

## The Eagle's Gift

Carlos Castaneda.

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Reviewed by:

Daniel Merkur

Interdisciplinary Studies

York University

4700 Keele Street,

Downsview, Ontario

Canada M3J 1P3

Mountebanks were named because they mounted up onto benches in public marketplaces, where they delivered a spiel, told jokes, and performed feats of juggling and *leger-de-main* in order to attract a crowd and peddle their wares. Charlatan, from the Italian *ciarlatano*, "babbler," was another term for mountebank and was favoured for those whose merchandise was mystic, occult, or alchemical. The elixirs, waters of life, and gold waters of seventeenth century charlatans were the direct forerunners of the snake-oil cure-all medicines of more recent times. True charlatanism is a rare thing these days; but Carlos Castaneda is a charlatan so very able at his trade that he markets his spiel and never even bothers about peddling an elixir.

To be sure, Castaneda's disguise is wearing a little thin. In *Castaneda's Journey* (1978) and *The Don Juan Papers* (1980), Richard de Mille has gone to the trouble of documenting the sources that Castaneda plagiarized in confecting his fictions. Of course Castaneda had said it all himself, in a Hitchcock-like appearance in a datura-induced vision in his first book:

The scene changed again and I was watching the young man efface books; he glued some of the pages together, erased markings, and so on. Then I saw him arranging the books neatly in a wooden crate. There was a pile of crates. They were not in his room, but in a storage place.

The latest offering, *The Eagle's Gift*, presents a similar glimpse behind the mask, in a teaching by Don Juan.

...Think how horrible it would be if you would find yourself at the end of your trail as a warrior, still carrying your bundles of notes on your back. By that time the notes will be alive...it wouldn't surprise me in the least if someone found your bundles walking around.

The writings have indeed gained a life of their own, as the most

celebrated fraud in anthropology since Piltown Man.

Treated as anthropological fact, Castaneda's books are absurd. Castaneda presents Amerindians for whom tribal ceremonial and tribal myth do not exist—a situation absolutely unknown among Amerindian ecstasies. The kind of Southwestern and Mexican "sorcerer" that Castaneda at first purported to describe is always a widely known, revered, and feared tribal figure, a paramount authority on tribal religion at its highest levels of initiation and mystery. Even where socially-illicit sorcery occurs, as among the Navajo and Apache, the practices are ordinary rituals whose symbolism has been perverted through reversal, in a manner analogous to the relation of the Satanic sabbat to the Catholic mass. Socially marginal sorcerers with an autonomous system of lore, that is unrelated to cultural religious orthodoxy, are a uniquely Judaeo-Christian development in the history of religions. As well, Castaneda's knowledge of psychoactive drugs—wisely absent from his latest offering—is abysmal. He cannot differentiate psychotropes from psychedelics. Where he does not depend on a plagiarized source, he freely invents datura effects for both peyote and psilocybin, and vice versa. He even has psilocybin mushrooms dried and smoked, which can produce only a placebo effect because psilocybin molecules break down in response to heat. For students of Amerindian religion, there is not even heuristic value to be derived from Castaneda's writings. Castaneda is simply wrong on too many points of fact. While Castaneda prefaces *The Eagle's Gift* with the caution that "this is not strictly an anthropological work," "...not even remotely..." would be closer to the truth.

C.S. Lewis, perhaps the first literary critic to treat science fiction seriously, advised that no one not a devotee of a genre has the prejudice of sympathy that is necessary for judicious criticism. In fairness, Castaneda's works should therefore be seen in the context of their true genre: didactic occult fiction. Edward Bulwer-Lytton, Balzac, Arthur Machen, W.B. Yeats, Robert W. Chambers, Aleister Crowley, and Dion Fortune all knew the occult and, on occasion, used fiction as an allegorical vehicle for the discussion of complex, esoteric matters that were not to be divulged straightforwardly in introductory manuals. The marvellous tongue-in-cheek creations of Charles Williams, which explore the holy grail, the philosopher's stone, the tarot, and the Janus-faced Platonic idea of St. Michael-Lucifer, are easily the best offerings in the genre. By contrast, before fighting my way through *The Eagle's Gift* I had not encountered more unreadable prose than that of Dion Fortune.

In *The Eagle's Gift* we are treated once more to the basic situation in

Bulwer-Lytton's *Zanzoni*. A naive protagonist encounters a Magus Incognitus, a Faustian figure lacking a personal history, who leads him onward to discover a secret circle of peerless adepts who, in turn, are privy to scraps of ancient occult lore that the common masses have stupidly chosen to ignore. Don Juan takes his incarnation as an Amerindian sorcerer who is privy to ancient Toltec esoterica, in order to suit the gullibility of the modern audience. Bulwer-Lytton's Rosicrucians, privy to the lore of ancient Chaldea, were prime fare in the 1840's but simply will not sell now that *The Epic of Gilgamesh* is in paperback.

*The Eagle's Gift* makes rather a good stab at confecting a credible occult system. Castaneda presents a fictional *scala contemplationis* that is all but identical to the traditional Roman Catholic system as discussed by St. Teresa of Avila. Techniques for the induction of religious trance are borrowed from Yoga and Zen. The much-employed technique of "dreaming together" indicates that Castaneda is aware of the very recent experimental work with mutual hypnosis. The subsidiary technique of "intention" is no other than self-hypnotic auto-suggestion. For his metaphysics, Castaneda adopts the standard occult dualism of the material and astral planes, which he renames the right side and the left, Tonal and Nagual, and the first and second attention. He locates a few hypnotic phenomena as occurrences of second attention; but most of his "dreaming" phenomena are commonplaces of the occult: "seeing" the astral in the material, "dreaming" on the astral, and much to do about the "dreaming body," the astral body of the occult. His imagery, luminous white eggs, bleak otherworldly landscapes, and so forth, are occult commonplaces. The interrelation of the material to the astral is in part the classic parallelism of the occult. Jung's animus and anima, and his four types of personality, show up in pseudo-Amerindian form in parallel on both planes. On the other hand, Castaneda rather cleverly interfits false memories under hypnosis—the basic procedure of seance remembrances of past incarnations—as phenomena occurring on the astral plane while different phenomena occur on the material. "Remembering" is artfully described as though it were hypnotic hyperamnesia, thereby creating the same confusion of false with real memories that so complicates hypnotherapy. As a *coup de grace*, Mahayana Buddhism supplies Castaneda's soteriology. Beyond the first and second attentions is the Eagle or third attention. Everyone originates as a part of the Eagle and returns to the Eagle at death. The warrior, who gains total awareness of first and second attention, is alone able to retain post-mortem awareness and to escape dissolution into the Eagle.

The near faultlessness of Castaneda's mythopoeia is an index of the

research that must have gone into the book. Like a thesis overburdened with footnotes, a major fault in the novel is overkill. With hysteria recognized as a frequent precondition for religious trance, Castaneda portrays every character as celibate, ascetic, highly strung, extremely fearful, given to disproportionate fits of hilarity, and otherwise irritable, loud, and prone to sudden anger and violence. Conversion symptoms abound. Although all characters have moreover been drug-users in the past, they further practice meditation for years before they achieve their first dreaming. Three major means by which religious trance can be provoked—hysteria, drugs, and training—are all employed when any one would suffice, without abbreviating the training period.

Another major fault is Castaneda's implicit subscription to the theory that religious trance is a superstitiously viewed self-hypnosis having religious content to the suggestions. The other major theory, that religious trances involve the manifestations of unconscious materials to consciousness—variously explained by different Freudians and Jungians—does not influence Castaneda's depiction of "dreaming." Instances of "dreaming" are emotionally neutral, akin to a subject's response to a hypnotist's suggestions. Any disinterested student of comparative religious trance must however be struck by the affective contents of trances, with their consistent progresses to cathartic climaxes before they come to an end. The catharsis is sometimes weak as in day-dreams and sometimes profound as in occasional nocturnal dreams; but it is regularly present. Castaneda's oversight in this regard is consistent with some scholarly literature, but not with the better authorities. No genuine ecstatic would ever slip up in this way; subjective affectivity is always the first thing that attracts an ecstatic to religious trance. Its absence in *The Eagle's Gift* amply proves Castaneda's charlatanism even as an occultist, mars the heuristic value of an otherwise well-constructed mythopoeia, and—the worst offense of all—leaves his fiction flat and boring. When working in a genre that favours didacticism over drama, an author ought to exploit and not to overlook the remaining opportunities for dramatic catharses.

The surprise ending of *The Eagle's Gift*—and the reason it ends with a cliff-hanger—comes strangely early, only three-quarters of the way through the book. The device was better used in Aleister Crowley's *Moonchild*. It transpires that Castaneda's quest in the novel, together with the occult system so painstakingly described, is in entirety a misdirection in the technical occult sense. So is *The Eagle's Gift*.

#### References

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