

## The Eagle's Gift

**Carlos Castaneda**

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**Reviewed by**

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*The Eagle's Gift* is Castaneda's sixth book in the don Juan series, and readers will find that it is similar in style and content to *The Second Ring of Power* (Castaneda, 1977). Like the first five books in the series, *The Eagle's Gift* can be loosely classified as anthropological fiction, but can be distinguished from the other books by Castaneda's attempt at systematizing the religious underpinnings and cosmological significance of sorcery.

As a novelist, Castaneda's primary accomplishment has been his success in generating an air of mystery. Shocking, incomprehensible, and frightening events, coupled with distortions of time and space, hallucinatory states, and an emphasis on dreams have all been used to highlight some significant aspect of the don Juan teachings. For example, in *Journey to Ixtlan* (Castaneda, 1972), the comic but powerful sorcerer don Genaro uses hypnosis, sleight-of-hand, and outlandish pranks to induce an altered state of consciousness in the apprentice-Carlos so that his student can "stop-the-world," or perceive the world as a sorcerer would. In *The Eagle's Gift*, the sense of mystery is still there (e.g., the characterization of Silvio Manuel as the "man-behind-the-scenes"), although in diminished form. Possibly, this problem stems in part from two sources: (1) the fact that six books is too long for the don Juan series; and (2) the drubbing Castaneda has received for his failure to validate his "factual" material (de Mille, 1976, 1980).

Another problem with *The Eagle's Gift* is that Castaneda can be annoyingly careless with topics well within his range of expertise. As an example, consider this excerpt from "The Rule of Nagual," a five-page "ancient" teaching that describes the cosmological significance, purpose, and psychology of sorcery:

The power that governs the destiny of all living beings is called the Eagle, not because it is an eagle or has anything to do with an eagle, but because it appears to the seer as an immeasurable jet-black eagle, standing erect as an eagle stands, its height reaching to infinity... The Eagle is devouring the awareness of all the creatures that, alive on earth a moment before and now dead, have floated to the Eagle's beak, like a ceaseless swarm of fireflies, to meet their owner, their reason for

having had life. The Eagle disentangles these tiny flames, lays them flat, as a tanner stretches a hide, and then consumes them; for awareness is the Eagle's food. (pp. 176-177)

This presentation of God as an immense, superanimate eagle is appealing, and the passage possesses a delightful graphic quality that is uniquely Castaneda's. Yet as a mesoamerican remnant of archaic origin, the *rule* is not convincing. One would expect an ancient mesoamerican teaching to look mesoamerican, or at least ancient. This particular segment, as well as the "rule" in its entirety, lacks the directness and economy of presentation found in such writings. In addition, the metaphor is couched in a wealth of abstract language that looks surprisingly modern. The point is that if Castaneda is going to write good anthropological fiction, he can surely describe his artifacts with greater accuracy.

Perhaps, foibles such as these are indicative of Castaneda's preoccupation with creating a new religious order, which may work to the detriment of anthropological accuracy. The present book is the most comprehensive statement thus far of the philosophy of don Juanism. A central part of this philosophy is the Castaneda thesis (as portrayed in the novels) that the enlightened sorcerer can literally avoid death. This notion was first explored by Castaneda toward the end of *The Teachings of Don Juan* (Castaneda, 1968), when don Juan tells the apprentice-Carlos that when sorcerers are near the end of their lives, they cross over to the boundary of the "other world" (the world explored by apprentice-Carlos after ingesting don Juan's hallucinogenic pipe mixture) and request that a sorcerer-teacher from that world kill them, thereby admitting them into that world permanently. Yet, in *Journey to Ixtlan*, we are informed by don Juan that, "...we are all going to die" (Castaneda, 1972, p. 111). And in *Second Ring* and *Eagle*, we are told that successful sorcerers don't die, but disappear from the earth with their bodies. Such an inconsistent presentation leaves this reviewer with two distinct impressions, both of them cynical: (1) Castaneda was extending the "life" of his stories as well as the life of his aged mentors; (2) don Juanism has degenerated into a simple parody of black magic.

However, a less critical viewpoint is offered by McFerran (1980), who has hypothesized that Castaneda is depicting a Gnostic teaching that human beings are creatures beyond good and evil. Once "awakened" by a messenger from a source of light beyond the physical universe, they can display the same type of power as God, manipulating the appearances of the physical world at will.

In Castaneda's later volumes, don Juan's teaching closely parallels the Gnostic diabolism. Men are really luminous eggs condensed from infinite possibilities of the Nagual, but unless taught to see and dream—to use their "second ring of

power"—they live in a meaningless world of shadows. Sorcerers like don Juan and don Genaro come from the Nagual to guide a new cycle of apprentices in a magical tradition reaching back to the days of the Indian civilization that preceded the Aztecs. In a telling phrase, their disciples refer to them as "Toltec devils." To anyone familiar with mesoamerican mythology this suggests the image of the Plumed Serpent, the warrior god Quetzalcoatl, who the Spanish conquerors equated with Satan. And Quetzalcoatl, it should be remembered, was represented in Indian art as both benign and horribly malevolent... What remains to be seen is whether, like the most radical of the Gnostics before him, Castaneda completes the reversal of values by taking Quetzalcoatl, a Mexican Abraxas, as the ultimate equation of good and evil and demanding that his followers subscribe to both good and evil to be saved. (McFerran, 1980, pp. 252-253)

*The Eagle's Gift* offers a fair degree of support for this hypothesis. One piece of evidence is the spectre of an impartial, awesome, animal-like God that destroys the lives of good and evil beings with equanimity. Second, we are told that it takes a lifetime of preparation and stealth to get by the Eagle, not a lifetime of performing good deeds. And lastly, there is a final chapter entitled "The Plumed Serpent"—an image apprentice-Carlos sees while watching his mentors "go past the Eagle" (p. 316). Indeed, it seems that McFerran's (1980, p. 253) prediction that, "in later volumes, Castaneda will have the opportunity to convert his myth of the *brujo* into a full theology," has already begun.

### References

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