

Magical Realism in the Apuan Alps

Once again, on 31 October, pumpkins and goblins will be protagonists. Halloween, for the Celts, was the night before the start of the new year. Being pastoral people, they divided the year in two halves marked by two fire-festivals, one at the beginning of May, when they drove their cattle into the open to graze on the fresh grass, and another at the beginning of November when they led them back to the stall. At this time of year especially, the souls of dead were supposed to revisit their old homes to warm themselves by the fire and to be comforted by their kinsfolk. Witches, fairies and hobgoblins roamed freely about.



Despite its Celtic origin, Halloween has become part of a more or less commercial tradition in Italy, though in the past our world and the Celtic world came into contact. Some of the fantastic creatures that belong to the popular tradition of the Lucchese and Apuan areas are directly connected to Celtic folklore.

This is what I learnt last month in the Biblioteca Statale in Lucca, at the presentation of Paolo Fantozzi's new book *Rupi e boschi incantati – Fiabe dalle Alpi Apuane* (Enchanted cliffs and woods – Tales from the Apuan Alps). Professor Fantozzi explained that there are three main areas of rural popular tradition in Tuscany: the Maremma, the Casentino and the Apuan Alps. One of the elements distinguishing the latter from the other two, is precisely the presence of goblins of Celtic origin. There are approximately 35 distinct goblins identified in the tradition!

Lifelong researcher in folklore and local history, Paolo Fantozzi has written a whole series of books focusing on orally transmitted legends and tales. Perfectly in line with the tradition of the *folatori* (storytellers), at the book presentation he entertained the audience, and shared his knowledge, talking as if we were around an imaginary bonfire. He explained that the primary function of storytelling is precisely the transmission of a cultural heritage. Spells, supernatural events, scary situations, magical objects and talking animals help listeners to recognize the conflicts abiding within themselves, to face difficulties and to accept daily sacrifices. The big problems of life are presented in a simpler way, solutions are offered and it doesn't really matter if they require a supernatural intervention. Magic was an active part in people's daily life.

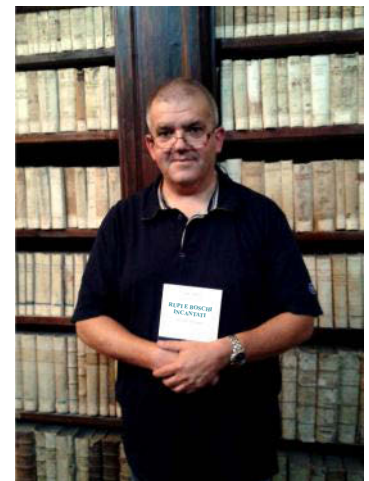
Professor Fantozzi told us about 93-year-old Marietta, a woman he met in Vinca, above Carrara, more than thirty years ago. At home she had neither electric light nor heating, and in her whole life she had never been to Carrara. Where roads are late to arrive, traditions are better preserved. Her house was full of dried herbs, which were the ingredients she used to make healing potions. The evening of 23 June, Saint John's Eve, she would break an egg in a glass and the next day

she would interpret the shape acquired by the albumen, making predictions for crops and future marriages. She lived in a context of legend and popular tradition. Like most isolated populations, these people had their imaginative life rooted in a living experience of the mythic, the legendary and the magical, which, far from being alienated from daily life, was part of it. The boundary between the ordinary and the extra-ordinary was blurred. For some people, this is still true.

All the tales in Paolo Fantozzi's book were recorded by him from the live voice of the older generations in the Apuan villages where they lived. Surely, the oral tradition is enriched by the expressivity of voice and gesture, by emphatic repetitions and silences and by vernacular forms. However, despite the difficulty in putting everything down on paper, Fantozzi's fluent and enjoyable Italian language, as faithful as possible to its spoken source, makes him the perfect mediator between orality and literacy. His next effort? The legends from Mount Pisano.

– by Chiara Calabrese

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