

*Slovene-Friulian-Italian Literary Connections at the Beginning of the 20th Century: The Case of Alojz Gradnik and Select Friulian and Italian authors*¹

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Abstract. Based on the case of Alojz Gradnik (1882–1967), this article deals with previously unresearched Slovene-Friulian-Italian literary connections that occurred during the last years of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and the first years after WWI along the border of today's Slovenia (Goriška Brda) and Italy (the region of Friuli-Venezia Giulia: the Provinces of Gorizia, Udine and Trieste). The article highlights the parallels in motifs, themes, ideas and form, as well as the connections between Alojz Gradnik and select Friulian and Italian authors from this region. These links are the consequence of living in a joint cultural space and Gradnik's Friulian family ties, especially with his cousin Maria Samer. The research uncovers certain differences in motifs, themes and ideas stemming from different national identities. Gradnik's poetry is closest to Friulian lyrical poetry in their descriptions and experiences of a rural setting, predominantly the deep bond felt between the farming people and native land coupled with their terrible social strife. Gradnik and his contemporary Friulian authors also coincide in works with a nationalist theme – on the threshold of WWI both Slovene and Friulian authors infused their work with their personal vision for the future of their own community. They shared a negative literary depiction of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and the wish to secure a better economic future, to protect and solidify their cultural heritage. Gradnik's poetry and that of the contemporary Italian (irredentist) authors share a similar literary technique that depicted the national identities of today's border between Italy and Slovenia; they were ideologically opposed however: while the Italians depicted the Italian view of the region, Gradnik highlights the presence of a Slavic element within the region.

Keywords: Alojz Gradnik; minority literature; regional comparatistics; Friulian literature; Italian literature

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I

The article aligns itself with the so-called “regional comparatistics” (Strutz 2006: 241), studying the literature from the last years of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and the beginning of WWI written in the border region between Slovenia and Italy. Today, this region falls under the Goriška region on the Slovene side and the Friuli-Venezia Giulia region on the Italian side. The latter further divides into the Gorizia, Udine and Trieste provinces, and Pordenone.²

In the mentioned border region between today’s Slovenia and Italy, a multi-lingual literary production developed at the beginning of the 20th century. Aside from the literature written in German, the official language of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, other works were produced within the Slovene, Friulian and Italian communities, written in their respective languages.³ All three communities’ literatures from this region have already been researched in many literary historical studies.⁴ Mostly Slovene literary historians have studied the Slovene literature from this region, whereas mostly Friulian researchers concentrated on the Friulian literature. All of the literary historical research done within these two communities so far has stemmed from the need to solidify their respective cultural and linguistic identities.⁵ Likewise, the research of Slovene and Friulian literature restricted to a small circle of local experts is a symptom of insufficient knowledge of the target languages among foreign experts, who have difficulty accessing, reading and understanding the primary sources, *i.e.* the literary text in the original language. The mentioned circumstances resulted in studies on Slovene literature in this area presented in the context of the Slovene national literature, part of the Slovene national literary history. Friulian literary studies predominantly look for common points between contemporary Friulian authors and their Friulian ancestors.⁶

Things are different in the case of Italian literature in this region, which has the status of the majority population’s literature, as it is produced within Italy’s borders. Consequently, this literature is not studied separately within Italian literary studies, if we disregard Italian Triestine literature which has had a special status since the end of the 19th century thanks to the specific role it played within Adriatic Irredentism (Vivante 1984), which is the movement that fought for

² For more on the history of this region see: Makuc 2011, Marušič 2013a.

³ For more on ethnic, national and language communities see: Toplak 2011: 16–17 and Vidau 2015.

⁴ For examples, see Košuta 1996, Guagnini 1980, Faggin 1987.

⁵ This can be explained in the context of cultural nationalism. For more, see Dović 2013.

⁶ See Belardi 1987.

the annexation of Trieste and other Austro-Hungarian regions with an Italian population to the Kingdom of Italy.⁷

The literature produced in this area in Italian, Friulian and Slovene was therefore studied separately, without a comparatistic study that would research the possible connections between authors from the three communities, or rather the possible ideological and thematic parallels in all three literatures, which came to be under the same circumstances of time and place, and which could uncover the specifics of the region's literature that exist regardless of national and linguistic identity.

The article therefore stems from the hypothesis that the literary production in the region along the border between Slovenia and Italy was not created in separate, nationally isolated literary systems, but interacted between each other. These interactions are worth studying, so as to have a more complete view of the literary production in this region. We wish to uncover these interactions based on a sample group study, which includes one of the leading Slovene poets of the period and region, Alojz Gradnik (1882–1967), and certain other Italian and Friulian contemporary authors (Pitteri, Cescutti, Deperis, Zardini, Collodi). The study's main focus is on Alojz Gradnik, given that based on his archived personal letters we can reconstruct his connections with some Friulian and Italian authors of his time. More specifically, we compared motifs, themes, ideas and form.

For the sample study we purposely selected the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th as the timeframe, when the tendency to reinforce the national literary histories in this area was strongest, leaving the intercultural literary correspondences unresearched. By uncovering an intercultural literary connection in this region we wish to foster critical reflection upon the existing research models and encourage studying the region's literature through the lens of regional comparatistics.

II

The poet Alojz Gradnik was born in 1882 in the hilly, wine-growing region of Brda, today divided by the state border between Slovenia and Italy.⁸ His father was Slovene, who moved to Brda as a shoemaker, while his mother was Friulian, once living on the outskirts of Cormons, a small town not far from Brda.⁹ Through

⁷ For more on Triestine literature, see Toroš 2014a.

⁸ For more on Alojz Gradnik as a poet and translator, see Toroš 2014b.

⁹ We are dealing with Gradnik as a Slovene poet according to the Slovene literary history. Following the same criteria (the place the poets have in literary history) we classified the other poets mentioned in the article as Italian or Friulian.

his Friulian relatives, Gradnik already learnt to speak their language from a young age. Friulian was like a second mother tongue to him, as he used it when visiting his Friulian grandmother and while playing with his cousins. The poet was very close with his mother's side of the family, visiting them often, while he never met any relatives on his father's side, as his father came from a foster home. The visits to his grandmother are tied to fond memories of the diverse fruits he could gorge on, as they sadly did not have any cultivated land at home, despite living among many neighbouring orchards and vineyards (Gradnik 1957: 53–54).

This image of an idyllic childhood in the Friulian area stuck with Gradnik all through to his later years in life. It was in the last years of his life and especially in the few decades after his death that Friulian literary historians and translators began to take an interest in Gradnik and his works. They presented his life and opus, even translating a few of his poems into Friulian, highlighting the Friulian aspects of his life, creating a "Friulian" image of Gradnik. In this vein, they emphasized that he was an auditor at the county court in Cormons (Friulian territory), pointing out that he spoke in Friulian when the cases involved Friulian clients. They highlighted his Friulian blood on his mother's side, his closeness to her side of the family and translated his poems that spoke of the customs and traditions of the Brda region, as these were close to the Friulian cultural context of the day (Faggin 2005).¹⁰

It must not be overlooked that Gradnik translated three poems from Friulian to Slovene, written by Friulian poets (Novella Cantarutti, Dino Virgili in Aurelio Cantoni), his younger contemporaries that began cooperating with the *Risultive* group in 1949 in Udine.¹¹ Those translations are part of his manuscript collection housed in the National and University Library in Ljubljana.¹² Besides these translations, the collection also contains the biographies of all three poets. It is worth mentioning the possibility that Gradnik was in direct contact with the *Risultive* group. The fact that Gradnik participated at the *Congresso della Società Filologica Friulana* conference in Cormons in 1957, halfway through his period of translating Friulian poetry, makes it all the more probable.¹³ The poems translated by Gradnik are linked to the ones he wrote about his native Brda by the similarities in motifs and themes: for example images of vineyards and cherry trees are present

¹⁰ For more on the Gradnik's reception among the Friulians, see Toroš 2013.

¹¹ The group was formed by Don Marchetti from Gemona that claimed that further development of Friulian literature should be achieved based on the existing Friulian tradition (Faggin 1987: 59–63).

¹² The translated poems are part of Gradnik's manuscript collection that is kept in the Slovene national library NUK.

¹³ The Friulian Philological Association was founded in 1919 in Gorizia. Since then it has organised annual conferences across Friuli. The association is focused on scientific research of Friulian language and culture.

in both. The main difference concerns the literary space: the Friulians' poems are not placed in Brda, but in today's region of Friuli-Venezia Giulia, referencing the town Gemona del Friuli and the river Tagliamento. Some of Gradnik's translations of the mentioned Friulian poets' works were published in the magazine *Naša sodobnost* (*Our Present-Day*) in 1960. The magazine was issued in Ljubljana, Slovenia (Toroš 2008), so we can credit Gradnik with the role of Slovene-Friulian cultural intermediary.

Within this framework, it stands to mention the impact Gradnik's maternal cousin, Maria Samer, had on his work as a translator. Her mother was Friulian, just like Gradnik's mother, while her father was Italian. To better understand the significance of Maria Samer within the context of literary history, we must first be aware of a few circumstances in Gradnik's life. Namely, after WWI he left his native Goriška¹⁴ and moved to the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes later renamed the Kingdom of Yugoslavia. He worked as a lawyer in Belgrade, Ljubljana and later Zagreb, where he became one of the supreme judges in the last year before WWII broke out. In the first few years after moving to Belgrade he found a wife and fathered a son. Just a few years later, he filed for divorce. "Abroad", as he thought of the lands within the Kingdom of SCS in one of his best known poems (*Abroad*, Gradnik 1986), he managed to find a few friendly faces, although we can infer from the preserved correspondence that his cousin Maria from Trieste maintained her role of confidante.¹⁵ He turned to her in his darkest moments; in sickness and times of distress; even trusting her with his son's care during the summers, as the boy spent most of his life in boarding schools after his parents' divorce.

Besides being supportive in his personal life, Maria Samer was also a great help in providing the books he needed for his translations. It was during WWI that Gradnik had already begun translating literary works from Europe and Asia into Slovene. This was part of his programme, through which he was trying to prove that the most complex masterpieces could be translated in the Slovene language (Boršnik 1954).

Many a times during his stay in the Kingdom of SCS he asked Maria to search for certain books or dictionaries in Triestine bookshops and send them

¹⁴ The Gorizia region came under Italian rule after WWI. This area saw intentional and compulsory Italianisation. This is the supposed reason Gradnik left for the Kingdom of SCS. For more on Gradnik's life, see Boršnik 1954. For more on the history of Slovenes in Italy, see: Kacin Wohinz 2000. The Gorizia region came under Italian rule after WWI. This area saw intentional and compulsory Italianisation. This is the supposed reason Gradnik left for the Kingdom of SCS. For more on Gradnik's life, see Boršnik 1954. For more on the history of Slovenes in Italy, see: Kacin Wohinz 2000.

¹⁵ The letters are part of Gradnik's collection that is in the possession of Gradnik's relatives.

to him at his foreign address. On the other hand, it was Maria who occasionally recommended which authors he should read or translate. In this light, we must not overlook her contribution to Gradnik's best known and most notorious work, *Italijanska lirika* (1940), which presents exemplary poets of Italian literary history in chronological order. A closer look at his choices reveals several of Gradnik's contemporaries from the Triestine and Udine regions, of both Italian and Friulian backgrounds (e.g. Nella Doria Cambon, Dario de Tuoni, Enrico Fornis and Alberto de Brosenbach). They were most likely included due to personal acquaintances or his cousin Maria's recommendations.

The collaboration between Gradnik and Maria Samer therefore opens up a whole new chapter in regional comparatistics. Based on their correspondence we can conclude that there were literary connections between authors that had different national (ethnic or language) identities.

The cousins' Slovene-Friulian-Italian connection also bore fruits in the field of translation. Maria Samer, with her cousin's help, translated his poems into Italian. Some of the translations were even published in periodicals, issued in Trieste and Udine; others made it into central Italian newspapers in Rome and Turin (Toroš 2013).

III

Aside from the mentioned intercultural literary connections in the region that were based on familial ties or were motivated by Gradnik's work as a translator and editor of the anthology *Italijanska lirika*, we can also prove literary similarities in motifs and themes between Gradnik and his Italian and Friulian contemporaries.

Firstly, we will highlight the similarities between Gradnik and Friulian poets, a point already made by Roberto Dapit, a professor at the University of Udine. He compared the depictions of peasants in Gradnik's poetry and David Maria Turol's work of prose *Il mio vecchio Friuli* (Dapit 2008: 108). Dapit also pointed out the similar imagery of the sacred soil in Gradnik's poetry and that of Pier Paolo Pasolini.¹⁶ Moreover, for both poets the motif of Eros-Thanatos is characteristic. Last but not least, their mothers were Friulian, whom they immortalised in their poetry (Faggin 1987: 54; Gradnik 2002).

¹⁶ Pier Paolo Pasolini (1922–1975) founded the "Academy in the Friulian language" in Casarsa. He is also the author of a literary programme manifesto (1945) in which he sustained the idea of further development of the Friulian literature on the basis of the Romance literature tradition from the 13th century. A group of poets formed around him, writing poetry following his guidelines (Faggin 1987: 51–52).

Similar, previously overlooked parallels can be drawn between Gradnik and Celso Cescutti (Argeo) (1877–1966), a renowned Friulian poet. He was Gradnik's contemporary, who lived in a town called Flaibano in the province of Udine, approximately 50 kilometres from Gradnik's hometown of Medane. Cescutti wrote about rural life, his main focus was on his native land, depicted as a mother, caring for her children (Faggin 1972: 18). A very similar comparison of the native land with a mother is also characteristic of Gradnik's poems about Brda, considered to be some of his best work (Gradnik 1984).

The parallels we can observe in Gradnik's and Cescutti's poems are the consequences of living within the same cultural context. They were also looking for answers to existential questions at the same philosophical sources. Both reportedly had an interest in Schopenhauer (Faggin 1987: 42-45; Boršnik 1954).

We must give special consideration to Gradnik and three poets from Cormons, all a few years his senior and geographically the closest poets in the region. The distance between Gradnik's native Medana and Cormons is less than 10 kilometres. The poets' names are Ermeto Zardini (1868-1940), Alfonso Deperis (1870-1932) and Giuseppe Collodi (1878-1957) (Sgubin 1982).

Eraldo Sgubin, who studied the three mentioned poets, pointed out the common "cultural and psychological frame" (Sgubin 1982: 43) that we can observe in their poetry. Gradnik's poetry can also be placed in this context. A common formation most probably contributed to these similarities: Gradnik and Collodi both attended the theological seminary in Gorizia, while Deperis finished secondary school there.¹⁷

The first parallels we can highlight are the ones tied to a common cultural heritage. Through the comparison of Gradnik's poems about the Brda *colonate* and Ermeto Zardini's poems, the symbolic importance of *polenta* (a typical thick porridge-like dish made from cornmeal and water) comes to light. This poetic imagery reveals the characteristics of the local cuisine, traditionally tied with the lower rural classes in Brda and Friuli: The family is gathered around the table, waiting for dinner. Meanwhile, *polenta* is being prepared in the cauldron above the fire. One member of the family cuts up the polenta using a cotton string, dividing it between the rest. Such a scene is found in Zardini's poem *Zene contadine* (Farmer's dinner) (Sgubin 1982) and Gradnik's poem *Jesenski večer v Medani* (Autumn evening in Medana) (Gradnik: 2008).

The second common point is related to politics: On the threshold of WWI, all four poets had their visions for the Slovene or Friulian community's future in this region. Gradnik favoured the idea of a new state for Slovenes and other Slavic nations, while Zardini and Deperis saw the future for Friulians in the

¹⁷ For more on the school system in the Gorizia region, see Marušič 2013b.

context of Italy. The Austrian authorities even imprisoned Gradnik and Deperis due to their pre-war political activities (Sgubin 1982; Boršnik 1954). The socio-political situation at the time had an impact especially on the literary production of Gradnik and Zardini as they depicted the Austro-Hungarian Empire in a negative light, as a prison for Slovene or Friulian people (Sgubin 1982, Toroš 2013). Both Friulian poets, Deperis and Zardini, enthusiastically received the news that Gorizia would be adjoined to Italy, but were disappointed to discover that the new government did not favour the Friulian community, which suffered from poverty and Italianisation during the interwar period. Collodi's surname was even Italianised (previously Collorig; Sgubin 1982). Gradnik expressed a similar disappointment; firstly, because of Gorizia falling under Italy and secondly, that the newly founded Kingdom of SCS fell short of his idealised imagining he had dreamt up before WWI (Boršnik 1954). These feelings of disappointment emerged in two of Gradnik's sonnets entitled *Gorica I* and *Gorica II* (Gradnik 1986), published in 1922. Around the same time, in 1921, Deperis shared his own feelings on the subject in two poems entitled *I tims si cambiin* and *I miei pinsirs* (*Časi so se spremenili, Moje misli*) (Sgubin 1982: 90). A final comparison can be made between Gradnik and Italian irredentist poets, namely on the base of a similar literary model that they used to sustain the idea of national belonging. Regarding this, we have to mention that a collection of sonnets about Gorizia entitled *Friuli* written by Riccardo Pitteri (1853-1915) in 1913 was found in Gradnik's personal library (Toroš 2009).¹⁸ Pitteri was an Italian poet from Trieste, his mother possibly being Friulian judging by some of his poems in his *Friuli* collection, although no such evidence is found in his biography.¹⁹ In his poems, Pitteri usually supported the Italian irredentist movement. His political views can also be found in the aforementioned collection of poems *Friuli*. Following this ideology Pitteri depicted the Austro-Hungarian Empire in a negative way. On the other hand, he supported the idea of Friuli as part of Italy. It should not be overlooked that Pitteri's understanding of Friuli is in line with the Friuli from the time of the Patriarchate of Aquileia,²⁰ which means that it covered a larger territory, among that Brda, Gorizia and certain towns in the Soča valley (Tolmin) which were nationally mixed areas or a rather predominantly Slovene area at the start of the 20th century.²¹

¹⁸ The book was printed in Udine in 1914, published by the Gabinetto di lettura di Gorizia on 11th October 1913.

¹⁹ For more on Pitteri, see Picciòla 2006.

²⁰ For more on the history of Friuli, see Makuc 2011.

²¹ For more on the Austrian Littoral census in 1910, see Marušič 2012.

Pitteri used a specific literary model to sustain the idea of an “Italian Friuli”. In this regard he used personification which enabled him to build the image of the mother Friuli and her sons (the Friulians) while the Friulians are presented as part of the Roman and Italian cultural tradition. Pitteri also literalised the local history of Friuli as a means to fortify the idea of Rome as the forefather of Friuli and alluded to the previous Venetian rule in this region, e.g. the Venetian lion.

The mentioned literary model (personification; the use of local history) is also characteristic of Gradnik’s poems, especially in those written after WWI. Gradnik wrote many sonnets during this period, bringing to attention the presence of Slovenes in Brda, Gorizia and the Soča valley, who faced violent Italianisation in the fascist era.²² In this regard he created the image of the Mother – soil and her sons (the Slovenes in Brda), (which appeared throughout his literary production) that is similar to Pitteri’s image of the mother Friuli and has the same function – to solidify the idea of a national belonging.

Considering the noted parallels and the fact that the *Friuli* collection was a part of Gradnik’s private library, it is entirely possible that Gradnik was influenced by Pitteri in writing this cycle of sonnets. The latter looked to the Italian national poet Carducci when writing his own irredentist poetry. Gradnik also knew Carducci, even translating some of his poems. Despite all this, we can assume that Gradnik wrote the national defence-themed sonnets as a symbolic response to Pitteri’s poems. While Pitteri defended the idea of the Roman (Italian, Friulian) identity of “Friuli”, also encompassing Gradnik’s native Brda, Gradnik used the same literary model to firmly depict his birthplace (Brda) as Slovene.

We can therefore conclude that the sample study revealed literary connections between Gradnik and some Friulian and Italian poets. Certain parallels in motifs and themes used by the authors were consequences of their common living environment (rural region, the farmer’s existential link with the earth), and literary interactions (reading and translating literary works as well as accepting certain literary patterns), which were, among other things, dependent on the neighbouring culture’s linguistic competency and the nationalistic tensions within the region.

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²² For more about Slovenes living under Italy, see Kacin Wohinz 2000.

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