

**THE ASCENSION INTO THE REAL WORLD:  
PRÂSLEA THE BRAVE AND  
THE GOLDEN APPLES (PETRE ISPIRESCU)**

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**Abstract:** *In folk tales, I have rediscovered the joy of evasion. In order to truly understand tales, we have to resort to the unconscious, to the things “we know, but we don’t know that we know”, according to Slavoj Zizek’s phrasing. They have to be brought to light. In “Prâslea the Brave and the Golden Apples”, from Petre Ispirescu’s collection, the hero’s journey will involve both the regression to the earth’s belly and the return trip to the world of origin. His ascent will be as dangerous as the descent, involving the presence of an auxiliary animal, the mother eagle. Prâslea is the civilising hero, the one making Cosmic the space that belonged to Chaos. “The journey to the centre” leads him to a spectral, intermundian space, which eludes both inner and outer reality. From here, the hero starts on his self-knowledge journey that includes a descent into the “chaotic preontological reality”.*

**Keywords:** civilising hero; Romanian folk tales; Petre Ispirescu; imaginary of descent; golden apple; imaginary of return.

The imaginary of descent, dominated by the Great Goddesses, doesn’t signify “the ascent to the heights”, but “the entrance to a centre and the ascending techniques will be followed by digging techniques” (Durand, 2000: 201). Wings are replaced with the breastplate, “meant for defence and parrying”, since “the descent risks at any moment to coincide with and turn into a fall. It has to be incessantly doubled,

expressly in order to quiet it down, by the symbols of intimacy. (...) If the ascent is an appeal to exteriorization, to a world beyond the bodily existence, the axis of descent is an intimate, fragile and delicate one. The imaginary of return is always a 'coming back', more or less coenesthetic and visceral." (201-202).

*Prâslea the Brave and the Golden Apples*, from Petre Ispirescu's collection (Ispirescu, 1984: 67-78), is the typical tale for the "Hesperides Type", "the Cycle of *Infernal Descents*" in Lazăr Șăineanu's classification (Șăineanu, 1978: 288-294). The hero's journey will involve both the regression to the earth's belly and the return trip to the world of origin. His ascent will be as dangerous as the descent, involving the presence of an auxiliary animal, the mother eagle. The beginning of the tale is dominated by the description of a Hesperides' Garden, belonging to "a great and mighty emperor". He "had around his palaces a beautiful garden, rich in flowers and greatly ornate! Such a garden nobody had seen before in those places. In the back of the garden there was an apple tree that bore golden apples" (Ispirescu, 1984: 67). But every year, "after seeing them first in bloom, then growing into fruit and maturing, someone would come in the middle of the night and steal them when they were about to ripen." (67). The place where the apple tree with golden apples is located is not the centre of the garden, but its edge, the outer limit. The apple tree seems to delimit the garden, the known and built space, from another space which is unknown, unexplored. None of the guards sent to watch had managed to find out who the thief was, because they were incapable to pass the trial of sleep, a trial of a spiritual nature.

The eldest son, confident that he will be capable of apprehending the thief, asks for his father's permission to keep watch over the apple tree. "Then, the emperor's son started to guard the apples, and he did that for a whole week", but one morning "he showed up saddened before his father, and confessed that he failed because one night he couldn't fight a deep sleep that came over him around midnight, making him drop like he was dead". Midnight is an ambivalent time, a crossroads in the night, a halfway mark. It is the peak of the

manifestation of evil spirits, which will be gradually banished as the dawn approaches.

Sleep, *Hypnos*, the twin brother of *Thanatos*, is assimilated with death and ignorance. “This is an archaic, universally spread symbolism. Victory over sleep and the prolonged watch constitute a pretty typical initiatory confrontation.” (Eliade, 1999: 452). The emperor’s eldest doesn’t have the strength to resist that initiatory trial.

The following year, the second son meets the same fate as his elder brother, and the emperor decides to have the apple tree cut down. The youngest son convinces his father to let him try too. “I do not dare say I will catch the thieves’, said Prâslea, ‘but one more try couldn’t hurt anyone’.” His request is met with great distrust by the emperor (“I wish to hear no more about this, you fool’, said the emperor. ‘Your elder brothers and so many brave men couldn’t do a thing about it, and you think that you, a snotty little brat, will succeed?’” (Ispirescu, 1984: 68) In most tales, the characters who are credited with the smallest chances to achieve something are those who surpass their condition. This is what Vasile Lovinescu called “the reverse analogy: what is greater on a higher plane appears inferior on the lower plane.” (Lovinescu, 1996: 108). Only the wise can see beyond the appearances and distinguish the real power of the person deemed a “fool”.

Prâslea’s watch begins way earlier than the time when the fruit ripen. “Prâslea often walked in the garden, circled the apple tree and kept making plans.” (Ispirescu, 1984: 69). When a new cycle is complete, that is when the apples ripen one more time, the youngest son sits near the tree, with “books to read”: “he chose a watching spot in a corner, close to the tree, stuck two spikes in the ground and sat between them, so that one was in front of him, and the other behind him” (69). The emperor’s son carefully prepares his watch. The spikes have the role to delimit a space. They are synonymous with the circle drawn by travellers at crossroads or in the woods, to protect them from evil spirits; they play an apotropaic role. One night, “right after midnight, he felt the soft touch of a sweet-smelling breeze intoxicating him (...) but every time he started to doze, he hit the spikes that stung him, so he remained awake,

and at the crack of dawn, he heard a faint swoosh in the garden.” (69).

Andrei Oișteanu speaks of the drowsy state given by the closeness to the Chaos, and the thief of the golden apples belongs to the chaotic space, is a manifestation of Chaos in the cultural space (Oișteanu, 2004: 29-30). With his bow ready, Prâslea shoots three arrows in the direction of the tree, and then hears a moan, followed by “an unearthly silence”. All these happen under cloud of night. Only then the day breaks and the youngest son picks several apples, puts them on a gold platter, and takes them to his father.

The bow, and especially the arrows, are symbols belonging to “the diurnal regimen of the imaginary”. “Many times, the technological image of the arrow takes over the natural symbol of the wing.” But “the *ray* [author’s emphasis] corresponds to the arrow; the ray is a reversed arrow since in descent it knows how to maintain its speed and rectilinear direction. (...) Especially by its assimilation with the ray, the arrow unites the symbols of purity with those of light, and the rectilinear nature and speed will frequently go hand in hand with enlightenment.” (Durand, 2000: 134).

As bearer of the bow and quiver, Prâslea legitimizes himself as a solar hero and takes a first step to enlightenment (initiation). He has the vision of transcendence, possesses the power to aim at the nothingness and to touch the root of evil with his arrow.

Through his nights of watch, he triumphs over physical tiredness and “proves his spiritual strength. Staying ‘awake’, being completely conscious, means: *being present in the world of spirit.*” [author’s emphasis] (Eliade, 1999: 452). The anabasis is now achieved, but for the journey to be complete, the catabasis must follow. For it, the hero has to follow Ariadne’s thread, the streak of blood left by “the thief of apples”. He departs accompanied by his brothers, who “were so bitter and jealous of him because he had proven himself worthier than them, that they wanted to get rid of him for good. That was the reason why they accepted to go with him.” (Ispirescu, 1984: 70). The proof that the golden apple tree is a defender of the threshold separating the created, cosmic universe from the increate and the Chaos, in other words from the Other World, is given by the fact that,

on their journey, the three brothers “kept going until they got into the wilderness and further more until they reached a precipice, where the trace of blood ended.” (70). None of the eldest brothers is capable to go down into the earth’s belly; only Prâslea is able to descend, on a rope, into the precipice.

Once on the other realm, “he took a shy look around him, and to his great amazement, saw that everything was different: the ground, the flowers, the trees, and the beasts that lived there. At once, he felt a little frightened”. The other realm is perceived as a space built differently, which could mean that it has another Demiurge and it functions by other rules. It isn’t better or worse than this realm, but its novelty is a source of fear. The descent into the unknown frightens. Prâslea arrives at a copper palace. Copper is a sacred metal, which was used by the Romans to delimit spaces and mark borders (Chevalier, Gheerbrant, 1995: 122). Once he enters the copper palace, the emperor’s son completely delimits himself from the world he had come from. Here, he encounters a young princess, who tells him that “this is the land of three dragon brothers, who have kidnapped us from our parents; there are three of us, sisters and daughters of an emperor from the realm you came from.” (Ispirescu, 1984: 70). The dragons “move heaven and earth to do all their biddings”, so that the girls would marry them.

The dragon who owns the copper palace announces his arrival for lunch by throwing his mace “when he is half a day away, and the mace hits the door, then the table and finally it hangs on the wall on its own.” The mace is a symbol of brutal, primitive force. Throwing the mace, a custom preserved in the folk dance called *căluș*, is considered an initiatory trial, by which the young men have to prove their prowess (Eliade, 1980: 28). The dragon uses the mace to mark the threshold, the door and the spiritual centre of the house – the table – on which the offerings are brought to him. Prâslea takes the mace and throws it farther than his adversary. This is a first show of force, before the encounter proper. Then, the two of them wrestle, „and they wrestled and they wrestled until the Dragon stuck Prâslea into the ground up to his ankles; But Prâslea gathered his strength and he stuck the Dragon into the ground up to his knees and cut his head off.” (Ispirescu, 1984: 71). A two-day period follows,

when the hero regains his strength, and then he departs for the silver palace. Here, he is greeted by the second sister of the princess from the copper palace. Prâslea defeats this dragon too, although he was stronger than the first, and after a week's rest, he departs for the golden palace.

Its master is the dragon he had hit with the arrow in his father's garden. This third dragon had the strength to throw the mace "from one day and a half's distance", but the emperor's son throws the mace even farther. The fight between the two of them proves extremely hard, and it seems impossible to have a winner, that's why "at noon, both of them turned into big fires and they continued fighting. Meanwhile, a crow kept circling them, croaking." (72). Both the dragon and Prâslea asked it to get some suet in its claws and throw it on them to keep the fire burning. "Crow, oh crow! Prâslea said to the bird, 'if you put the suet on me, I'll give you three corpses.'" The crow is a bird with a contradictory symbolism. Considered by the Greeks a *messenger* of Apollo, to the Celts "it has a *prophetic role* and also the role of a *civilising hero*" [author's emphasis], and for the Dacians, it has the symbolism of a "solar, but at the same time dark bird, a bird of life and death, an apotropaic and funerary bird" (Vulcănescu, 1987: 530). A divinatory bird, the crow is an aid of the solar hero. This is how it also appears in this tale, the crow being the one who helps the hero. It is "superdetermined by its connection with the solar flight and by the onomatopoeia of its name, linking it to the stones of the solar cult." (Durand, 2000: 131). The dragon and Prâslea turn into two fires and each asks the crow to put some suet on him. The fire burning the grease does nothing but make a sacrifice to the gods – similarly to the offerings brought in temples – to whom it asks for the strength to defeat its enemy. The encounter with the crow occurs at midday, a crossroads moment under the patronage of the sun, to which the two fires bring tribute.

Towards the evening, the emperor's daughter is asked to bring water to one of the two combatants, each of them promising to marry her in return. The girl chooses to marry the emperor's youngest son. Twilight is a time of day intensely ritualized by all the peoples of the world, being associated with

the realm of death. “An hour separating the day from the night, twilight symbolizes the end, but also the beginning of a new cycle.” (Evseev, 1997: 26). The water the hero receives from the hand of the virgin has a curative role: it is untasted water or live water. Thanks to it, Prâslea “squeezed the Dragon until his bones cracked, stuck him into the ground up to his neck and cut his head off”. If he had to stick the other dragons in the ground only up to their knees, he has to bury the third dragon completely.

After the killing of the dragons, the rescued princesses transform, with the use of a whip, the palaces into three apples – made of copper, silver and gold, respectively. The whip is “a symbol of the power to right the wrongs, but also of legitimized terror, of oppression.” (49). The whipping has an apotropaic function and is used to cast out evil spirits, especially in the rites related to the New Year. The theft is considered in folk tradition a ritual with magical valences. “The object acquired through this kind of ‘alienation’ is attributed sacral valences, because from the ranks of ‘profane’, trivial objects, it migrates to the category of ‘miraculous’ realities, coming from another world. The magical power of a stolen object was greater if the latter came from a person who rejoiced a certain mythical or religious prestige” (154). The golden apples stolen from the emperor’s garden and taken to the other world thus gain new connotations, become sacral objects. By striking with the whip at the four cardinal points, the princess who used to be captive in the golden palace gathers the energies dissipated in the four winds and condenses all of them in the golden apple, the one the entire story began with. From this perspective, the construction is closed. On the other hand, that fruit is considered “the world egg”, a symbol of origin. Each girl takes an apple for herself, except for the youngest sister, who entrusts hers to Prâslea. He must be the keeper of the golden apple, of supreme knowledge, since he is the one who was able to protect the tree of knowledge from the Hesperides’ Garden.

The four depart for the precipice, the access gate to the White World. There, Prâslea pulls on the rope, and the girls are taken to the surface. But when it’s his turn, he ties a rock to the

rope, and puts his hat on it. His brothers, thinking it was the youngest son, drop the rope, “which fell swiftly, making the brothers believe that Prâslea had died.” Then they leave for their father’s palace and get married to the eldest sisters, “as Prâslea had arranged”. Although they believe him dead, they recognize his authority and observe his “arrangements”.

Left behind on the realm of the dragons, apparently lacking any possibility to return to the White World, the emperor’s youngest son suddenly hears “a desperate cry, which filled him with sorrow. (...) and he saw a huge snake climbing a tree to eat the chicks of an imperial eagle.” (Ispirescu, 1984: 74). The snake “embodies the chaotic forces of the universe and man’s basic, untamed instincts.” (Evseev, 1997: 45). The imperial eagle is a bird resembling the golden eagle, but in folk tales, its size is impressive; this tale, for instance, mentions that, in their attempt to hide the hero from their mother, who would swallow him out of joy if she saw him, the chicks hide the hero under a feather. A voracious creature, a divine messenger and courier, the Imperial Eagle has the attributes of the Simorgh bird from the Persian tradition, the one that nests in the tree of knowledge, has the gift of human speech and the capacity to transport heroes between the two worlds (Oişteanu, 2004: 170 and the following). Upon their mother’s arrival, the chicks send her to the four corners of the realm below to look for their benefactor, in order to thank him. The tree in which the little eagles sit acquires the meaning of Centre of the world below, since it is the landmark, located near the precipice that is the entrance to the realm of the dragons. The precipice is isomorphous to the door of the alchemic oven, which “bakes” the impure substances to turn them into pure, processed matter. The emperor’s son, descending into the earth’s belly, prepares his symbolic rebirth.

In gratitude for the killing of the snake, the mother eagle agrees to take the hero to the White World, although she admits it to be a difficult task. (“What you’re asking is very difficult (...). Have 100 chunks of meat of two pounds each, and 100 loaves of bread ready for me.”) The hero climbs on the back of the mother eagle with all the food and the ascension may begin. “When they were close to the edge of the

precipice, the magical bird asked for more meat, but the meat was already gone. Prâslea didn't lose his temper, but pulled his broadsword and cut a piece of his own flesh from his thigh and fed the eagle." Only after making an offering of his own, the hero can return to this realm. But the bird had felt that the last piece of meat received had been different. Discovering it was human flesh, "she threw it out, put it in its rightful place, licked it and glued it back to his bones with her spit." (Ispirescu, 1984: 75). Saliva is considered a secret substance, "just like other bodily secretions, it is intimately connected to a person, it bears their 'mana'; this is why it is a symbol of connection, being present in communion rites and in sacred vows." (Evseev, 1997: 422). It is also a remedy for illnesses, having an apotropaic function. By the gluing of flesh with saliva, a profound connection is established between the bird and the hero. The eagle becomes a "soul bird", represented on the burial poles from Transylvania, a vehicle of the soul to the world above, the world of origin (Pavelescu, 1942).

This episode leads us to the idea that the mother eagle is a totemic bird participating in the initiation rite of the hero. After the precipice swallows Prâslea, this event being synonymous with an initiatory death, it's the turn of the psychopomp bird to swallow a small piece of his body, that it will give back to the hero, as a sign of his rebirth, once he returns to the White World. "In the beginning, there were the birds. They existed before mankind, before gods, and they weren't waiting for anyone. Many cosmogonies mention the existence of an egg that was the primal form of the world: a bird's egg, such as the one of the great noisy gander which in the Egyptian mythology gave birth to the world, or such as *Hiranyagarbha*, the Golden Embryo the entire world originated in, according to the Vedic tradition. In front of this egg, birds assisted to the birth of the world. Therefore, they know all its secrets." (Walter, 2007: 181).

The catabasis is completed, the monsters within the unconscious have been defeated and their estates transformed into the fruit of the world tree, the apple tree. Going through the concentric circles that lead to the centre of the subterranean world, Prâslea recovers the power to ascend to his point of origin. His ascension had been anticipated by

him being “buried” under the wing of the eagle chicks, because “the ascension instrument by excellence is *the wing*” [author’s emphasis], the bird being only an accessory of the wing (Durand, 2000: 131). Through its flight, the mother eagle connects the world above with the world below, can travel between the two worlds, proving once more a totemic and psychopomp animal.

After his arrival in this world, Prâslea becomes Tota-Puri, the naked, primordial, reborn, transfigured Man. This is symbolized in the text by his “cheap” clothes, which make him unrecognisable to everyone. Arriving at his father’s kingdom, he finds out about his brothers’ marriage to the eldest princesses and about the youngest daughter’s refusal to wed. The latter is forced to take as her husband a “very beautiful” prince, nevertheless not Prince Charming! The girl asks for the same thing that she had requested from the dragons, “a distaff and spindle made entirely out of gold, which would spin by itself” (Ispirescu, 1984: 75). What the girl wants is, as a matter of fact, an unwinding of her destiny. Attribute of Clotho, the Moirae spinning the thread of life, the distaff also used to appear in feminine initiation rites, as well as in the wedding ritual, as a symbol of prosperity and fecundity.

Prâslea becomes a silversmith’s apprentice and, since no one had managed to fulfil the girl’s desire, and the punishment for failure was death, he promises to bring the distaff and spindle, but asks to be given, for three nights, a room to work in all by himself, and “for each night, a small bag of hazelnuts and a glass of fine wine.” (Ispirescu, 1984: 76). Hazelnuts are, like the apples that contain the palaces of the dragons, microcosms. From the golden apple, that emperor’s youngest son had kept, he takes the gold distaff and spindle. The princess recognizes them, and then asks for a golden hen and chicken. If the spindle referred to wedding rites, the hen and chicken are a symbol of maternity. The lad brings them too from inside the apple and is asked to come to the palace, at the girl’s request. He is immediately recognized by the princess, but not by his parents, because “he had changed greatly”. The death and resurrection ritual transfigures the character. “Taking a better look at him, the

emperor also recognized him” and, after hearing his story, he calls for his eldest sons to come and be punished by Prâslea.

Prâslea, instead, invokes the divine punishment: “Father, I forgive them, let them be punished by God. We will go out on the palace steps and we will each shoot an arrow up and God, in case any of us had made a mistake, will punish us.” (Ispirescu, 1984: 77). The place the youngest son picks for the act of justice is the steps of the palace, a crossing space, a boundary separating the exterior from the interior. “*The ray* [author’s emphasis] corresponds to the arrow; the ray is a reversed arrow” (Durand, 2000: 134). According to this symbolism, the three brothers are testing the transcendence with their bows, but their arrows turn, like divine lightning bolts, against them and “fall right on the top of their heads, killing them, while the youngest son’s falls before him.” (Ispirescu, 1984: 78)

Prâslea is the civilising hero, the one making cosmic the space that belonged to Chaos, the other world. His action is justified by the theft of the apples. This time around, the Chaos, by its representative, the dragon, is the one invading the world of humans to kidnap the daughters of emperors and steal fruit from the forbidden tree. The dragon’s action can be deemed a cosmocrator act, by which he tries to turn his own universe into a cosmic one, following the archetypal model of this realm, created after the primordial theft from the tree of knowledge.

"In the *beginning* [author’s emphasis], both in the cosmic and in the anthropological dimension, there was a fullness that contained all the virtualities", the chaos, where contraries are abolished, and reality is "androgynous", all-encompassing. Creation means the splitting, breaking of "the cosmogonical egg", of the *unity-totality* (Eliade, 1995: 108). It brings constraints, frustrations, but also knowledge, which engenders an attitude, that of order in accordance with the existential.

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