

experience could not be successfully conveyed, and the statements about the departure of the soul from the body were condemned. The confessions of the witches and benandanti were wilfully incorporated into the inquisitorial *schemata* with its contrary concepts of a real tangible sabbat and one of fantasy and imagination.

13

What we have noted thus far helps to explain the reason for the queries attempted by Fra Felice da Montefalco during the interrogation. It is not surprising either, that in the final session the notary observed that Gasparutto's wife cried without shedding tears, a fact considered obvious evidence of witchcraft and of ties to the devil;⁶⁷ and that Gasparutto's and Moduco's trial was routinely filed under the rubric '*Processus haeresis contra quosdam strigones*' ('heresy trial against certain witches').

When we turn, however, to the rites which, according to the benandanti, were practised at their nocturnal gatherings, it is clear that they bore no resemblance to the sabbat. They were rites that hardly need to be explained, so explicit and transparent is their significance: we are not dealing with hardened superstitions mechanically repeated, but with ceremonies that were intensely and emotionally experienced.⁶⁸ The benandanti, armed with bundles of fennel who fought witches and warlocks armed with stalks of sorghum, did so with the consciousness that they were locked in a struggle 'out of love for the crops', to assure their community abundant harvests, a plente of food, of small grains, and of the vineyards, in fact, 'all the fruits of the earth'. It was an agricultural rite which survived with extraordinary vitality almost to the end of the sixteenth century in the marginal area of the Friuli, left relatively untouched by the main routes of communication.⁶⁴ It is hard to say when it originated, but even today, it is possible to discern the complexity of the cult which expressed itself through this rite.

The benandanti went forth on Thursday nights in the Ember seasons: festivities which had survived from an ancient agricultural cycle and which were eventually incorporated in the Christian calendar,⁶⁵ that symbolized the changes of the seasons, the perilous passage from the old to the new time of year, with its promise of planting, harvest, reaping and autumn vintage.⁶⁶ It was during these occasions,

on which the prosperity of the community depended, that the benandanti went forth to protect the produce of the earth from witches and warlocks, and from those forces that they thought secretly threatened the fertility of the fields: 'And if we are the victors, that year there is abundance, but if we lose there is famine.'

To be sure, the benandanti were not alone in fulfilling this propitiatory function. The church itself laboured to protect the harvests and ward off those all too frequent and ruinous famines by means of Rogations, processions around the fields, usually during the three days preceding the Ascension: and for a long time the tradition was preserved of forecasting harvests from each of these days – the first for vegetables and grapes, the second for wheat, and the third for hay.⁶⁷ And, in this period, the disasters caused by foul weather were frequently attributed, especially in the Friuli, to punishment inflicted by God for past sins: on 9 April 1596 Clement VIII absolved the district of Polcenico from an excommunication which it feared it had incurred as evidenced by the barrenness of the crops; he did the same on 26 March 1598 with the district of San Daniele, whose harvests had been repeatedly struck by hail.⁶⁸ But if the processions of the Rogation Days and papal absolutions were not considered sufficient, here, in tacit competition, emerged the rites of appeasement of the benandanti. It certainly was not accidental that the benandanti's weapon in their battles to protect the fertility of the fields was, as Gasparutto described it, the wayfaring tree or viburnum, 'that rod which we carry behind the crosses in the Rogation processions.' This mixture of the sacred and the diabolical led the inquisitor to forbid Gasparutto (and the prohibition was intended to include his domestics) from bearing these rods in the Rogation processions, and in fact to order them kept at home.⁶⁹

Obviously, we are not suggesting by this that Friulian peasants at the end of the sixteenth century attempted to safeguard their crops and their harvests exclusively by means of religious processions or superstitious practices, but the careful performance of work in the fields could and in fact did easily co-exist with faith in the benefits of ecclesiastical rituals or even in nocturnal battles fought victoriously by the benandanti. In these very years and among these same peasants there is evidence of attitudes that were deeply and fiercely naturalistic; such as a magnificent statement by Niccolò Pellizzaro, a peasant of Villa in Carnia, whom the Inquisition condemned in 1595 for having maintained 'that the benedictions which priests pronounce over fields, and the holy water which they sprinkle over them the day of Epiphany, in no way help the vines and trees to bear fruit; only dung and the industry of man do that.'⁷⁰ But even more than a 'humanistic'

exaltation of man's power over nature, we may see here the echo of a religious polemic; Pellizzaro, in fact, was suspected of Lutheranism, and by his statement he may have been conveying his scorn for priests and Catholic ceremonies.

So the benandanti with fennel stalks battled witches armed with stalks of sorghum. It is not clear why sorghum was the weapon of the witches – unless it could be identified with the broom, their traditional symbol (the so-called 'broom sorghum', one of the most common varieties of sorghum, is a type of millet). It is a compelling theory, especially in light of what we will say about the nocturnal gatherings of the witches and benandanti as the antecedents of the diabolical sabbat – but obviously this is a theory which should be advanced with caution. In any case, for the benandanti the sorghum seemed to symbolize the evil power of the witches. The parish priest of Brazzano, Bartolomeo Sgarbarza, reported having had this conversation with Gasparutto: 'He begged me not to sow sorghum in my field, and whenever he finds any growing he pulls it up, and he curses whoever plants it; and when I said that I wanted to sow it, he began to swear.⁷³ To fennel, instead, whose healing qualities were recognized in popular medicine, was attributed the power of keeping witches away: Moduco affirmed that the benandanti ate garlic and fennel 'because they are a defence against witches'.⁷²

It may be supposed that this combat re-enacted, and to a certain extent rationalized, an older fertility rite in which two groups of youths,⁷³ respectively impersonating demons favourable to fertility and the maleficent ones of destruction, symbolically flayed their loins with stalks of fennel and sorghum to stimulate their own reproductive capacity, and by analogy, the fertility of the fields of the community.⁷⁴ Gradually the rite may have come to be represented as an actual combat, and from the uncertain outcome of the struggle between the two opposed bands would magically depend the fertility of the land and the fate of the harvests.⁷⁵ At a later stage these rites would cease to be practised openly and would exist precariously, between the dream-like and the hallucinatory, in any case on a purely internal emotional plane – and yet without quite sliding into mere individual fantasizing.

But these are pure conjectures that can be confirmed only on the basis of solid evidence, unavailable at present, about preceding phases of the cult. There is absolutely nothing in the statements of the benandanti that can be interpreted as a relic of this hypothetical original rite. More plausible perhaps is the analogy between the battles of benandanti against witches and ritual contests between

Winter and Summer (or Winter and Spring) which used to be acted out, and still are today, in some areas of north-central Europe.⁷⁶ Consider, for example, the plant parts with which both contestants are draped: Winter with pine branches or other plants of the season, Summer with ears of grain, flowers, and so forth. Is there something analogous, even though the two plants flourish in the same season, in the sorghum and the fennel of which the benandanti spoke? It should be noted, in particular, that the contest between Winter and Summer is linked, in some areas, to a presumably older rite, that of the expulsion of Death, or of the Witch.⁷⁷ In this ceremony, undoubtedly intended to procure abundant harvests, an effigy of Death, or of the Witch, is beaten with a stick, stoned, and finally solemnly driven from the village. Is there an analogy between this symbolical removal of the wintry season, and the blows inflicted on the witches by the benandanti? Possibly; but along with these similarities there are also notable differences. First of all, the ritual struggle between Winter and Summer was celebrated everywhere once a year, whereas the benandanti claimed that they fought the witches on four occasions each year (the Ember seasons); secondly, and this is even more important, the content of the two rites appears to be totally dissimilar. In the contests between Winter and Summer a peaceful alternation of the seasons is symbolized, and the victory of Summer is inevitable;⁷⁸ on the contrary, the battles between benandanti and witches were a clash, with an uncertain outcome, between abundance and famine, a real battle conducted according to a precise ritual. Here the contrast between old and new seasons was experienced dramatically, virtually a contest to decide the actual physical survival of the community.⁷⁹

In the confessions of these benandanti, religious elements of very different origin were superimposed on this agrarian rite, seemingly self-sufficient in its internal motivations. Moduco and Gasparutto both asserted that they could not discuss the nocturnal conventicles in which they participated because by doing so they would be flouting the will of God; and Moduco clarified this point: 'We go forth in the service of Christ and the witches in the service of the devil.' The company of the benandanti was a divine entity, virtually a peasant army of the faith established by God ('we believe that it is given by God,

because we fight for the faith of Christ'): at its head, according to Gasparutto, was an angel of God; within the group, Moduco related, God and the saints were piously invoked, and its members were certain to go to paradise after death.

The contrast between fighting 'for love of the crops' and fighting 'for the faith of Christ' is indeed glaring. To be sure, in this popular religiosity, so composite, interlaced with the most varied elements, such syncretism is not surprising. But we should ask ourselves the reason for this Christianization of agrarian rites performed by the benandanti - which undoubtedly was 'spontaneous' in this period and widespread throughout the Friuli. Perhaps it was a method adopted in a distant past to shield from the eyes of the church a rite that was not quite orthodox (just as the groups of young people celebrating ancient fertility rites placed themselves under the protection of a patron saint),⁸⁰ or it may be that the ancient agrarian rite gradually received a Christian motif from those who ingenuously joined the good cause of the fertility of the fields with the holy cause of the faith of Christ. Finally, we may even suppose that, in the face of the progressive assimilation (to be discussed below) of diabolical elements on the part of their enemies, the witches, the benandanti instinctively and correspondingly identified their cause with that of the faith.

There may be some truth in each of these assumptions. At any rate, it is clear that this attempt at Christianization did not (and could not) succeed, and indeed was not favourably received by the Inquisition. It faded away within a few decades. Two primary elements coexisted within the medley of beliefs of which the benandanti were the bearers: an agrarian cult (probably the more ancient of the two) and a Christian cult, and in addition a number of other elements capable of being assimilated by witchcraft. When inquisitors failed to understand the first and decisively rejected the second, this composite of myths and beliefs, for lack of other outlets, inevitably had to debouch in the last direction.

15

Thus far we have spoken principally of the benandanti. The time has come to talk about their adversaries: the witches and warlocks. They appear from the confessions of Gasparutto and Moduco first of all by

way of contrast - a contrast that here too is physical and tangible - with the benandanti: 'Our captain was somewhat pale of face, and the other one swarthy,' our standard bearer carries a banner of white silk, gilded, with a lion . . . the banner of the witches is of red silk with four black devils, gilded.⁸¹ But what did witches and warlocks do in their conventicles? Besides fighting with the benandanti, 'they dance and leap about,' Gasparutto stated. There is no trace, as we have already noted, of the elements that would later impress a diabolical stigma on the traditional sabbat: presence of the devil, profanation of the sacraments and apostasy from the faith. To be sure, certain details were there pointing to a tendency in this direction - the devils depicted on the banner of the witches and Moduco's statement: 'We go forth in the service of Christ and the witches in the service of the devil.' But these are isolated matters, and may have been appropriated at a later date. These witches were characterized not in terms of crimes theologically defined, but rather in terms of the destruction they brought to the harvests and famine, and the sorcery they worked on children. But even in this second instance they had to overcome the strenuous opposition of the benandanti. The son of the miller Pietro Rotaro 'had been possessed by witches, but . . . at the time of the witchery the vagabonds were about and they snatched him from the witches' hands.' In fact, the benandanti could recognize immediately the victim of an act of witchcraft: 'It can be ascertained,' said Gasparutto, 'because they do not leave any flesh on the body, . . . and they remain dried up and withered, nothing but skin and bones.' If the benandanti arrived in time they could attempt to save the bewitched child: it sufficed to weigh him three successive Thursdays, and 'while the child is weighed on the scale, the captain of the benandanti uses the scale to torment the witch that has caused the injury, even to the point of killing him; . . . when the child gains in weight . . . the witch withers and dies, and if the child withers, it is the witch that lives.'⁸²

The fact that this trial is the first Friulian evidence of witches' conventicles might be considered pure chance. But this coincidence becomes remarkable and probably no longer casual when we notice that it is not until 1634 (and after more than 850 trials and denunciations to the Holy Office of Aquileia and Concordia) before we encounter a full description of the traditional diabolical sabbat. There are many accounts before this time of nocturnal conventicles of witches and warlocks, but benandanti were always present in them, and the rites were always somewhat unusual, much like those described by Gasparutto and Moduco. It is a relationship that recurs too often and over too long a period to be attributed to chance.

Something must have taken place in the Friuli akin to what has been documented for another part of the peninsula, the area around Modena.⁸⁵ the gradual but continuous transformation of ancient popular beliefs, which, under the unconscious pressure from inquisitors, finally crystallized in the pre-existing mould of the diabolical sabbat. In Modena, the earliest references to nocturnal meetings of witches in fact do not concern the adoration of the devil, but the cult, still innocuously magical, of a mysterious female divinity, Diana, about which we have knowledge in northern Italy at least from the end of the fourteenth century.⁸⁴ When it was said of a witch (who was mentioned in a trial in 1498, although she herself was not tried) that she used to go 'in *striacium*', that is to say, to the sabbat, what is described is merely a peaceful nocturnal gathering of individuals assembled together until dawn to eat 'the turnups of a field or garden'.⁸⁵ It is not until 1532 that one encounters descriptions of the desecration of the cross and of the host, intercourse with devils, and so forth. And it should be noted that in this later context the person of Diana, although transformed, was still present.⁸⁶

We see that the acceptance of the diabolical sabbat in the Modenese area long preceded – by a century in fact – a similar development in the Friuli. This too reflects what we have called 'the marginal quality' of the Friuli, as well as, perhaps, the greater complexity and vitality of the benandanti's beliefs compared to the cult of Diana (a cult from which these beliefs were an offshoot). In both cases, however, it seems fair to assert that the belief in the diabolical sabbat is something that was initially foreign to the popular mind. Indeed, even if this observation could be applied to many other localities, the problem of the origins of the diabolical sabbat would still persist.⁸⁷

16

The trial of Gasparutto and Moduco was the first in a long series involving the benandanti (both men and women) who declared that they fought at night with witches and warlocks to secure the fertility of the fields and the abundance of the harvests. This belief (we have hinted at its presumably ritual origins) does not appear to the best of our knowledge, in any of the countless trials for witchcraft or superstitious practices held outside the Friuli. The sole and extraordinary exception is furnished by the trial of a Livonian werewolf which took

place at Jürgensburg in 1692 – more than a century after the trial of Gasparutto and Moduco, and at the other extremity of Europe.⁸⁸

The accused, a certain Thiess, an old man in his eighties, freely confessed to his judges that he was a werewolf (*waltrwölff*). But his account seriously differs from the concept of lycanthropy which was widespread in northern Germany and the Baltic countries. Thiess related that he once had his nose broken by a peasant of Lemburg named Skeistan, who at that time was already dead. Skeistan was a witch, and with his companions had carried seed grain into hell to keep the crops from growing. With other werewolves Thiess had also gone down into hell and had fought with Skeistan. The latter, armed with a broom handle (again, the traditional symbol of witches) wrapped in the tail of a horse had struck the old man on the nose. This was not a casual encounter. Three times each year on the nights of St Lucia before Christmas, of Pentecost, and of St John, the werewolves proceeded on foot, in the form of wolves, to a place located 'beyond the sea': hell. There they battled the devil and witches, striking them with long iron rods, and pursuing them like dogs. Werewolves, Thiess exclaimed, 'cannot tolerate the devil'. The judges, undoubtedly astonished, asked for elucidation. If werewolves could not abide the devil, why did they change themselves into wolves and go down into hell? Because, old Thiess explained, by doing so they could bring back up to earth what had been stolen by the witches – livestock, grains, and the other fruits of the earth. If they failed to do so, precisely what had occurred the previous year would be repeated: the werewolves had delayed their descent into hell, found the gates barred and thus failed to bring back the grains and buds carried off by the witches. For this reason last year's harvest had been very bad. But this year, instead, things had been different, and, thanks to the werewolves, the harvest of barley and rye, as well as a rich catch of fish, were assured.

At this point the judges asked where the werewolves went after death. Thiess replied that they were buried like other people, but that their souls went to heaven; as for the souls of witches, the devil claimed them for himself. The judges were visibly shaken. How was it possible, they asked, for the souls of werewolves to ascend to God if it was not God they served but the devil? The old man emphatically rejected this notion: the werewolves were anything but servants of the devil. The devil was their enemy to the point that they, just like dogs – because werewolves were indeed the hounds of God – pursued him, tracked him down, and scourged him with whips of iron. They did all this for the sake of mankind: without their good work the devil would carry off the fruits of the earth and everyone would be deprived as a

consequence. The Livonian werewolves were not alone in their fight with the devil over the harvests: German werewolves did so as well, although they did not belong to the Livonian company and they journeyed to their own particular hell; and the same also was true of Russian werewolves who that year and the one before had won prosperous and abundant harvests for their land. As soon as the werewolves managed to snatch away from the devil the seed grain he had stolen, they cast it up into the air so that it might fall back down to earth and be spread over the fields of rich and poor alike.

At this juncture, as might have been foreseen, the judges tried to get Thiess to confess that he had entered into a compact with the devil. The old man reiterated, in vain, with monotonous obstinacy that he and his companions were 'the hounds of God' and the enemies of the devil, that they protected men from dangers and guaranteed the prosperity of harvests. Then the parish priest was summoned, who scolded him and called on him to abandon the errors and diabolical lies with which he had tried to cover up his sins. But this too was useless. In a burst of anger Thiess shouted at the priest that he was tired of hearing all this talk about his evil doings: his actions were better than the priest's, and moreover he, Thiess, would neither be the first nor the last to commit them. The old man remained steadfast in his convictions and refused to repent; on 10 October 1692 he was condemned to ten lashes for his superstitious beliefs and acts of idolatry.

This was not a case, clearly, of more or less ill-defined similarities, or of the repetition of metahistorical religious archetypes.⁸⁰ The beliefs of the old werewolf Thiess substantially resemble those which emerged at the trial of the two Friulian benandanti: battles waged by means of sticks and blows, enacted on certain nights to secure the fertility of fields, minutely and concretely described. Even details such as the broom handles with which the Livonian witches were armed recalls the stalks of sorghum or millet used by the witches of the Friuli. In the Friuli the struggle was primarily over the vineyards, in Livonia over barley and rye, but the struggle for fertility was understood as a work that was not merely tolerated but was even protected by God, who actually guaranteed entrance into paradise for the souls of the participants. There is not much doubt about any of this. Obviously, what we have here is a single agrarian cult, which, to judge from these remnants surviving in places as distant from one another as were Livonia and the Friuli, must have been diffused in an earlier period over a much vaster area, perhaps the whole of central Europe. On the other hand, these survivals may be explained either by the peripheral positions of the Friuli and Livonia with respect to the centre of diffu-

sion of these beliefs, or by the influence, in both cases, of Slavic myths and traditions. The fact that in Germanic areas, as we shall see, there were faint traces of the myth of nocturnal combats waged over fertility, might lead us to lean towards the second possibility. Only intensive research may be able to resolve this problem.

But it is not just the beliefs of old Thiess that remind us of the Friulian benandanti. The reaction of the Jürgensburg judges resembles, even in particulars, that of the Udine inquisitors: both rejected, with mingled shock and indignation, the paradoxical boasts of the benandanti to be the champions of 'Christ's faith', and of the werewolves to be 'the hounds of God'. In both cases the judges tried to identify the benandanti and the werewolves with the witches who were followers and worshippers of the devil. There is a difference to be noted, however. Gasparutto and Moduco, to the best of our knowledge, were the first benandanti tried by the Holy Office; the very name 'benandanti' was unknown to the inquisitors. Only gradually would the benandanti assume the traits of diabolical witches. In that late seventeenth-century Livonian trial we are witnessing the opposite phenomenon. The figure and negative attributes of werewolves, the ferocious scourge of flocks and herds, were well known to the judges of Jürgensburg. But a totally different picture was painted by old Thiess: werewolves were defenders of the harvest and of livestock against the constant threat from the enemies of the prosperity of mankind and of the fertility of the land – the devil and the witches. This revival of presumably ancient beliefs can probably be explained by the fact that at the end of the seventeenth century Livonian judges had ceased to use judicial torture or even rely on leading questions in the interrogation of defendants.⁸⁰ That the favourable image of werewolves was much older than the end of the seventeenth century is shown first of all by Thiess's venerable age: presumably he must have acquired these beliefs in his distant youth, which brings us to the early years of the century. But there is an even more compelling bit of evidence. In mid-sixteenth century Caspar Peucer, during a digression on werewolves and their extraordinary exploits, inserted into his *Commentarius de praecipuis generibus divinationum* an anecdote about a young man of Riga who had suddenly fallen prostrate to the ground during a banquet. One of the onlookers had immediately recognized him as a werewolf. The next day the youth related that he had fought a witch who had been flying about in the guise of a red-hot butterfly. Werewolves, in fact, Peucer commented, boasted that they kept witches away.⁸¹ This was an ancient belief, then. But, just as with the benandanti in the Friuli, under pressure from the judges, the original

positive qualities of the werewolves began gradually to fade away and become corrupted into the execrable image of the man-wolf, ravager of livestock.

In any case, on the basis of this surprising Livonian counterpart, it seems appropriate to suggest that there is a real, not an analogical, connection between *benandanti* and shamans. Such phenomena as trances, journeys into the beyond astride animals or in the form of animals (wolves or, as in the Friuli, butterflies and mice) to recover seed grain or to assure the fertility of the land, and as we will note shortly, participation in processions for the dead (which procured prophetic and visionary powers for the *benandanti*) form a coherent pattern which immediately evokes the rites of the shamans. But to trace the threads which tied these beliefs to the Baltic or Slavic world obviously falls outside the scope of this particular investigation. So let us return to the Friuli.

II THE PROCESSIONS OF THE DEAD

1

Towards the end of the year 1581 the inquisitor general of Aquileia and Concordia, Fra Felice da Montefalco, received a denunciation against a woman of Udine, the widow of Domenico Artichi, called Anna la Rossa, who claimed that she could see the dead and converse with them. The accusation was wholly confirmed during the interrogation of the witnesses. It seems that Anna had gone to visit a woman of Gemona, Lucia Peltrara, who was confined in a hospital, and told her that at the sanctuary of Santa Maria della Bella she had 'seen' a deceased daughter of Lucia's wrapped in a sheet and 'in a dishevelled state'. The dead girl had beseeched her to convey her last wishes to her mother: namely, that she should give a shirt to a certain Paola, and go on pilgrimages to some nearby sanctuaries. At first Lucia hesitated 'between yes and no'; later, torn by remorse, spurred on by the exhortations of her friends ('at least give it [the shirt] to her, which will be for the love of God') and at Anna's urging, she obeyed the wishes of her departed daughter, and thus finally put her own mind at rest.¹ Another witness, Aurelia of Gemona, confirmed Anna's extraordinary powers. The latter, for example, had been able to describe, without actually having been present, the details of a squabble occurring the night before between two brothers. Anna said that she had her information from the deceased mother of the two rivals who had been at the altercation and had tried, though invisible, to restore peace. Generally, it was common knowledge that Anna la Rossa could see the dead, and she herself made no secret of it.²

On 1 January 1582, it was Anna's turn to be interrogated by the Holy Office. At first she evaded the inquisitor's questions; eventually she admitted that 'many people' asked her whether she had seen their departed loved ones, but she drove them away angrily. It was a weak

sort of defence: put on the spot 'she did not know what to say.' She was sent home, and the interrogation resumed the following day. Her skirmishing was of short duration. She quickly confessed that she had told Lucia Peltrara about the apparition of her daughter for a reward of five *soldi*: 'To support my husband and my children,' she gave as her excuse. For a similar reason, to obtain 'a few mouthfuls of bread', she had come up with the story of the fight between the two brothers.

The inquisitor was not satisfied, however, and wanted to get to the bottom of the matter: 'Have you been able to speak about what happens at night in the houses of others? How did you come to know all this? What sort of an art is it?' Anna 'did not know what to say.' This silence, Fra Felice warned her, made her gravely suspect of witchcraft. Anna burst into tears and 'cried exceedingly': 'No one will ever be able to say that I make medicines and that I am a witch.' And yet, the inquisitor reminded her, she had told someone 'that his mother was of good cheer, visited Santa Maria della Bella and had been holding Terentia by the hand'; and to another she had said that 'Master Battista goes around with his head down, worried-looking, saying nothing.' How had she come by these ideas and where had she seen these dead people? 'They just came into my head,' Anna replied. And, seeing that she was not going to confess, she was allowed to go, on condition that she remain at the disposal of the Holy Office.³

Fra Felice continued to investigate the case. On 7 March he summoned Lucia Peltrara to testify again. She supplied new particulars about Anna's powers, adding that 'she . . . goes about saying that the rest of us cannot see the dead, but she can, because she was born under that sign; and she also says that, if anyone wants to see their deceased father or mother, she can arrange it, but she worries that this might provoke some evil.'⁴

The facts that have emerged thus far are sufficiently clear. Anna la Rossa was trying, it would appear, to alleviate her own and her family's poverty by exploiting an extremely common but also insatiable desire, the longing to know something about the fate of a departed loved one (and linked with the hope of life beyond the tomb), mingled inextricably with the instinctive inability to think of a dead human being without restoring to it the life it no longer possessed. But this desire is tinged with remorse: remorse for not having lived up to what those beings had expected from us in life, here both alleviated and accentuated by the thought that there might be a way to do something for them, to directly better their otherworldly lot. This was undoubtedly the reason why Lucia Peltrara acceded to the last requests communicated to her by Anna: perhaps the shirt given in charity and

the pilgrimages to the sanctuaries would shorten her daughter's suffering. The man who had come to Anna to hear about his dead mother must have rejoiced to learn that she 'was cheerful'; on the other hand, the parents of Master Battista who went about in the other world 'with his head down, worried-looking, saying nothing' must have been saddened. From this game of contrasting emotions Anna la Rossa squeezed out sometimes five *soldi*, sometimes a mouthful of bread. This was a seemingly direct, uncomplicated sort of behaviour. And yet it becomes charged with unforeseen implications in light of some later evidence.

Aurelia of Gernona, who was interrogated again on 7 March, declared that Anna 'said she knew many things which the dead themselves had told her, but that if she should tell some of these things, they would beat her fiercely with those stalks of sorghum which commonly grow in the fields.' And Anna herself added that 'on Fridays and Saturdays beds had to be made early, because on those days the dead would come in exhausted and throw themselves on the beds in their own houses.'⁵ There is more: the denunciation which had provoked the investigation of Anna concluded with the statement that:⁶

this woman used to be called by her husband many times at night while he was alive, and even though he elbowed her vigorously, it was as if she was dead, because she would say that the spirit had set out on its journey and thus the body remained as if dead; and when the spirit returned, she told her husband that when he found her in that state he should not become so infuriated, because she was in great pain and torment. And so her husband desisted and left her in peace.

A connection with the accounts of the benandanti appears from these facts, which must remain unexplained for the time being. It was not stated that Anna la Rossa was a benandante,⁷ in fact the word was not even mentioned. But the lethargies into which she periodically fell, accompanied by the withdrawal of the spirit from the body which remained as if dead, recalls the tales of the benandanti (remember the testimony given by Gasparutto's wife) as well as those of the witches. Just like Anna, Polissena of San Macario, the Lucchese witch who was a victim of sudden deep fainting spells, said to her mother-in-law who had tried to revive her: 'When I am in the condition I was in last night, do not bother me, because you do me more harm than good.'⁸ Moreover, Anna, going with her spirit to visit the dead, claimed to learn from them things she dared not repeat lest she be beaten with the stalks of sorghum which grew in the fields – the same weapons used by witches to punish benandanti who had not kept silent about the nocturnal gatherings. Finally, just like the witches described by the

benandanti, the dead entered houses on given days to be restored. These are scattered elements which still do not constitute a coherent pattern: nevertheless, that some connection existed between the two seems unquestionable.

Could a presentiment of this connection also have struck the inquisitor entrusted with bringing the case of Anna la Rossa to a conclusion - the same Fra Felice da Montefalco who not long before had condemned the two benandanti to six months in prison? We cannot be certain. After hearing the new evidence he ordered, threatening excommunication *latae sententiae* in case of disobedience, that Anna should present herself within three days before the tribunal of the Holy Office. She was to testify about facts which, if verified, would render her suspect in matters of the faith. But when the time came, Anna could not be found: it seems that she had gone to Spilimbergo. Her husband and daughter came forward to ask that the date set for her appearance be postponed since Anna was far away and could not be reached on such short notice. The request was granted and the date moved back a month. On 30 March 1582 Anna voluntarily placed herself at the inquisitor's disposal. The latter discharged her, enjoining her to reappear at the end of Easter week.⁸ But there is no trace that she did so. The trial was left unfinished and the new inquisitor, Fra Evangelista Sforza, discerned this deficiency in the course of sorting the papers inherited from his predecessor. A note inserted in the trial records by an unknown hand briefly summed up the results of the interrogations and concluded: 'Perhaps it would be better to pursue the trial, at least for the sake of her reputation.'⁹ Was this veiled criticism of the way in which Anna's inquest had been conducted? It does indeed seem to suggest the intention of continuing the case and bringing it to a conclusion. But evidently it was not of such great concern even to the new inquisitor. On 1 February 1585 (three years later), Paolo Bisanzio, vicar general of the patriarch of Aquileia, Fra Evangelista Sforza, inquisitor general of Aquileia and Concordia, Pietro Gritti, provincial governor for the *Patria* of the Friuli, and other officials of lesser account met at Udine in the Church of San Giovanni a Platea. On this occasion the tribunal of the Holy Office, 'since it finally intended to come to a resolution . . . of the present trial,' and because the trial itself was 'of little . . . moment', ordered the inquisitor to wind it up personally, as soon as he had a chance to go to Gemona on other business.¹¹ In any case this conclusion never took place.

2

The connection between the benandanti and those who, like Anna la Rossa, claimed to see the dead emerges even more clearly in a trial begun in 1582 of the wife of a tailor, Aquilina, residing at Udine in *vico Grazzani*.¹² In the city as well as in all the neighbouring villages it was said about her that 'she makes a profession of seeing,' and cured diseases of every kind with spells and superstitious remedies. A 'great multitude of people' came to her, and there were rumours that she earned (since 'she wants to be paid and well paid at that . . . and can tell at a glance those who are able or unable to pay') perhaps a hundred, perhaps even more than two hundred ducats a year. There were those who claimed she was a witch, but 'if they call her witch she chases them away and becomes very angry because she wants them to call her Donna Aquilina.'¹³ The depositions were numerous and in agreement: but it turned out to be impossible to question Aquilina. As soon as she learned of the suspicions piling up against her she fled, and found refuge, it seems, at Latisana. This inquest too broke off. Only after a year did the Holy Office decide to resume it. At that time it became known that among the sick who had come to Aquilina there had been a woman of Pasiano 'who used to say that she could see the dead.' When confronted, Aquilina replied that 'she must have been born with the caul.' This is a new link in the chain to add to those mentioned earlier.

On 26 August, 1583, Fra Felice da Montefalco went to the home of Aquilina, who claimed to be ill, with the intention of interrogating her. But the woman 'because of the great fear and fright given her by so many horsemen,' that is, by the emissaries of the Holy Office, slipped away and hid in the house of a neighbour. The inquisitor came upon her there, still in a state of terror. When he asked her why she had fled and thereby disobeyed the orders of the Holy Office, she replied: 'Because I am afraid.' 'Afraid of what?' 'Afraid,' she replied. On 27 October, after a series of delays sought and obtained by her husband, the moment of the interrogation finally came. Aquilina had recovered her composure, and responded in a defiant manner to the inquisitor's threat of excommunication: 'Even the excommunicated eat,' she said, 'there will be a pardon, and I will have myself absolved so that I won't die excommunicated.'¹⁴ She declared that she was not able to recognize children who had been bewitched, and added impetuously: 'Nor do I know what is meant by witches . . . I have even been asked where I store the ointment which I use to grease my feet when I run up the chimney; but what do I know about running up chimneys?' Similarly,

she denied being acquainted with any of the benandanti: she knew only that persons born with the caul were benandanti. And, in reply to a question from Fra Felice, she related that one day a woman of Pasiano had come to her in tears and told her 'that she could see the dead but she did not want to see them.' Aquilina said to her 'that it would satisfy her curiosity if she could see a daughter of her own who was dead, and who was dressed in such and such a way.' But then she stated that she no longer believed that the dead went wandering about, 'because,' she said ingenuously, 'I had a husband and a daughter who loved me very much, and if they could go about, they surely would have come to visit me.'¹⁵

The aftermath of Aquilina's trial - the prohibition against using cures based on spells and superstitions, the denunciations which followed without interruption until 1591 despite penances which had been imposed two years earlier by a new inquisitor - does not concern us here except as further confirmation of the relative lack of interest (evidenced by the slackness in the judicial process, the interruptions, the postponements) on the part of inquisitors in these widespread superstitions and beliefs, considered harmless in comparison with contemporary heretical infiltrations throughout the Friuli.

3

In that same year, 1582, Fra Felice da Montefalco investigated a woman of Cividale, the widow of a certain Andrea of Orsaria, named Caterina la Guercia, accused of practising 'various maleficent arts'.¹⁶ When she was interrogated on 14 September, she declared that her occupation was 'to sew and to weave'; but she knew how to cure children's sicknesses by uttering certain words, which she did not consider superstitious. This prompted Fra Felice to ask her, abruptly, whether she was a benandante. Caterina denied it: 'No sir, not I, I am not one of the benandanti, but my deceased husband was; he used to go in procession with the dead.'

Here then was explicit confirmation of a link which had been suggested hypothetically: whoever could see the dead, went with them that is, was a benandante. Caterina la Guercia's husband even used to fall into a sort of swoon: 'I would remove his shoes, and he lay on the bed . . . still, and he was not to be touched until he returned from the procession, because his spirit solemnly went out, and even

though I might call him, he would not respond.' And she added: 'There were many people who wanted him to show them their dead, but he never would, saying that later the dead would have beaten him, and I knew that there were some among them who even wanted to give him bushels of grain.' But she was not able to say who accompanied her husband on these processions, and she herself did not go: 'Because I did not possess that grace; God did not give it to me as it was given to him.'¹⁷

In the case of Anna la Rossa, one could suppose, at least initially, that the alleged ability to see the dead was no more than a device to earn a little money. Gradually, instead, this 'power' took the form of a widespread belief (and not just of an individual stratagem), and for those who claimed to possess it, namely the benandanti, it became a destiny. It was a thing that weighed heavily on life, marking it indelibly - sometimes accepted as a grace from God, sometimes as a 'fate' from which they longed to flee, but could not, as with the unknown woman of Pasiano. At times, even witches asserted that they proceeded to the sabbat impelled by an irresistible interior force. The Lucchese witch, Margherita of San Rocco, replied to a judge who had asked her 'what reward they received, or hoped to receive from such servitude': 'I did not expect to get anything, and since I was born with that disgrace I used to go [to the sabbat] and experience certain pleasures.'¹⁸ But it was principally 'the going out' to fight the witches that became the inevitable necessity for Gasparutto and Moduco. When they reached the predetermined age they were called 'by means of a drum in the same way that soldiers are called, and . . . they are obliged to respond.' And for them too the fact of being summoned was a sign from God: 'I cannot teach this art to anyone,' declared Gasparutto, 'when our Lord God has chosen not to teach it Himself.'¹⁹ This was an additional link between the benandanti who went out at night 'in spirit' to observe the dead, and the benandanti who went out 'in spirit' to contend with the witches over the harvests. We are faced here with two branches - presumably not independent of one another, as the points of contact between them suggest - of a single belief with roots stretching far back into time.