

## WHEN FLEAS WORE HORSESHOES

*L*et us imagine that somebody who has never read or listened to a tale asked us what a tale is. A lot of bizarre clues will cross our mind: a trick meant to pacify our toddlers, a genial lie, a coherent fantasy, a fruit of the cognitive faculty named imagination, the frivolous object of sciences such as anthropology, ethnology or folklore, the painstaking frenzies of dawdlers sitting around a bonfire or at a remote outpost in the desert, the election platform of a new cosmos, a proto-Hollywood.

Our man would be at a loss, no doubt. And the same may be said about ourselves, for what we disentangle from our attempted answers, whatever the thing, animal or event named tale, is a certain distance between us and it; it is something on the outside, something we read, elaborate, or look upon with a sovereign eye: "When man could neither read nor write, he would still twaddle; besides, although man traded in green horses\*, he would fit only fleas with horseshoes\*\*, not to mention that a doubting Thomas would be branded as a liar; but they still managed to live happily ever after. Only now we know that their time was to us what apes are to man, what alchemy is to chemistry, and astrology to astronomy."

Moreover, at every step you run into the cop-ethnologist who will give you a preventive ticket for imminent methodological skidding, and explain that discussing the "tale", or tales in general, is outmoded or even reactionary, as if you talked about the only natural satellite of Earth.

The suspect Tale has several masks and super- or subordinate acolytes: sacred tales or myths, secular tales, legends, fables, saints-lazy gods-clever animals tales and legends, heroic poems, parables by one's mentor: the hedgehog, the tortoise, the hare, the cricket (there is a bee too, I think), etc., narratives about unrivaled heroes and outlaws. Formerly, I agree, it was different – when the tale was a smugglers' ship illegally crossing the border into another time, with angels and people together jostling at the prow of immortality. However, the spirit of the age is wearing now postmodern clothes, and labels-and-stamps perfume. Today, no tale dares set out into the world without a visa on the papers of its teller. What a pity!

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\* Hint at a Romanian phrase (literally: "green horses on walls") meaning cock-and-bull stories.

\*\* Expression used in Romanian folktales to indicate ancient times ("when fleas wore horseshoes").

(Translator's notes, A.S.)