

Translating the sacred: literature and ethnography in Carlos Castaneda¹

Taduzindo o sagrado: literatura e etnografia em Carlos Castaneda

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Abstract

This article deals with the debate over the narrative of American anthropologist Carlos Castaneda and the problematic of his Yaqui informant Don Juan. It is my contention that Castaneda's narrative presents a blend of interdisciplinary discourses involving primarily literature and ethnography. I propose the discussion of whether the traces of fictional narrative to be found in a supposed ethnographic account are meant to work as a form of translation of sacred space, that is, as a challenge at transcribing the unworldly, or simply as a means of representing the concept of power within shamanism as personal amoral gratification. In short, I argue that Castaneda's narrative could be seen as paradigmatic of the power of language not to originate the supernatural but rather, given the use of certain literary techniques, to attempt at representing that which cannot be grasped by words alone.

Keywords: *literature, ethnography, supernatural, sacred, hermeneutics*

Resumo

Este artigo lida com o debate envolvendo a narrativa do antropólogo norte-americano Carlos Castaneda e a problemática de seu informante Yaqui Don Juan. É minha contenção que a narrativa de Castaneda apresenta-se como uma

¹ Recebido em 19/04/2013. Aprovado em 27/08/2013.

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mistura de discursos interdisciplinares que envolvem acima de tudo a literatura e a etnografia. Eu proponho a discussão a respeito dos traços ficcionais encontrados numa suposta etnografia como sendo uma forma de tradução do espaço sagrado, ou seja, de um desafio à transcrição do inominável, ou simplesmente como uma maneira de representar o conceito de poder no xamanismo em termos de uma gratificação pessoal amoral. Em suma, eu argumento que a narrativa de Castaneda poderia ser vista como paradigma do poder da linguagem, não como fonte originária do sobrenatural, mas, dado o uso de certas técnicas literárias, como tentativa de representação do que não pode ser apreendido somente pelas palavras.

Palavras-Chave: *literatura, etnografia, sobrenatural, sagrado, hermenêutica*

We may generally historicize the development of modern literary theory as having three successive periods: a concern with the author and the idealist Romantic figure, during the 19th century; an almost exclusive interest with the text, and the formalist New Critic through the mid 20th century; and a shift to the reader and the reception theorist over the second half of the previous century. Underlying not only this brief modern contextualization, but also perhaps any theory of interpretation at large, there lies the hermeneutical approach.

The word hermeneutics derives from the Greek *hermeneuein* (“to interpret”) and thus is referred to as the art of interpreting texts, especially by means of specific techniques and a theory of literary, legal, or biblical exegesis. From Plato’s reference to oracle interpretation and his considering the poets as interpreters of the gods (*hermenes ton theon*), through medieval biblical interpretation as with the allegorical exegesis of Dante and the subsequent more historical apprehensions during the Reformation period with Luther and Calvin, up until the modern philosophical stances in Heidegger and Gadamer shifting the synecdochical hermeneutical circle towards a more existential understanding, which eventually served as a starting though divergent point for the more contemporary currents of critical theory and their concern with social transformation in the works of Habermas and Ricoeur, hermeneutics has been a central part of critical interpretation for millennia.

The relevance of hermeneutics to critical theory can be seen, amongst many others, in the conceptual ideas surrounding Hans-Georg Gadamer's *Truth and Method* (Gadamer, 2004) According to Gadamer, the literary text, like a sacred hymn, provides a dialogue that puts the reader in question by means of reversing the direction of interrogation and hence providing an encompassing rather than dividing interpretation that includes author, text and reader. In fact, Gadamer's ideas regarding prejudices as positive rather than negative factors have indeed been considered a breakthrough in critical theory at large and can also be seen as an inspirational stance regarding the inclusive and interdisciplinary aims of a dialectically hermeneutical approach.

At the time of Carlos Castaneda's first books, the Western world was under the impact of the counter cultural revolution. The late 1960s represented, especially in America, a time of spiritual freedom, in which paradoxically the physical also experienced its liberation, whether through sex, drugs, or music. It was a time of wild experimentations and mysticism was the word of the day. Castaneda, therefore, could not have picked a better time to depict his experiences of a separate reality. But not everyone was indeed taking those mind-altering substances, which, as Yves Marton has suggested, would help them understand Castaneda's message more fully.

The more fundamental question about Castaneda's work though, is still whether he is telling the truth or not, that is, is it fiction or anthropology? In the mid-70s, when Castaneda had only published four books, the several reviews and discussions over his writings already indicated the wide range of his influence.³ Castaneda's books were generally seen as ethnography for almost ten years, albeit viewed by some anthropologists with distrust,⁴ without

³ See Robert Hughes, Sandra Burton, Tomás Loayza & others, "Don Juan and the Sorcerer's Apprentice" in *Time Magazine* [5 Mar 1973] 36-45; Max Allen, "Review: 32 Castanedas" in *Journal of Altered States of Consciousness* [1(1): 1973] 109-122; Daniel C. Noel, *Seeing Castaneda: Reactions to the 'Don Juan' Writings of Carlos Castaneda* (New York: Putnam, 1976).

⁴ Among those academics who praised Castaneda's writings as ethnographic accounts are: Edward H. Spicer "Early Praise from an Authority on Yaqui Culture" in Daniel Noel, *Seeing*

being seriously disputed. It was only in 1976 with the publication of *Castaneda's Journey*, by his self-appointed debunker Richard de Mille, that for the first time the work of Castaneda, hitherto praised by all sorts of prominent figures, from ethnographic scholarship and literary culture alike, such as Octavio Paz, Weston La Barre, and even Gilles Deleuze, to name only a few, was wholly scrutinized and revealed as fiction rather than ethnography.⁵

Hence, as Edmund Leach stated in his review of Castaneda's writings,

just at the moment nothing brings in the bread more easily than a careful description of the horrors and delights of hippydom, pot, LSD, St. Teresa, or what have you. So any book of this sort invites caution. (Leach, 1976, p.33).

Leach's caution turned in fact into sharp criticism as he detected Castaneda's literary skill working to the detriment of any possible ethnographic purposes. Leach, himself an anthropologist at Cambridge and an authority on structuralism, points out, in his comments of *The Teachings of Don Juan*, that

despite the last fifty pages of jargon-loaded 'structural analysis,' this is a work of art rather than of scholarship, and it is as a diary of unusual

Castaneda, 30-33; Barbara Meyerhoff, in Richard de Mille, *The Don Juan Papers*, 346; Ralph L. Beals, "Sonoran Fantasy or Coming of Age?" in *American Anthropologist* [80(2): 1978] 355-362; Clement Meighan, *Time Magazine*, 45; and John Kennedy, in David E. Young and Jean-Guy Goulet, *Being Changed by Cross-Cultural Encounters: The Anthropology of Extraordinary Experience* (Peterborough, Canada: Broadview Press, 1994) 284. For distrust of Castaneda's ethnography see Ward Churchill, "Castaneda" in Ward Churchill, *Fantasies of the Master Race: Literature, Cinema and the Colonization of American Indians* (Monroe, Maine: Common Courage, 1992) 43-64, 291; Wendy Rose, "The Great Pretenders" in M. Anette Jaimes (ed.), *The State of Native America* (Boston: South End, 1992) 403-421; and Weston La Barre, "Stinging Criticism from the Author of The Peyote Cult" in Daniel Noel, *Seeing Castaneda*, 40-42, even though it is worth mentioning that La Barre seems to have changed his mind as I show in the second part of my chapter.

⁵ Richard de Mille (1976), son of the movie mogul Cecil B. de Mille was the first author to present a serious study of Castaneda as a hoax. Nevertheless he does not discard Castaneda's value as a writer. On the contrary, de Mille actually praises Don Juan's apprentice to such a high degree that sometimes one is left wondering whether his idea was in fact to debunk him. He also published one more book on the subject, which is a more in depth work about Castaneda's writing and could be seen as the definitive blow to Castaneda-as-true-ethnography defenders: *The Don Juan Papers: Further Castaneda Controversies*, 1980.

personal experience that the book deserves attention (Leach, 1976, p.34).

Leach's expected anthropological assessment becomes a literary one instead, as he detects the nature of Castaneda's writings as pertaining to Romantic imagination rather than ethnographic scholarship ("the general tone is Coleridge-de Quincey by Rousseau out of eighteenth-century Gothic"), before asserting that "clearly the atmosphere is that of *The Ancient Mariner*." Not that Castaneda's text would have the same quality as Coleridge's, quite the contrary, as Leach makes clear as he sharply remarks, after comparing a few lines from both "poets," that "even if the images are familiar it needs a guru to get you through 'the caverns measureless to man down to the sunless sea,' and if Maharishis from the Himalayas are in short supply, an Indian from Arizona may do just as well." Revealing perhaps his own prejudiced views not only about Castaneda but also about literature itself, a minor genre when compared to the almighty scientific purpose, Leach declares that "the outcome need not be contemptible, but it is more likely to emerge as poetry rather than science."

Yet, Leach does seem to acknowledge some positive aspects in Castaneda's writings. According to him, in spite of being "confined to the personal interactions between Don Juan and the author," the text reveals "a relationship which is at once intimate yet tense, as between Moby Dick and Ahab, God and Job, or any psychoanalyst and his patient." (Leach, 1976, p.35). Leach believes that Castaneda's book

is certainly not a complete spoof, but if it had been spoof, it might not have been different. The patients of psychoanalysts are unreliable witnesses of either the personality or the doctrine of their mentors, and Castaneda is no exception (Leach, 1976, p.37).

Leach admits that "potentially his theme is very big. He is trying to describe a non-logical cosmos in terms which we can accept as constituting a 'reality.'" It seems to me that somehow Leach realizes that there is more than meets the eye in Castaneda. When he indicates

that “perhaps it is simply that the size of the canvas is too small for what it is meant to portray,” he appears to have missed out on his own indication of Castaneda’s valuable side, that is, of symbolic allegorist: “somehow, despite the author’s sensitivity to the poetic symbolism, which is implicit in his often terrifying experiences, the whole business gets reduced to triviality.” Perhaps where Leach sees trifles, the committed reader of Don Juan’s symbolism might “somehow” see poetic complexity, instead of reducing it all down to a mere aesthetic disguise void of any ethnographic effectiveness.

Moving now to the debate over Castaneda’s writings in critical theory, in his praising of Anglo-American literature in comparison to his own, Gilles Deleuze includes Don Juan’s amanuensis in his list of commended experimentalists, whose lack of interpretive explanations is highly appreciated, and proclaims, as if wanting to become himself a pupil of Don Juan/Castaneda’s hallucinogenic/literary experiments:

Every line in which someone gets carried away is a line of restraint in comparison with the laborious, precise, controlled trash of French writers. No longer is there the infinite account of interpretations which are always slightly disgusting, but finished processes of experimentation, protocols of experience. ... The strength of Castaneda’s books, in his programmed experiment with drugs, is that each time the interpretations are dismantled and the famous signifier is eliminated. No, the dog I saw and ran along with under the effect of the drug was not my whore of a mother ... This is a procedure of animal-becoming which does not try to say anything other than what he becomes, and makes me become with him (Deleuze, 1987, p.48)⁶.

Deleuze’s theory fits perfectly with my general argument in that it favors the construction of meaning out of fragmentary texts, which do not quite fit any traditional representational form. In fact, Castaneda’s strangeness, with its ambiguity and cross-disciplinary nature that result in a narrative both scientific and allegorical, fits into Deleuze’s concept of “a living experiment,” in which, “from fragment to fragment, interpretation begins to crumble, and

⁶ See “On the Superiority of Anglo-American Literature”.

there is no longer perception or knowledge, secret or divination.” Out of Castaneda’s ambiguities, through his textual gaps, lack of information, and blending of subjective experiences and objective events, the process of experimentation becomes the means to translate the sacred into words.

Ever since the publication of Castaneda’s first books, several writers have recognized the integration of fictional techniques into the narrative of Don Juan’s amanuensis.⁷ Ronald Sukenick, for instance, who, after meeting up with Castaneda in the early 1970s and considering that he “looked like someone who had been holding himself together under enormous strain,” stated: “I don’t really believe Castaneda could write a sustained work of pure imagination,” was nevertheless “astonished to find a number of similarities between ‘Out’ [Sukenick’s novel] and Castaneda’s story.”⁸ According to Sukenick, whose book, like Castaneda’s, had come out of his own dreams, Castaneda, unless he was truly a sorcerer with access not only to his own but other people’s dreaming states, “too must be writing a novel.” (Sukenick, 1976, p.111).

Sukenick calls our attention to some other literary, albeit visionary-like, similarities between Castaneda and Anaïs Nin, for instance, who

has over the years insisted on the continuity of dream and reality, as does Don Juan, and whose theories about fiction as controlled dreaming provide such a precise counterpart to Don Juan’s ideas about learning to control one’s dreams.

In fact, as Sukenick points out, Castaneda’s distinctive quality lies in the fact that his material is the vision itself, and hence should somehow transcend the debate over fact or fiction: “Castaneda is a visionary and in what sense does one ask whether a vision is ‘true’? A

⁷ See Joyce Carol Oates, “Don Juan’s Last Laugh” in Noel Seeing Castaneda, 122-128; and Jerome Klinkowitz, “The Persuasive Account: Working it Out with Ronald Sukenick and Carlos Castaneda”. In: Noel, 1976, p. 132-139.

⁸ Ronald Sukenick, “Upward and Juanward”. In: Noel, 1976, p. 110, 112. Sukenick’s first meeting with Castaneda was arranged by their mutual friend, Anaïs Nin, who had in fact helped Castaneda publish his first book.

vision is beyond the category of fact, other than the fact of its having happened at all.” (Sukenick, 1976, p.112).

For Sukenick, Castaneda’s accounts of his experiences, which “attain a high level of imaginative power and coherence, of precision in language, of inventive selection,” should be seen as works that have integrated fictional techniques, making them “as persuasive in fact as the most accomplished novels.” Sukenick also compares Castaneda to other important literary figures. As he comments on the wanderings of Castaneda “through the Mexican mountains amid a landscape animated by spirits and powers,” Sukenick is reminded of “the early Wordsworth wandering in the English hills that are alive with immanent spirit.” (Sukenick, 1976, p.115). The Romantic allusions of Don Juan’s teachings on spiritual realms are in fact too conspicuous for the engaged reader to miss out; after all, both the Romantic poet and the warrior apprentice are in search of the sublime knowledge. Next Sukenick poses a question that reveals his perhaps most interesting literary comparison: “how about another Hispanic sorcerer, Cervantes, Castaneda’s Sancho Panza to Don Juan’s Quijote?” According to Sukenick, even if Castaneda’s works are not novels they are still stories, that is, they pertain somehow to literary culture rather than science. And Castaneda’s story about Don Juan’s story indeed explores similar, if neglected, areas of our culture. These areas, these “enormous realms of experience” closely connected to the exploration of the unknown and imagination, which are in fact “the fertile medium in which we live,” have been consistently fended off by a culture which insists on the separation between true or false and which, by not tolerating the unexplainable, attempts at explaining it all “until it is explained away and we don’t have to be afraid of it anymore.” (Sukenick, 1976, p.112). Imagination has been deflected by the “hysterical strength of our commitment to statistics,” and our culture, to go back to the literary allusion, “has conceded too much to the pragmatic Sancho.” But in Castaneda’s story Carlos/Sancho’s pragmatism is torn to pieces and his conversion to Don Juan/Quijote’s fantastic world leaves us readers wandering about in our wasted unimaginative land:

Here it is Sancho Castaneda who undergoes the conversion, who finally has to admit that the windmills are giants, and that he has to struggle with them. Here it turns out that the Don is sane after all and the rest of us are mad, or if not mad at least gross dullards. (Sukenick, 1976, p.116).

Castaneda's work has also been seen as purely fictional. David Murray believes the real question to be asked about Castaneda is not whether it is fiction or ethnography but rather what kind of fiction he writes, namely occult or modern nonrealist? According to Murray, Castaneda's framework belongs to the former and should be seen as such, that is, as a literature of the trivial that

while it suggests a departure from realism, it is totally parasitic upon it and has nothing to offer except for the cheap thrill (cheap because nothing is really risked) of a temporary departure from it. (Murray, 1981, p. 182).⁹

Murray also makes the connection between the ambiguous subjectivity of Castaneda's narrative, which is detached from any communal experience to be expected from an ethnographic account, and therefore shows no social dimension, and the Romantic ideas of the "supposed liberation from rationality and its imposed categories of the 60s counterculture," which are themselves part of a long tradition in American literary culture.

The way Castaneda deals with the concept of power is a typical example in that it is not related to Don Juan's healing abilities and its social functions but rather to something personal and supernatural that lacks a communal dimension altogether. As Murray points out:

the idea that power and enlightenment are achieved *outside* one's community, in an isolation broken only by a confrontation with a primitive or alien individual, has a long pedigree in classic American literature (Murray, 1981, p. 173) ¹⁰

⁹ As examples of writing based on master-pupil relationship that became best-sellers in the same period Murray uses: Doug Boyd *Rolling Thunder*, 1974; John G. Neihardt *Black Elk Speaks*, 1988; and John Lame Deer *Lame Deer: Seeker of Visions*, 1972.

¹⁰ Murray is here referring to the connection between the traditional presence of hunting magic in American literature, as with whales, bears, or deer, and the power of the warrior in

This power generated without sympathy or humanity, and therefore lacking any meaningful moral dimension, is in itself a characteristic of “Castaneda and so much literature of the occult” Murray contends.

As indicated by Murray, Castaneda’s books did start as ethnography but did not hold to it. The first three books could be considered ethnographic accounts based on hallucinogenic-induced experiences, in that the narrative allowed us to categorize those experiences into a psychological/spiritual exploration within an anthropological panorama. But from then on, the gaps and misinformation to be found in the narrative (how could he be in two different places at the same time, or did he really fly, or how could he be spoken to by a dog, etc.) lead, as Murray puts it, to an “area congruent with if not identical to fiction, regardless of how much of it Castaneda actually experienced (at any level of reality).”¹¹ As Murray points out, Castaneda’s work shifts from psychological accounts to occult fiction as soon as it starts dealing with another level of reality, “a separate reality,” which cuts into the ordinary one: “the occult necessarily distinguishes itself from fantasy by its insistence on the *intrusion* of the ‘other’ into this world on this world’s terms.” (Murray, 1981, p. 177). The different aspect with Castaneda’s work, when compared for instance, with Mircea Eliade’s, is that, as Murray asserts, the latter “at least keeps his anthropology and his fiction separate.” Hence, Castaneda is somewhat “accused” once again of being neither an ethnographer nor a writer, or, in other words, of writing false ethnography and bad fiction.¹²

Castaneda, which, apart from excluding women, “must be protected from being dissipated in the social or commonplace” (Murray, 1981, p. 174).

¹¹ Murray, 1981, p. 176. By the time of Murray’s article Castaneda had published only four books, and hence it analyzes this shift of narrative structure based only in *Tales of Power*. Notwithstanding, as time went on, and Castaneda published his other sequels, the amount of gaps and misinformation kept on growing along with other traces of collage and sometimes sheer plagiarism. An example of the latter can be found in the title of Castaneda’s sixth book, *The Eagle’s Gift*, which “incidentally” coincides with an early 20th century account of Eskimo shamanism by Knud Rasmussen: *The Eagle’s Gift, Alaska Eskimo Tales*. New York: Doubleday, 1932)! This borrowing was surprisingly absent from De Mille’s books’ impressive attempts to depict the many unacknowledged borrowings in Castaneda’s narratives.

¹² It is interesting to notice how Castaneda’s books are catalogued both in library records and on bookshop shelves. One can find them in such areas as anthropology, sociology, psychology,

Murray believes that Castaneda writes under the limitations of occult literature, which he considers a minor genre, and suggests that the gaps and discontinuities found in Castaneda's work are part of the author's incorporation of techniques of fiction. As stated by Murray, in order to create the occult in literature, "one must first have the normal and the logical syntax to disrupt," and this makes it very often dependent on "this power of language to disrupt or subvert itself." (Murray, 1981, p. 179). In order to support his argument, Murray quotes Tzvetan Todorov's ideas on the dependence of the fantastic upon language to exist:

If the fantastic constantly makes use of rhetorical figures, it is because it originates in them. The supernatural is born of language, it is both its consequence and its proof: not only do the devil and vampires exist only in words, but language alone enables us to conceive what is always absent: the supernatural.¹³

According to Murray this disruption in syntax, which is clearly an indication of the fictional nature of Castaneda's work, can be seen in his fourth book, *Tales of Power*. When Castaneda describes an experience while lying out in the desert at night, he says it was neither a dream nor a vision, that it was a physical sensation with no relation to anything in the environment. As Murray points out, these sorts of depiction, which avoid classification by denial and paradox, are "negatives" that "cut off ways of categorizing what happened, either as a subjective experience or as an objective event. *It is situated uniquely between the two.*" (Murray, 1981, p. 179). I have italicized the last sentence to show that, where Murray recognizes ambiguity related to the presentation of Castaneda's work as occult fiction rather than psychological account, I myself see, unlike Todorov, the uniqueness of the non-linguistic nature of the supernatural and of Castaneda's effort to represent it. Once again the allusion to Cervantes comes to mind through Sukenick's question: "Why do we have to keep on saying the giants are, of course, really windmills, when the only important thing about them, as far as we're concerned, is that they're really giants?" (Sukenick, 1976, p.116).

fiction, New Age, and esoteric.

¹³ Murray is quoting from Todorov, 1973, p. 82.

Translating the sacred space, or supernatural, into secular language is not an easy undertaking, and transcribing the unworldly requires such “negatives,” even though they might appear as mere techniques of occult fiction. Throughout his work, Castaneda is constantly telling his reader that his narrative is based on real events as opposed to fictional ones. They can only be seen as supernatural from our natural stance. Accordingly, as Deleuze points out,

the great and only error lines in thinking that a line of flight consists in fleeing from life; the flight into the imaginary, or into art. On the contrary, to flee is to produce the real, to create life, to find a weapon. (Deleuze, 1987, p.49).

In keeping with Castaneda, Don Juan’s world, which *is* the supernatural, is as real as this one and his mission as a writer is to try to make his readers *see* this. Don Juan does not interpret the supernatural for Castaneda but, as Deleuze remarks, can only lead his apprentice into the experimentation of what is beyond the reach of words before letting him take down his notes and try to put it down into words. Don Juan is often reminding his pupil that all accounts of life are but representations of reality, fictions, as it were, which therefore should not be apprehended solely under the primacy of the objectively induced rational understanding.

In a way, Castaneda is acting like his readers’ master just as he says his own master is acting with him, that is, he is writing and trying to explain what can only be experienced.¹⁴ Hence, Todorov’s assertion is precisely what Castaneda writes “against,” namely to undermine Carlos’ (and for that matter our) literal-linguistic interpretations of imaginal-shamanic experiences. Only those who have never experienced the supernatural (devils and vampires included) can claim it to be born out of words. Relegating the realm of the “imaginaire” to the scope of words is like trying to validate or invalidate sorcery by means of scientific scrutiny. As Castaneda himself once remarked, after being questioned about his biographical

¹⁴ For a similar analysis see Elsa First, “Don Juan is to Carlos as Carlos is to Us”. In: Noel, 1976, p. 57-64.

details, “to ask me to verify my life by giving you my statistics is like using science to validate sorcery. It robs the world of its magic, and makes milestones out of us all.”¹⁵ Imagination (the true bearer of supernatural beings) is much more powerful than language and its expression is ultimately represented by vivid synesthetic perception rather than by words, which, as Nietzsche has suggested, can only express what is already dead in the heart. Todorov shows perhaps his total ignorance of native languages in general, which, apart from being oral-based, do not exclude other dimensions of existence in their symbolic, rather than syntactic, representations.¹⁶ Sukenick’s interrogation is yet again of value here: “why are American artists so guilty about the imagination? We should not need an old wizard, O Humanities Departments [O Todorov], to remind us of its scope and power.” (Sukenick, 1976, p.116). Todorov insists on the supremacy of language over the imaginary, conditioning the latter’s very representation to the former’s power, and hence denies the very power of language, as it appears in symbolic-allegorical discourses of literary culture, to defy and challenge precisely that which can not be worded.

In the preface to the Mexican edition of Carlos Castaneda’s first book, Octavio Paz writes at length on the enigmatic nature of a work, which, according to him, has, since its emergence, generated strangeness and uncertainty (Castaneda, 1974)¹⁷. Paz’s preface is titled “The earlier gaze” and it refers to what he believes Castaneda’s work is able to bring forth, that is, the power to perceive in the world something beyond the dichotomies of good-or-bad, true-or-false, real-or-illusory; a secret we all had before losing it under the grind of modern civilization and its historical-critical approach to reality

¹⁵ Robert Hughes and Sandra Burton, “Don Juan and the Sorcerer’s Apprentice” *Time Magazine*, 44.

¹⁶ Over all, in the end, all we are left are stories. Accordingly, an ancient Nahuatl poem entitled “Ephemeral Life,” reads: “Alas, I shall leave the fairest of flowers, I shall go down in search for the far beyond! Alas, for a moment it felt weary: we can borrow but the beautiful songs!” in Angel María Garibay K. *Llave del Nahuatl* (México: Editorial Porrúa, 1994) 182. [My translation].

¹⁷ The original text here, that is, the preface by Paz, entitled “La Mirada Anterior,” is written in Spanish and the translation is my own.

based on a rational-logical understanding to the detriment of a more symbolical-hermeneutical apprehension of the things of the world. Paz confesses to be more intrigued by the mystery of Castaneda's work than by that of the man himself, which he sees as trivial when compared to the enigmas proposed by his books.¹⁸ Accordingly, Paz asks himself the usual question about the nature of the work as anthropological or fictional, although he is aware of its redundancy given the recognition, as he remarks, by the most severe of its critics, of the literary fiction as an ethnographic document as well as of the document having indubitable literary value. The work of Castaneda nonetheless challenges this very redundancy. As Paz points out:

If Castaneda's books are a work of literary fiction they are so in a very strange way: its theme is the defeat of anthropology and the victory of magic; if they are works of anthropology their theme can not be the less strange: the vengeance of the anthropological "object" (a wizard) upon the anthropologist until it turns him into a sorcerer. Anti-anthropology. (Paz, 1974, p.11).

The new world into which Castaneda is thrown is a separate reality that challenges not only his view of the subject as a scientist but even his perception of the world as a human being. Not only do the elements of the relation change, but also the relation itself will not be the same. As Paz asserts, "the duality subject/object – the subject who knows and the object to be known – vanishes and in its place appears that of master/neophyte," and what had been a scientific relation is now of a magic-religious pattern, wherein the anthropologist who wanted to know the other becomes the apprentice who wants to convert himself into the other. What we see is a double conversion, "that of the anthropologist into a sorcerer and that of anthropology into *another* knowledge."

It is important to observe here that Paz is making use of his concept of "otherness" to support his comments on Castaneda's writings.¹⁹ This concept, which Paz himself refers to as an experience,

¹⁸ At the time of the Mexican edition, for which Paz writes his preface, Castaneda had published only three books.

¹⁹ The concept of "otherness" is elaborated and discussed by Octavio Paz in *El Arco y la Lira*, 1956.

deals with the relation between the self and the other expressed mainly in magic, religion, and poetry, but, as the author emphasizes, not only in those categories, as “from the Paleolithic until today it is a central part in the lives of men and women.” (Paz, 1974, p.12). According to Paz, the “otherness” is a constitutive experience for man just as language and work are, and it “embraces all from the child’s playing to the erotic encounter, from the awareness of being alone in the world to the feeling of being part of the world.” As if Paz had written on the “otherness” only to analyze Castaneda’s work, his theory fits so perfectly in order to understand the “secret” message of Don Juan’s apprentice that one is tempted to say that maybe it was Castaneda who wrote his ideas based on Paz’s among others.²⁰ For the “otherness” is a “disengagement of the self we are (or so we believe to be) towards the *other* that we also are and which is always different from us. Disengagement: apparition: Experience of the *strangeness* of being human.” (Paz, 1974, p.12). Only by becoming another will the neophyte acquire the *other* knowledge that will open the *other* reality for him in Don Juan’s world.

Castaneda’s work represents a double breakthrough as a critical overthrow of anthropology in that it touches the opposite borders of philosophy and religion. On the one hand, it is philosophical because, after a radical critique of reality, it proposes a new one, a new knowledge, as it were, non-scientific and non-logical.²¹ On the other hand, it is also a religious proposal in that it requires a change of nature in the initiate, that is, a conversion. As Paz points out, Castaneda’s books “are the chronicle of a conversion, the account of a spiritual awakening ... they represent the rediscovery and the defense of a knowledge not dear to the West and to contemporary science.” The relation between knowledge and change, absolute change, is therefore a leitmotif in all of Castaneda’s work:

The theme of knowledge is linked to that of power and both to that of metamorphosis: the man who knows (the sorcerer) is the man of

²⁰ Perhaps this is only to say that both Castaneda and Paz have a common literary and intellectual heritage of Romanticism.

²¹ Or, if one takes a negative view, a rather old knowledge, a fusion of 19th century Romanticism and mysticism, in the manner of Herman Hesse.

power (the warrior) and both, knowledge and power, are the keys to change. The sorcerer can see the other reality because he sees it with other eyes – with the eyes of the *other*. (Paz, 1974, p.12).

The warrior, that is, the apprentice of a man of knowledge, which in Castaneda's books is himself, is introduced into such a different perception of the world through the instructions of a shaman, Don Juan Matus.

In keeping with Paz, what matters is the ability to see through the eyes of the other, to be able to contemplate the “otherness” in the everyday world. In order to give his apprentice such an ability Don Juan conveys to him not the inconsistency of our descriptions of reality – be it from everyday life or from philosophy – but the consistency of the magical vision of the world. Not only the vision but mainly the practice, for magic is above all a practice and “Castaneda's books, although possessing a theoretical basis, radical skepticism, are the account of the initiation to a doctrine wherein the practice occupies a central position.” (Paz, 1974, p. 20). What really matters is not what Don Juan and his cohort Don Genaro are saying but what they are doing all the time. And what do they do? Extraordinary things to which Castaneda always reacts as if he was going to die due to their impossibility in the physical world of everyday life, generating an immense outburst of laughter in both shamans every time he does so, as if the whole of his initiation were but the funniest of activities in the eyes of the shamans. But are those prodigies real or illusory? In other words, is Castaneda writing ethnography or fiction? The answer is neither of these; both the prodigies and his writings are mediums to destroy everyday reality. There is a double dialectics of humor at play here. Castaneda should doubt both the reality of the everyday reality, denied by the prodigies, and the reality of the prodigies, denied by the shaman's laughing. And his reader is invited to do the same, that is, to doubt both the scientific truth of ethnography, torn to pieces by Don Juan's reiterations after Castaneda's carefully chosen rational remarks, and the fictional truth, denied by the author who, as if wearing Don Juan's mask of laughter, insists on telling his reader that his

work is nothing but an ethnographic account. It is my contention that Castaneda's work is experimental fictional ethnography, that is, a literary piece based on ethnographic data. The very nature of Castaneda's writings seems to work as a paradoxical allegory for his proposition in that it blends two apparently divergent fields into a text that dialectically defies them in order to translate the sacred.

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