that was saved from the

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[104]Tor - The Torre Torrent, a mountain stream with a fast flowing current.

[105]dal rojal - from the area around the canal or "rojs".

[106]cul flor all'orele - with flowers at their ear, idiomatic for selling well.

canal, another farmer from the town of San Lorenzo; Jacun is on his own in a mill; and Sef still runs the family mill. Even after her wedding, Menie always took care of her brothers and sisters.

A widow with five children, she fed them, maintained them and saw them all through with her work.

Finally grown old, she lived with her son, a parish priest in Pavia. Respected and loved, she lacked nothing, but always had her kin in her heart. In the last years of her life, seated in a chair near the fireplace at the pastor's rectory, she relentlessly thought about her siblings, her children, grandchildren, and great grandchildren. First she would ask about one, then about the others; she wanted to know about all the weddings, all the children born, and how such and such a daughter-in law, son-in-law, grandchild or great grandchild was behaving. Sometimes, she put it into her head that one of them was ill, and if the news that they gave her didn't seem reassuring enough, nothing stopped her: She had the pastor's horse saddled and the poor old lady went to see for herself. The love that made her make so many sacrifices and made her bear so much hard work seemed that it couldn't die. Mrs. Menie Durie was a courageous woman, and fortunate are those families gaining such a woman through birth or marriage.

THE BIRD HUNTER

The Bird Hunter is essentially an exhortation for constant, permanent work. This story features an anti-hero, a character whose actions are not to be emulated. The young Tinorio was allowed too much slack by his family as a child, and consequently, he chose the wrong route in life, one that ultimately led to the disintegration of his family. It is interesting to note that a male protagonist, not a female protagonist, is perceived as needing this sort of exhortation for work.

THE BIRD HUNTER [Genoa, 1863]

"It takes more than fine feathers to make fine birds."[107] This is a proverb from the high country where they know from experience what the passion of bird hunting means to the farmer. With cages, bird calls, and by going around the world doing the job of bird catching, there are some who manage to put aside a nice sum of money, but rare is the case where these coins are seen to raise a family: They are just like the feather that a puff of wind throws in the air and the more you run after it the less you'll get to grab.

I remember a certain Tinorio who had let the curse of

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[107]A la daur plume--nuje s'ingrume - a proverb spoken about bird hunters (Pirona 784). Plume in Friulan and piume in Italian also used idiomatically to indicate dreams or sleep, in other words, nothing works out from following dreams; literally, "You get nothing chasing after feathers" or "You get nothing chasing after dreams."

that passion enter into his bones since his boyhood . His family were farmers; they had good land and with work they managed well. Always a coin in the pocket, they paid the rent, they had their good pig, and they were never without polenta. When he was small, Tinorio, instead of preparing fodder for the cattle, planted a cage with a pair of snares[108] at the bank of an irrigation canal, and spent the entire morning chirping. His father loved him dearly, he had always been his favorite child, and if someone at home had said something about how badly he wasted his time, it was he who would defend him; he enjoyed seeing in the evening a nice frying pan of marsh tits on the fire. Meanwhile, the boy grew up and had nothing else in his head except the birds. Throughout the year he was always with the whistle between his lips, busily occupied with breeding owls, readying snares and mistletoe birdlime[109] and twine for the owls[110]. If they sent him to pasture, he couldn't have cared less about bringing home the well-fed cattle and he got bored attending to them; in fact, often, so that they wouldn't yell at him

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[108]vergon - Used in bird catching, a trap or snare covered/smeared with birdlime to trap birds by using the call of an owl.

[109]vischiade, pl. vischiadis - Paniuzze from bird hunters; also from visc, or vischio, which is the viscous material that is distilled from boiling the fruits of certain plants, primarily mistletoe; used to make the sticky substance spread on the snares to catch the unsuspecting birds.

[110]filaine, pl. filainis - the twine used to make the decoy owl play while attached to the trap.

seeing him return so early, he began to buzz with his lips as if it were horseflies, and the cattle with tails in the air, taken by a crazy fury, escaped from the field and galloped away to hide in the stable, with him following behind making believe that it was because of the horseflies.

Harvest season came, and yes, that's when they could call him as long as they wanted to gather corn or to plant wheat: Not even in the evening could they get him to husk corn cobs, because he, up before dawn and dead tired from running around, collapsed from tiredness early on, and whoever was left to do it did his best. His father began to notice it, but it was too late; in fact, once when he tried to ask him to do some sort of job, he ran away from home, going off with a rich man to bird hunt with nets[111].

His greed excited by the money earned, it was then that he became a bird hunter by trade. Having become an adult, married and full of kids, you know what kind of life he led? He now went through the mountains day by day in order to find a calling finch, then took a trip to Pordenone to procure a titmouse; and in the fall went with some gentleman to supervise a hidden bird net[112]: Meanwhile, his children were

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[111]oselâ une bressane - to hunt birds with nets, sometimes, nets that turn over at a touch, trapping the birds underneath (Pirona 74, 674).

[112]rocul - a small circle of trees within which is set up a net from the top of the trees to the ground. The bird catcher's cabin or tower is set up at the circumference. The flying birds, attracted by the song of their already trapped

left to themselves. In the rich men's houses, particularly during harvest season, they become gluttons and engage in merrymaking, and Tinorio quickly learned all their vices. Drinking, playing cards, flirting with the servants and chambermaids was it a miracle if he forgot about his own poor family? When he returned home, accustomed as he was to doing nothing, he turned up his nose at every little task and spent the entire blessed day cooped up in the inn. Now, he's old, immersed in misery up to his eyes.

Among his children, some servants, some wandering through the world, there was no one raised well, no one who could help him. Oh, if his father, a good farmer and a skillful land owner, could now raise his head from the grave and come to see for an instant how his poor family has turned out!

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companions, descend into the wood. Thus frightened by the objects that the bird catcher throws down from on high, they fly into the net and get caught there.

ST. JOHN'S DEW

Only initially concerned with a knotty old walnut tree, this story specifically addresses the tradition of John's courage in facing Herod, comparing it to the kind of heroism necessary for truth telling in all ages of history. Though first published in 1859, the story was possibly a Friulan rendering of the early 1841 Italian story about John the Baptist.

ST. JOHN'S DEW [Milan, 1859]

Near the town of Moruzzo in a little meadow at the foot of the hills, there's a walnut tree, very, very old. You see it from far off throughout all the countryside, and you can sit in the shade on its roots, which jut out knotted and dark from the earth. Spring comes: The grass on the meadow shoots out, slender and fresh. The hedges become white and the apple trees on the hill blossom so that it seems like snowfall: But the walnut tree, dry and hard, seems to have neither spirit nor life. Summer comes: The little birds come singing in the thicket of the countryside, the meadow grass is high and everywhere depending on the wind, their seeds split on the stems of the rye grass. But the walnut doesn't bud or grow; it's still there with its hooked branches, black and rough as if it were frozen in the bark of winter. The traveler who passes by there sees that ugly tree and says,

"Chop it down, make plenty of logs to go on the fire--"

But the farmer from town who is used to seeing it for so many years, answers, "Wait until the dew of St. John comes!"

The night of St. John comes. The people come out of their houses and spread out on the meadow and through the hills to gather the dew.

They lie down on the grass in the moonlight, some praying, some singing, some telling the story of the saint. Chosen by the father to preach redemption in front of King Herod, St. John defended his poor country. Naked and starving, St. John wasn't afraid of condemning the sins of Herod on the throne. They threw him in prison, they cut off his head, but his word has remained.

During the night of St. John, Moruzzo's walnut tree sprouts its leaves and prepares its berries. It's that dew that has the power to make it grow, but in that same night, the rye grass loses all its seeds. They say that the devil's little horses come to split the stems to gather the oats. The rye grass is delicate, turning its face to all sides as the wind blows.

The dew of St. John, which makes the walnut tree live again, is poisonous for those stems. People without courage who fear telling the truth, timid and cowardly people, don't come out during that night, because that night, St. John's blood falls on the earth in the dew.

THE WORMS OF JOB

This story highlights the rewards that issue from perseverence and trust in the Lord. It provides a folk explanation for the genesis of the mulberry tree, which gave Friuli its silk industry.

THE WORMS OF JOB [Milan, 1859]

He was on the dung hill, his house burned, his children dead, all his livelihood lost. Wife and friends had abandoned him. Only his tongue was sound and with this, he persistently blessed the Lord. From high in his heavens, the Lord God finally cast him a merciful eye, and the earth of the little dung hill, drenched from the many tears, began to sprout a strange little tree that no one could recognize: a tuft of tender twigs, straight as candles and adorned by leaves with embroidered edges. It grew in the wink of an eye and in a few days, it refreshed the brow of the poor patient man with its shade. His body's wounds then began to heal and the scabs, like fish scales, fell off leaving his skin clean so that it turned fresh and rosy. The worms which till that moment had nibbled on him, ran in a procession like a line of ants along the trunk of the little tree to pasture on the tender leaves sprinkled with dew. Every three or four days, Job's worms metamorphosed and each time became more beautiful until, one day, gold as ripened grapes, out from their mouths they spit a needleful of thread, fine and shining, that looked like a

ray of sun.

With that thread wrapped around in such a way, they made a cocoon that no one had ever seen. In a few days, all the branches of the strange little tree were adorned with a great number of those cocoons that hung like garlands, in bunches like clusters of grapes on the vine. Thus, for the merits of Job, the Lord God gave the earth the first silk.

HAPPY AND UNHAPPY

The tradition of stories from the St. Peter cycle are some of Percoto's most elliptical stories, where intuitive significance is more important than actual plot. Happy and Unhappy portrays the difference in perspective and attitude between people who are generally content in their lives and those who are continually victims of miserable circumstances.

HAPPY AND UNHAPPY [Milan, 1859]

One day St. Peter asked the Lord for permission to go wandering about a bit. "And where would you like to go, Peter?" the Lord asked him. "Well, to get rid of this boredom, I would say, Lord, I want to get to the land of the Happy Ones."

"Go with God: as long as you remember not to stay too long." And St. Peter, throwing a rucksack on his shoulder, with his walking stick in hand, headed towards the land of the Happy Ones.

Today goes by, tomorrow, no sign of his return. Finally after eight days, here's St. Peter, white and red as an apple, all happy go lucky, coming home, whistling and rubbing his hands.

The Lord said to him, "It seems to me, yes, indeed Peter, you know how to stay away. Do you know it's been a week?"

"Lord, I was in the land of the Happy Ones. There, they were getting married: dancing, playing music, all you could

eat! The flask always full and shouts of May God help us!... In truth, Lord, it slipped my mind about coming home!"

"Wow, so much merrymaking? But Peter, did those people remember me?"

"You Lord? Who are you kidding! Not even in the Our Father!"

After some time, St. Peter again got the itch to go wandering. But this time he headed instead toward the land of the Unhappy Ones. The Lord told him he could stay as long as he wanted. He stayed there three days, and on the fourth day in more than a hurry he returned back home.

"What does this mean, Peter? Why so soon? What the devil was down there that you didn't want to stay more than a bit?"

"What was there? Misery, Lord, tears, lice, disease and misfortune to give you the shivers..."

"And them Peter? Did they remember me?"

"Oh at every word, Lord! Really they did nothing else but pray, implore, and invoke your help!"

THE LORD'S EYE

Another popular story from the St. Peter cycle, The Lord's Eye addresses the veracity of the age old wisdom that "God sees everything." Percoto's tradition makes Peter entirely human, a glutton and a liar.

THE LORD'S EYE [Genoa, 1863]

The Lord and St. Peter, as usual also on that day were roaming about the world. With rucksacks on their shoulders, they had been walking for quite a while and in truth, St. Peter was feeling really hungry. They entered the house of some good farmers[113]. A pot boiled on the fire in there, but you couldn't see a living soul, for everyone was at work in the fields.

The Lord gave his holy blessing, then he turned away toward the door to leave. St. Peter, who was behind him, stopped instead for an instant[114] still near the hearth, and lifted the lid to sneak a look at what might be boiling in the pot. A consoling perfume grazed his nose: A beautiful sausage was floating amidst the barley and the beans.

He grabbed it swiftly and while he walked behind the Lord, he nibbled it secretly. After they finished their hike, the two of them went to rest in a hayloft. They had already

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[113]parôn - land owning farmers.

[114]lampin - lightening bolt, flash, used figuratively.

put down their rucksacks, when the Lord ordered St. Peter to comb his hair. He wore his hair parted down the middle, like the people of Nazareth, and St. Peter, with the comb, was parting his hair when suddenly, he stopped with his hand in the air: "Jesus!" he cried out, "--back here you have an eye, Lord?"

"For sure," answered the Lord. "It's that eye with which this morning I painfully saw you ransack the pot and steal the sausage from those poor people who were out working in the fields."

THIS WORLD'S EYE

This story contrasts the piety and forced holiness of a hypocrite with the spontaneous love and good will of young people singing traditional songs, the villottes, to some newly-married friends. The Lord's preference takes Peter by surprise, his own worldly logic at odds with the other-worldly faith preached by the Lord, his companion.

THIS WORLD'S EYE [Genoa, 1863]

When the Lord together with St. Peter was roaming through the world, one morning, at the crack of dawn, they were passing across a bridge. A beggar, old and tattered, with sunken eyes and with a huge rosary in hand, was standing there, and full of devotion, was reciting prayers, "Our Fathers" and "Hail Marys." St. Peter noticed him and full of respect, removed his hat, but the Lord went ahead on his way without paying attention, looking elsewhere. When they reached the town, they bumped into a group of young people who were singing villottes under a window.

One had a bark pipe in his mouth, one let out cheers[115], another did somersaults. St. Peter, frowning, managed to move aside and to pass by silently in order to have nothing to do with that rabble. The Lord instead greeted them with a "Good

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[115] ucave - uca, shouts of mirth with a certain cadence, as farmers do, alternating usually with the song of the villotte.

day" and stopping to chat, his divine face full of love, with a knot[116] in his throat, he blessed them. The houses past and already in the distance, having turned on to a country path, St. Peter broke the silence: "You know, Lord, that you seem more than a bit strange to me. We meet on that bridge a poor devil who prays with a devotion to make the stones feel pity, and you pass by without greeting him, without even turning a glance toward him; in fact, with a harsh face that seemed furious. Now then back in town we run into that gang of hooligans, who were coming from God knows what kind of night out and who, satiated with food and full of wine, instead of going home to sleep, were there throwing out the urge by yelling songs at some little girl, yes sir, with those, you stop to make niceties, you bless them, and, you caress them!..."

"Poor Peter," the Lord said to him, "you are looking with this world's eye, but I have another eye, and I see further inside. Do you know how much that beggar[117] has done in his life? Now that he's old, without repenting, he thinks that he can reconcile everything with those few Our Fathers that he goes about mumbling.... On the other hand, those young people under that window have a pure soul and their happiness comes

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[116]ingroppat - ingropa, having a knot in one's throat from emotion.

[117]cercandul - attaccone, attack, opening, onslaught, assault.

from a good heart. Yesterday, there were weddings and in that little room the bride, who is from their town, is sleeping. She left her home, abandoned father, mother, brothers and sisters. They stayed up all night to cheer up the poor old folks who have lost her, they danced, they drank, and this morning instead of going to sleep, they came to sing a song under the bride's balcony to greet her and cheer her, in order to console the heart of the one who took her from home. Peter, blessed are those young people, blessed are their songs, blessed their kindness: For me, they form a bouquet of fresh flowers that have a thousand times more fragrance, a thousand times better than all the dry rosaries of that gentleman there on the bridge."

THE MADONNA'S FOCACCIA

Some of the stories of the saints can almost be considered homilies in their use of biblical motifs. The Madonna's Focaccia, for example, combines several Old and New Testament Bible stories into one: the story of Abraham and the weary travellers, Lot's wife, the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, and the miracle of the loaves and the fishes. The story also proposes an underlying cause for the real life natural disaster of the earthquake at the conclusion.

THE MADONNA'S FOCACCIA [Udine, 1884]

Behind Mount Spitz, the sun, red, dusky, blood-colored, was setting. The Piave River ran darkly. A woman, holding a child by the hand, was coming down from Merceana.[118] She turned to look at the town, raised her eyes toward the sky with a sigh, and two tears came down her cheeks: The little boy was skipping. Up and down along the paths of the Antelao,[119] they reached Taulen[120] when it was already late. There, too, house by house, they asked for the night's lodging. But everywhere, like at Merceana, people answered, "There's no room! Go with God!"

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[118]Merceana - town.

[119]Antelao - a mountain.

[120]Taulen - a small town.

At the top of the town, there were two other little houses, one attached to the other, that in the past, seemed to have belonged to one owner; but the first, higher and with windows and a beautiful green doorway, plastered and white-washed, belonged to some gentleman; that other, with the worn-down gutter and the windows stuffed with corn husks, the door in pieces, and here and there, gray walls crumbling and in pebbles, obviously belonged to a poor person. They knocked at the rich man's door. A huge, well-dressed woman with a beautiful gold necklace came out. She gave them an ugly look, and then asked what they wanted.

"Would you find it in your heart to lodge us for the night?..."

"Go, go in the name of God! Because here there is no place for beggars!" And grumbling she shut the door in their faces. The poor person's little house was open. Oh, what a house! A woman intent on lighting a fire came out.

"Come in , come in, good people!"

"If you could please put us up tonight..."

"In my bed, you poor woman! I just put on my wedding linens, fresh from the wash; and your little one we'll put with mine--but for supper, my child, I have nothing to give...

"Meanwhile, come closer, warm yourself at the fire because today in the mountains we gleaned a good pile of sticks, and my son, thanks to the woodsman's two sons, managed to get that whole pile of kindling that you see next to the

wall.

"They let him gather up more than what he could carry because they know that I'm a widow and poor as a louse." And thus saying, she kicked off her clogs and galloped up the stairs to prepare the beds.

The two sat down in front of the fire next to the widow's son who, exhausted and hungry, stayed there and played, and with a stick every once in a while he stirred the ash. He was a poor baby, skinny, stunted, with a yellowish face. They looked at him pityingly, they hugged him, but there was no way to make him open his mouth. When his mother came back down, the perfume of freshly baked bread spread through the kitchen.

"You said that you had nothing for supper, but here under the embers, look! a focaccia!" The poor woman blushed red as fire.

"Oh, yes, I made a small one, but I didn't dare invite you to eat it together with us because that stuff isn't fit for humans. This morning I went to the mill for my sister, who is very wealthy and lives next door there... I was hoping that she would give me a few handsful of flour just so to make it through today: Instead she left me only what I could shake from the sacks. You can believe in order to put together that miserable smattering, I had to scrape the bread box and even the floor. If only it weren't like this; it's kneaded with sweepings. I was ashamed to offer you such a supper; but if you don't mind..." And while she was speaking, the stranger's

son with his little hand drew a cross in the ashes. The ashes rose up, rolled all around the embers, here and there caving in the pile. That other child used his stick to press down the ashes and tried to smooth it, but it swelled, it swelled up so much that the focaccia began to appear: A huge mouthful of a focaccia, so big that all the ashes in the fireplace weren't enough to cover it. A consoling odor of fresh bread! All four of them pulled it from the fire. They placed it on the table in wonder: It was the color of gold, risen like a mushroom, and baked to make your mouth water! They sat around to eat it; but the stranger's son asked for a bit of meat to go along with it.

"Oh Lord, meat, my child? It's been years and years that we poor ones haven't seen even a bite."

"Go to the pantry and poke around," said his mother, "it will make him happy."

"But how do you want me to find something in the pantry if I don't even remember having killed the pig?"

"You go, woman, go there; who knows that you won't discover some long forgotten salami!"

The poor woman, still dazed from that miracle of the focaccia, lit the lamp, and just to obey, went into the pantry. Do you want to see? Two bars of pork meats and

salamis and sausages and ossocollo,[121] enough for as much as one could eat. She carried out the beauty of God's good gifts: a stick with strings of sausages. They wolfed their food down ravenously. But that small child still wasn't content. Now he wanted to drink.

"We need a bit of wine, mummy. Look and see if you find at least a drop, maybe even the kind mixed with water."

"Oh sure! Of what? Down there is only a little barrel, old and disconnected, which hasn't been used since my poor husband died."

"Tap it, woman!"

"Go ahead! It hums like a tambourine!

"Tap it and obey!"

She thought she was dreaming, and yet, to make her guest happy, she rummaged in the rack and came out with an auger in hand. They began to drill little by little, and suddenly, the auger went inside and wine spurted on to their fingers, red like a hare's blood. They put an earthenware bowl beneath it, removed the auger, and out gushed the wine impetuously spreading the scent of strawberry throughout the cellar, enough to make your mouth water. They ate like popes and fell asleep as if they had returned from a wedding feast. The next morning before the break of day, that strange woman and her

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[121]ossocollo - a huge sausage made from pieces of meat taken from the neck of the pig and mixed with fat; eaten uncooked, cut in slices.

son were already awake.

"Get up, woman, dress your little one and come away with us. But remember to not turn back."

The widow, still stunned from the miracles of the previous evening, obeyed without a word, and like a sheep, followed behind holding her son by the hand. She saw Mount Spitz in front of her and it seemed that it was becoming lower.

A bit at a time, its peaks, high as three church belfries, flattened out and in place of those mountain crests, a wide opening of sky appeared. She couldn't believe it, she rubbed her eyes; but meanwhile, the sun that rose at their shoulders was making the day more and more clear.

There was no doubt: Mount Spitz had completely disappeared. They hadn't gone much further than a stone's throw[122] when they heard a great crash as if the shutters of the sky opened up and a deluge of rain pelted down, accompanied by a thousand underground thunderclaps that made all the earth tremble.

Mount Spitz ended up sinking and in its place appeared a lake that still today forms a whirlpool, and unfortunate is he who risks himself in those waters! On that other side, the mountains hollered: a great ruin of stones slid down into the Piave and inverted its course. In the fear of that terrible

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[122]tir di sclope - tiro di fucile, a stone's throw.

instant, the widow forgot the order she had received and spun around to look at her doomed town.

The Antelao, torn asunder, crashed headlong and in one shot buried Merceana and Taulen. Nothing was left standing but her little house. Of all the inhabitants, three hundred or more people, none escaped ruin except the widow with her son and two other children who were out early gathering kindling on the field where the day before, they were cutting wood. Those boys have now grown very old and to whoever passes by those parts, they tell the story, showing the place of the landslide, the widow's little house, and the rocky crag where the stranger disappeared.

They say that she was the Madonna who came to earth to seek some good that could be worth saving from retribution, but she could save only that poor woman and those children.

THE BEES

This story, published for the first time posthoumously in 1889, is a longer Friulan story, one that includes more description than most of her other Friulan stories. In the Friulan setting of the river, the countryside in spring, and the beauty of nature, St. Peter is once again the eternal discontent, whose humanity is shown in his longing for simplistic explanations to the questions that plague him about fairness and unfairness in the world.

THE BEES [Udine, 1889]

They were coming up along the shore of the river. Once in a while they stopped to rest, now among the wicker wood and the already blossoming willows, then after reaching a small poplar grove on an open field facing the towns that were on the other shore. It was a heavenly day: a clear sky like the eye of a bird, songs and perfumes in the air, the earth already at the height of spring. But St. Peter, sulky and angry, did nothing but grumble and act insulted at everything the Lord said to him.

The Lord looked at him with his understanding eye and smiled. "What's wrong, Peter? You're in a really bad mood! You, Peter! What's the matter? What's going on in your head?" And to all these questions he received nothing but a grunt and a "Leave me alone!" They arrived at the ferry crossing. The boat was there on the opposite shore. They sat

on the grass waiting for it. A nightingale sang in the thicket of the acacias; the mother bird had her nest nearby there. Every once in a while you could hear it chirp in the wild rose bush that fell in festoons and garlands down from the slope. The black cap inside a hedge almost on the water seemed to answer it, and further away in the woods, the cuckoo. The Lord was enjoying himself in that moment as if he were satisfied with all his creatures. But St. Peter couldn't relax, and he let off steam[123] by murmuring a tavern song between clenched teeth:

"Be happy, be happy, for if the mountain turns upside down

someone will straighten it.

Justice made of stitches

we won't tolerate."

"Bravo, Peter," said the Lord. "Do you intend to straighten out the world?"

"Of course! But if I were you, I'd do things a bit more fairly."

"Like what? What's bugging you? Why are you looking cockeyed at everything? Come on, spit out the bile and tell me what crickets are buzzing through your head!"

"Do you see that boat there? Well, it's full of all sorts of people: three or four, Lord, are probably good men,

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[123]la lune - the moon, his moodiness.

but the rest is all riffraff, they deserve to be drowned at once. And the day is so beautiful, the water is tranquil, and they come in to this side lighthearted and blessed. And within an hour they'll probably be at the market telling lies, cursing, cheating their neighbor as always. Is this justice?"

"Would you like to turn over the boat and let drown even those three or four that you, too, admit are good men?"

"Save those, Lord. Aren't we two here?"

"It's better, Peter, to let them all live."

"But in that case, where's justice? Even last night in that mill over there where we stayed for supper, you gave your blessing freely to everyone, and yet you knew that among them there was also that evil[124] woman who gave us the polenta against her will and who is nasty at home like the devil, making a mountain out of every molehill.[125] And in truth, rather than bless her, it would have been better to punish her and to destroy her mill!"

"It's better, Peter, to let them all live!"

"But when you send storms, for goodness' sakes, it falls on the honest man's field as well as on that of the rascal.

I now insist that this isn't right."

"Judgement Day isn't down here, and therefore, Peter, it's better to let them all live."

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[124]strie - witch, ugly, old woman.

[125]fâs d'ogni jerbe un fas - idiomatic, makes a bundle out of every blade of grass.

With that, they heard a drone, a strong buzzing sound, and they looked around and saw a swarm of honey bees that just at that moment were passing, flying overhead. St. Peter bent over and quickly began throwing sand with both his hands. From right to left, from high to low, they swarmed with so much fury that the eye couldn't follow them.

Like when it snows or like when children make luminous torches out of burning embers by turning them in a vortex and splitting the air in all directions, fast as lightening. Little by little, because of the sand, the bees flew lower and calmed themselves, and then away they all went after their queen, fixing themselves near a maple tree[126] one on top of the other, like a great pyramid.

"Peter," the Lord then said, "take them and put them in your bosom."

"Oh sure, real smart! They'll sting me!"

"No, if you know how to do it... grab them and bring them home."

St. Peter cast a sidelong glance at him to see if he was really serious. The Lord was earnest and poor St. Peter had to obey. They had barely gone a few steps when one stung him. "I told you, Lord, they're stinging me!..."

"Courage, Peter, patience Peter!"

Another two stung him, then another three, then four,

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[126]vol - Another word for vuol or ajar, which are all words for maple tree.

five...

He was resisting, but suddenly, he couldn't stand it anymore, squeezed them with his arms, and began crushing them here and there desperately until he killed them all.

"Oh Peter, what have you done? They didn't all sting you, did they? But you, in fact, you killed them all the same! Why such fury? Where's the justice? It would have been enough to just kill those that had stung you and to bring home the others and let them make honey."

"Oh sure! I really had the time to stay here and count!"

"You see now then what it means to get furious and to punish before the right time? What you wanted me to do with those men, there now, you did it with the bees, and instead of waiting for them to give you honey and wax, you ended up killing them all. In this world, Peter, it's better that things go a bit according to their own destiny, and let everybody run, let everyone live.

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