

A Sorcerer's Corner

Carlos Castaneda's Doomed Romance with Knowledge

By Aeolus Kephas, 2011

I: The Pen is Mightier (A Sorcerer-Academic in Exile)

Over the years, Carlos Castaneda (who died of liver cancer in 1999) sold millions of books and stirred up a mountain of speculation and controversy. He was called “the godfather of the New Age” by *Time* magazine, an ironic designation (his works are hardly populist) but an indication of his influence on “alternative” Western thought. Over the years, Castaneda has been denounced as a trickster, hoaxer, opportunist, and just plain liar (for example, by Richard de Mille in *Castaneda's Journey* and *The Don Juan Papers*, and Jay Courtney Fikes in *Carlos Castaneda: Academic Opportunism and the Psychedelic Sixties*). Without going into detail, there are a considerable number of inconsistencies, if not glaring contradictions, to be found in his books, and these have led skeptics to conclude that the accounts were cut from whole cloth. I may as well say, right off the bat, that I consider this idea untenable. There is simply too much in the books of obvious merit—too much insight, depth, and sheer novelty—for me to believe that the answer is as straightforward or convenient as that he made it all up. Ironically, since Castaneda claimed to be recounting his initiation into a “separate reality” in which the laws of physics were closer to quantum mechanics than those of Newton (i.e., more microcosmic than macro-, more subjective dream reality than objective consensus reality), the shaky, amorphous quality of his accounts could even be said to *confirm* their authenticity, rather than to undermine it.¹

Those who put forward the hoax-invention angle rarely acknowledge the kind of literary genius required to pull off such a hoax—on a par at the very least with Edgar Allan Poe—perhaps because, if they did, they would wind up expressing admiration and awe rather than skepticism and consternation. On the other hand, the examples that are given of seemingly recycled knowledge in Castaneda's books (luminous eggs, energy filaments, similarities to Krishnamurti and Gurdjieff, and so forth) could just as well be cited as validation. Such sweeping criticisms invariably ignore the much more unique material in the books, that pertaining to the “old seers,” for example, to the first and second “attentions” and “the assemblage point,” and some extremely precise psychological descriptions that pertain to the art of *stalking*. Many of these latter observations I have found verifiable in day-to-day existence, while at the same time they

¹ One charge leveled at Castaneda was that, once his “tales of power” had apparently reached a natural end (when don Juan left the world), he contrived a way to spin off a bunch more books by accessing buried memories of “the left side.” In my opinion there is nothing in the books themselves that suggests such a subterfuge. Some people argue that the books declined in quality after *Tales of Power*, and that this substantiates the idea that Castaneda was making it all up, but this might be circular logic: the later books contain more outlandish and unbelievable accounts, therefore they are of lesser quality, therefore the accounts can't be true. But since, in the later books, Castaneda is describing his experiences in the second attention, that would account for their increased outlandishness. To my mind, and with *The Art of Dreaming* as a curious exception, Castaneda's works continued to astonish, and even surpass themselves, with each subsequent volume.

seem to have no precedent in esoteric or psychological literature. To me, this strongly suggests that Castaneda obtained this information somewhere other than from his own imagination.

The well-known spiritual teacher, Osho, had this to say about Castaneda:

If there were someone like Don Juan he would be enlightened, he would be like a Buddha or a Lao Tzu—but there is nobody like Don Juan. Carlos Castaneda's books are ninety-nine per cent fiction—beautiful, artful, but fiction. As there are scientific fictions, there are spiritual fictions also. . . . When I say fiction I don't mean don't read him, I mean read him more carefully, because one per cent of truth is there. You will have to read it very carefully, but don't swallow it completely because it is ninety-nine per cent fiction. . . . On that one per cent of truth he has been able to create a big edifice. On that one per cent of truth he has been able to project much imagination. On that one iota of truth he has made the whole house, a beautiful palace—a fairy tale. But that one per cent of truth is there, otherwise it would have been impossible. This man has come across some being who knows something, and then through drugs, LSD and others, he *has projected that small truth into imaginary worlds*. Then his whole fiction is created. [My italics.]²

While I don't agree with Osho's conclusion, or at least with his ratio of truth to fiction, the idea that Castaneda must be read with extreme discernment, and the suggestion that he fell prey to fantasy, seem to me to be accurate. Castaneda had a gift for bringing almost inconceivable concepts and experiences into the realm of everyday reality. His work forms a bridge between two apparently (or previously) inseparable worlds, and invites the reader to cross over into "a separate reality." The tendency of the reader—to the extent that they lack direct experience of the world of sorcery—is to imagine that that other reality must adhere to the same rules as this one. Although Castaneda wrote of "first and second attentions," he describes most of the events as if they are occurring in the "first attention," that's to say, the reality which we all know. Had he not done so, his books would have been much closer to what, possibly, they actually are: *dream narratives*.

I don't think Castaneda invented anything in his books: I think he dreamed many of the events he recounts, maybe even most of them, and then did what he could to reformulate them, or reconceive them, *as if they had happened in this reality*. In the process of that reformulation, it may be that something else happened. Since there was a larger than average amount of *interpretation* in transcribing his experiences in the second attention (his dreams), Castaneda's own personal bias colored his accounts. Little by little, and unbeknownst to Carlos himself, they became the means to his own ends. The obvious end for Castaneda was that he became a titled academic (he got a master's degree for *Journey to Ixtlan*), a best-selling author and leading figure in the

² In an email to me, Castaneda's wife Amy Wallace wrote: "Carlos agreed with Osho, by the way, and said '99% of everything I say and write is bullshit.'" I wondered if that statement was included in the ninety-nine percent.

counterculture, a guru, and finally a cult leader. In his own mind, he got to be a warrior and a sorcerer. Since everything in a warrior-sorcerers' life comes down to hunting energy and turning it into personal power, Carlos was on a "power trip" in the most dramatic and profound sense of the phrase. While Castaneda accessed some extremely powerful and profound truths about existence, he then used those truths for his own empowerment, thereby turning them into something *less than truth*—something closer to an extremely glamorous kind of information. If so, then the accuracy and authenticity of his writings is a far subtler and more mysterious question than investigators such as De Mille could ever hope to answer, and even than a supposed "Master" such as Osho was able to comprehend (or willing to speak about).

Osho's comment was that Castaneda *projected truth into imaginary worlds*. I think this is accurate, and that the books themselves are acts of sorcery, and the separate reality which Castaneda led millions of people into was one which he co-created *using the reader's attention to do so*. Castaneda's books (there are ten in all, not counting *Magical Passes* and *Wheel of Time*) not only *describe* a perception of a separate reality—to a degree they also *induce* it. All good writing creates a trance state in the reader, provided they are willing to be entranced, and Castaneda's books excel at creating such states. My guess is that this is because they were written—or at least conceived—while their author was in an unusually deep trance state. Castaneda even admits in one of the volumes that he *dreamed* his books before writing them. For the remainder of this article, then, I will assume that, however unreliable his accounts might be, and despite any evidence of "tampering," Castaneda was reporting experiences that genuinely *happened*, and not merely inventing them or suffering from hallucinations. However, and somewhat ironically, this argument is predicated on a belief (mine) that such a thing as the second attention exists, and that dreams are indeed gateways into another reality, one that exists on a parallel track to this one. It then becomes possible that some, maybe even most, of Castaneda's encounters with "sorcerers" occurred in another realm to the one we are accustomed to calling reality.

If we allow for this possibility, then Castaneda's gift was for relaying experiences and knowledge *passed on to him from elsewhere* while in an altered state of awareness. In other words, his greatest insights, although they came through him, do not appear to have come *from* him. This can be said of all great artists, in one way or another; the problem with Castaneda is that his source was not God, but *godlike beings* with whom he had direct contact (even if through dreams). If his accounts are to be even partially believed, then Castaneda was a kind of glorified postman for superior, post-human intelligences. And Carlos' way of dealing with his soul-shattering experiences was even *by writing them down*—as suggested by don Juan, in one of the early books, when Carlos becomes a figure of fun to the sorcerers because of his relentless note-taking. Don Juan compares Carlos and his notebook to a drunkard with his bottle, or a baby with his pacifier—writing for Carlos was a particular "doing" which he used as "shield" against the onslaught of the irrational which being caught up in the sorcerers' world entailed. Writing about his experiences was a way for Carlos to distance himself from them—hence, as DeMille suggested, there were two sides to Castaneda: there was Carlos, the character, swept away by the sorcerers' narrative, and there was Castaneda, the aloof master-chronicler of that fantastic narrative.

It may be pointed out here that if, as I'm suggesting, Castaneda dreamt many of his experiences, it's unlikely he actually *dreamed* he was taking notes throughout. In which case, Carlos' note-taking may have been a literary device (created by Castaneda) necessary, on the one hand, to explain how he was able to remember everything in such vivid detail, while on the other, serving as a symbolic indication of his tendency to remain detached from his experiences, a passive witness, much as we often are as *dreamers*.³ One thing is certain, and that is that, first and foremost, Castaneda was a writer. Writing was his primary function both in his ordinary life (assuming there was such a thing) and in the world of sorcerers (assuming there was such a thing). When we write down our experiences, we naturally have a degree of control over them that we lack while simply living them. As the author of his own experiences, Castaneda could recount them—and maybe even *remember* them?—any way he chose. This is why writing down an account of factual events always renders them as fiction, no matter how accurate a writer tries to be. While writing can help us to assimilate and understand an experience, by the same token it can also foster *the illusion of having done so*. There is always the danger that writing about an experience will become a means *not* to assimilate it fully, because, by having control over our experience and reaching premature conclusions about it, we can file it away and forget all about it. Intellectual understanding is theoretical and not practical—it's "all in the head." Its power is to make the unknown known, a double-edged sword, because we can use the mind to fool ourselves into *thinking* we know, when all we have done is interpreted an unknown and accepted that interpretation *as reality*.

There is plenty of evidence (not the hard kind, but suggestive evidence) that Castaneda was allowed access into the sorcerers' world not because he necessarily belonged there, but because he had the right kind of "journalistic" (i.e., intellectual) bent to pass on his experiences to the rest of humanity. If that was his actual reason for being among such beings—and/or for being visited/abducted by them in his dreams—it's possible that (like his fellow imaginer Whitley Strieber) he was exposed to a level of intensity, power, and revelation that he wasn't ready for. Like a photo-journalist who ends up in a war zone, dodging bullets and witnessing atrocities while trying to hold his camera straight and keep his head despite his lack of army training, such an experience could unhinge the sturdiest of minds. If Castaneda was only given his experiences in order to relay information to the world, his own integration and understanding of them may have been inessential to that function. Castaneda's testimonies then become the accounts of one man's rational struggle with impossible realities, while at the same time, they provide a subtle (but unwitting) description of the pitfalls the intellect encounters as it tries to navigate its way through the war zone-wonderland of the sorcerers' world.

In short, the same formidable intellect that allowed Castaneda to communicate the energetic truths he was given may have meant that Carlos was unable to fully assimilate them. In the first of his books, for example, *The Teachings of Don Juan*, a third of the work is devoted to an unreadable appendix called "A Structural Analysis," in which Castaneda attempts to wrestle the imaginal realities (which he has just recounted so

³ In *The Eagle's Gift*, Castaneda describes when he starts to access memories of "the left side" (second attention) through *dreaming*, and how he has a choice either to witness the dream/memory from the outside, as if it were happening to someone else (his past self), or entering into the dream-memory, and reliving it from the inside.

magically) down to the rubber mat of reason. The attempt seems less to mollify skeptical academics than to satisfy some need in Castaneda himself: to strip his experiences as “Carlos” of all their magic, power, and meaning. In the process, he reveals himself as a rational lunatic, an unwitting clown dancing buffoon-like while infinity takes pot-shots at his feet. The tragicomic aspect of his story is that Castaneda may even have been chosen partially for this very limitation, because, as an intellectually sophisticated Western male, he was equipped to present the knowledge in a way that would be easily digestible to the general public. At the same time, and once Carlos’ own life had played out its tragic tune to the bitter end, it would also make abundantly clear the dangers of that knowledge, and the limitations of the intellect for grasping it. Although he gave up trying to pass for an academic, Castaneda kept on writing books to the end, and if accounts of that end are to be believed (primarily those found in Amy Wallace’s *Sorcerer’s Apprentice*), the knowledge he worked so hard to bring to the world finally slipped through his fingers. This fact may provide the most persuasive evidence that Castaneda’s exposure to the incomprehensible forces of sorcery proved too much for Carlitos. It strongly suggests that, unwilling or unable to relinquish his self-importance, he was defeated by “the third enemy of a man of knowledge,” succumbed to the temptations of power, and became (in the words of don Juan) a “cruel, capricious man.”

While Castaneda never presented his works as fiction (he fiercely denied such charges), he was cunning enough to make sure they *read* as fiction. As such, and in a sense, his books became indistinguishable from fiction. I’d wager that this is a major reason for all the confusion and skepticism, because anything that looks this much like a yarn must *be* a yarn. But I wonder also if it was part of Castaneda’s subterfuge. The novelistic form of the books allows more literal-minded readers, those unable to entertain the subtle, subjective nature of the sorcerers’ world, to dismiss them, based on purely *circumstantial* evidence (the many contradictions cited by DeMille and others). This subterfuge might have been considered necessary, not only for the protection of the message, but that of the messenger also (and the public). Yet it seems to me that the real danger which Castaneda-the-messenger faced was his own incapacity to shoulder the burden of knowledge.⁴

⁴ Since Carlos was privy to the inner workings of the sorcerers’ world, he was obliged to carry experiences which he could share with no one, not even his readership. Since he would have been unable to comprehend much of the knowledge he had been granted, being so far beyond his experience, he wouldn’t have been able to write about it either, so it was solely for him. This is why it is essential that, whatever else, the messenger must not allow his experiences—neither the honor nor the high-unbearable pressure of being chosen as divine emissary—to go to his head. To do so proves fatal, in one way or another. The temptation to succumb to a sense of power and uniqueness is one that all extraordinary individuals have to face, and overcome, in lieu of being corrupted. That temptation becomes especially great when, as an extraordinary individual, they are marginalized by ordinary people, shunned. Prophets tended to be thought insane, and so they often wound up that way. The combination of exposure to divine knowledge with frustration, anger, and despair in the face of a world’s incomprehension and indifference often leads to self-righteous aloofness and superiority. Likewise, the traumatic effects of revelation combined with a complete lack of support from one’s fellow men is likely to drive such an individual into psychotic delusions of grandeur. The only way for the messenger to withstand the pressure and not wind up half-mad with paranoia and megalomania (two symptoms exhibited by Castaneda in his final years) is to constantly remind himself that he is only a messenger. As a carrier of information, he has neither the power nor responsibility to create (or even interpret) the message. His only task to deliver it faithfully and withdraw.

Caught between a strange and deeply threatening new reality, and an old reality that no longer offered much comfort or assurance, that would have seemed increasingly hollow and illusory, is it any wonder if Castaneda took refuge in the role of Carlos, sorcerer-author, guru, and cult leader? It may have been the only bridge he had between the two worlds which he was straddling, and the only way for him to make sense of either. The irony and tragedy of Castaneda, the writer, is that the tool he was using to protect himself from madness—his intellect—was the very thing that was most likely to undo him in the end. In the end, writing became not so much a bridge between worlds but a means to take *refuge in an imaginary world*—refuge even from the truth which he used to create that world. Being the author, Castaneda, would have given him an illusion of control as “Carlos” (his own creation) so intoxicating that it was almost bound to turn into an obsessive and neurotic drive for power. The very gift for which Castaneda was chosen, as the conveyer of hidden knowledge, would eventually make Carlos an outcast in both the world of men and the world of sorcerers.

II: Abstract Falsehoods

The next part of this essay—in the spirit of its subject matter—comes from a dream I had some years ago (2006) about Castaneda and the sorcerer’s path. It is not based on any factual accounts or even on material from the books (though it pertains to them), and foregoes any attempt at objective analysis. Instead it dives into the deep end of “received knowledge,” or at least imaginative reasoning (and storytelling)—just as Castaneda himself did. The reader may therefore wish to apply a greater degree of discernment for this segment.

I am in a dimly lit room discussing the Kennedy assassination with a second person. More than just discussing it, we are almost reliving it. The forces behind the assassination, dark sorcerers, are trying “to turn the abyss inside out.” They are attempting this “because it is impossible.” I mention the play *Macbeth*, saying that it is a good parallel to the assassination (I remembered later that it was performed in the White House, just prior to Kennedy’s death). The other person thinks about it then disagrees. *Macbeth* was about slaying the king in order to become the king. “They” killed Kennedy for far more complex and less human reasons than mere worldly ambition. Yet the parallel does exist. I state that the *emotions* involved in the Kennedy assassination, ambition bordering on insanity, greed, envy, fear, hatred, remorse, despair, hunger for power, are similar to the emotions that run, like pigment, through Shakespeare’s darkest play.

I am then discussing with someone Carlos Castaneda and his books. They are informing me that there is a basic and profound flaw in the works (something about the Sun and the Eagle), and that “they are not to be trusted.” My realizing and accepting this painful truth is a test of my warrior’s spirit. It is the equivalent of a religious man’s test of faith, or of the existential crisis of an atheist. It may in fact be somewhere between the two, since a sorcerer is neither religious nor atheist. Perhaps it is akin to a Gnostic who must accept that he is really *agnostic*, i.e., does *not* know, as yet, and cannot take it on faith. For the past eighteen years, I have “followed” (attempted to live by) the teachings

found in Castaneda's books as rigorously as I have been able. It is perhaps only a slight exaggeration to say that they got me where I am today. Yet these books are not to be trusted? If so, I realize that this is true of *all* written works. This fact, or realization (that anything that can be written down is false), is doubly challenging to me as a writer. Whatever I believe, and whatever I write (being founded in what I believe), is flawed, incomplete, potentially misleading at best, at worst counterproductive. At first this seems like a terrible truth. Then I realize that I *have* to write, I have no choice. So it doesn't really matter, does it? Or does it?

Perhaps the danger is in believing in the sanctity and infallibility of my own words, thoughts, and intellect, as Castaneda apparently did, and so falling into "the pit of Because"? Another point that is raised in my dream is that "people read in order to relax." This is what attracts people to books, and to written doctrine: the unconscious fact that, by engaging the intellect, they are able to relax and feel temporarily at peace. In a sense, we trick ourselves into believing, just as when we read a novel, in order to find comfort and solace in the abstract realm of thought and belief. People read to relax. Some people even read Nietzsche to relax (I was one of them).

I have no choice but to write. But I have a choice about what I believe.

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The death defiers, old seers who would turn the Abyss in on itself, are driven by the terror and the *hubris* that comes from knowing that what they aspire to *is* impossible. This gives them a (false) sense of heroism, or romance, about what they are doing. Their goal, their Opus Magnus, is the "Higher Identity" of individual Godhead. What they cannot or will not accept or understand is that this can never be. There is and can never exist any such "higher identity." It is a false goal, made real by a desperate hunger to attain it. It is an abstract falsehood.

The reason is that the Universe is designed to ensure that "personal intent" can never exist on the other side of the Abyss (or even once we are in it). Personal intent relates to—stems from—personal history. A Man of Knowledge (don Juan Matus, for example) is someone who has erased every last trace of personal history, and with it the personal self. There is no more nor less to it than this, and Castaneda may have unwittingly glorified and mystified what is really an incredibly simple, though monumentally hard, accomplishment. This is both why and because *he could not attain it himself*. Castaneda's works are his attempt to erase personal history by writing (and *reinventing*) it. But since he failed at this task, they remain contaminated by that history, as pure water that has passed through a dirty filter.

I am discussing this now with Lyn Birkbeck, the astrologer and a fellow warrior-traveler. If there is even one scrap of personal history left the moment a sorcerer attempts to cross the Abyss, the "Eagle" rejects the sorcerer and spits him out. He may be destroyed or he may be given a second chance, depending on factors beyond my understanding at this time. (Matus, in *Power of Silence*, was given a second chance. He died but the "Eagle" rejected him, so he began a new cycle of life. All this is very unclear.) That single scrap of personal history could be anything at all: the way a piece of candy tasted, the memory of a breeze on a summer's day, it doesn't matter. That one tiny scrap of memory (attachment?) will destroy everything, and the warrior's bid for freedom will either be delayed, or end in destruction. "For one kiss wilt thou then be willing to

give all; but whoso gives one particle of dust shall lose all in that hour.” (*Book of the Law*)

Apparently this relates to the body in some way, and the idea that even the slightest thought, pertaining to self-consciousness, at the Crossing of the Abyss will be magnified to Infinity. It will cause a blockage in the circuit and the entire organism will “short.”

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There is an odd interlude in the dream in which I am a Sherlock Holmes type character, sneaking into the sleeping quarters of the old seers (the dark side sorcerers), and carrying the leader out while he sleeps, laying him down in the middle of a trafficked highway so that he is rudely awoken by the sound of traffic. He then realizes he has literally been “caught napping.” The head sorcerer takes it well, however, as do his cohorts. They seem to have no problem admitting that “Sherlock” has got the better of them. Yet nor do they cease their efforts to find a loophole in space-time (a glitch in “the Rule”), by which they can cheat Death, the Universe, Karma, divine law. In the dream this is represented by their trying to get a TV to pass whole through the Abyss, and failing every time (the TV gets bounced back).

In the most obscure, intense, and mysterious part of the dream, I am with don Juan and Carlos for a time. We are in a large mansion, belonging to some rich friends of Carlos, where he stays sometimes, mooching. Carlos takes notes about everything. Then he leaves, and I am alone with don Juan. The telephone rings, he gets it. It is Carlos, collect-calling from some distant place. I ask don Juan if this is the first time he has done this, and don Juan shakes his head, no. He accepts the charges, explaining to me that, though extremely annoying, Carlos is also very useful. “He always asks the right questions.”

I deduce from this that they (the new seers) are using Carlos to get their doctrine out. I suspect that Carlos himself either never suspects or is unable to accept this fact: that he is only allowed to spend time with the seers so that he can write it all down. Otherwise, he would be unwelcome in their world. It may be this basic, incontrovertible fact that accounts for the “flaw” in his writing. Then again, it may not.

Don Juan is extremely crude with Carlos, seeming to take pleasure in shocking him. Carlos makes some realization about the body, and don Juan replies curtly, “The fucking body is for fucking, yes.” This statement, so far as I can glean, relates to organic existence. The actual reason for bodies to exist is in order to engage in carnal experience, yes; but this is not simply for the body’s satisfaction. It is rather that bodies, our bodies, are created by the Universe/Eagle in order to perpetuate itself. The goal of the Universe (and of the body) is to create perfect vessels for its awareness to reside in: the awareness of the Universe, as opposed to the personal self.

There is a profound and obscure point that Matus makes here, with the words: “The original sin was death.” So far as I can deduce from this, it implies that man did not come to know death because he sinned, but that dying—or perhaps the sense of a separate self that *can* die—is itself synonymous with and indistinguishable from “sin.” For this reason, death is the ultimate mark of “failure” for the Man of Knowledge. If he is truly a man of knowledge, death is an impossibility. It may be that the death defiers seek to defy the Universe by gaining personal immortality (“higher identity”), and that, over time, as they realize the folly of this, they gradually “evolve” into beings who seek to defy the

Universe by being erased, by “dying.” Both these things are unattainable however, are in fact the only two impossibles, in a Universe of possibilities. “Death is forbidden, o man, unto thee.” (*Book of the Law*)

Again I am talking with astrologer Lyn. We discuss how the Universe is arranged, and the Eagle’s gift to the warrior:

A warrior continues for an indeterminate time on his or her path with a heart. During this period (which is the exact duration of the warrior’s life as an individual self), he or she remains as if within an isolated space, a kind of cosmic quarantine. While s/he slogs away, keeping to the path of freedom, increasingly doubtful of ever attaining it, the only thing that keeps the warrior on this path—continuously focused on both the end, freedom, and the means, discipline—is his or her “personal intent,” or *will*. At a given point, however, a point which none but the Universe can determine, something gives. A bubble bursts, a lid is lifted, the Universe quite “literally” (energetically speaking) lets the warrior “out of the bag.” Once s/he is removed from the isolated space or “quarantine,” the warrior is then drawn inexorably through the “portal,” to freedom. In this final phase, *no volition or personal intent is required on the part of the warrior. In fact, it is not even possible.*

I deduce from this that the Universe does indeed apply a kind of quarantine, which ensures two things. Firstly, that no individual may attain freedom—i.e., become a vessel for divine consciousness, a Son of God—through *will* or desire alone. They must in effect be selected by the Universe to receive this breathtaking gift. This prevents the possibility of unscrupulous sorcerers, driven by superhuman thirst for power, attaining “higher identity” and becoming, as it were, fickle gods. It may easily be seen how this would quickly bring about the end, not only of the Universe, but of “God” Itself. (This may indeed be the ultimate goal and abstract falsehood of the death defiers, but let’s not go there!)

Secondly, and more directly pertinent to our concerns, this quarantine measure ensures that every warrior who remains on the path-with-a-heart for the necessary duration *will* attain freedom, through no specific act or achievement of their own, but merely by virtue of endurance, persistence, and, if you will, faith. This is a necessary rule. If personal volition had anything to do with those all-decisive moments in which a warrior makes the final bid for freedom, it would be impossible, utterly impossible, for the *fear* of failure not to bring about failure. The personal self (Poe’s imp of the perverse) being what it is, there would be *no way* to override the contrary impulse and *will* ourselves to fail. Out of sheer desire for freedom, our fear of not attaining it would invariably win out (the greater the desire, the greater the fear).

Another way of saying this is that the personal self cannot ever *will* its own erasure. It must be tricked into surrendering. The governing power is not the warrior’s but the Universe; as such, the Universe always gets its way and the warrior, *provided he hang in long enough*, invariably attains freedom.

After mulling over the dream later, I decided that there were three basic options for the individual who had embarked upon the warrior’s way, or path with a heart, and three alone.

- 1) To persist in the warrior’s way (a.k.a. “the path of righteousness,” “service of Spirit,” etc.), and endure the time of “incubation” or quarantine, until such a time

as the Universe breaks the seal and we return to our True Selves. (“A warrior is waiting and a warrior knows what he is waiting for.”)

2) To tire of and lose faith in the warrior’s way, and return to the heartless path of an unexamined life, complete with personal history, personal self-ness (*everything* is personal for the ordinary man), and a final, very personal death. This is by far the most common “failure” for the warrior—giving up.

3) Finally, there is the fool’s option, to defy the Rule. This is the way of the old seers (and presumably some new ones), by which they opted neither to persist in the warrior’s way nor to return to the ranks of ordinary ignorant humanity. Instead, they chose to forge their own path *against* the current, attempting to “turn the abyss inside out” and so escape the inexorable Law of Karma. This is the uncommon route to failure, and leads to such dire consequences that “failure” can hardly be considered the word, and “damnation” might really be more accurate.

In all cases, CHOICE *is* involved. This is the final beauty and power of the warrior’s way. Warriors take responsibility for the choices open to them, and make those choices accordingly. This is why there is no reason for fear on a path with a heart. Only that can befall us which we *consciously* choose to experience. The beautiful paradox of this is that, in the end, a warrior *has* no choice. He or she has accepted that the only possible freedom comes from surrendering the personal self to the “Rule,” which is God’s Will, and in submitting to the Law of the Divine.

III: A Rock & Roll Nagual’s Suicide

The challenge of Castaneda’s works is that they cannot be taken apart from the man himself, most specifically, the effect that the sorcerers’ knowledge had upon Carlos’ sanity. This is not so straightforward a challenge as merely distinguishing between fact and fiction, but of recognizing the ways in which the author’s distortions—his personal history—slanted the material and made it less than wholly accurate, or truthful. Richard DeMille’s books on Castaneda are written from the point of view of somebody who is certain that Carlos made everything up. DeMille has a great deal of evidence to support his argument, yet for many readers, myself included, his evidence remains inconclusive, and even somewhat irrelevant, because our own experiences *seem* to corroborate Castaneda’s accounts. And yet, there *is* a crucial element in the books that makes them deceptive. To put it more kindly, *they are not what they seem*.

There is a little-known book called *Encounters with The Nagual: Conversations with Carlos Castaneda*, by Armando Torres. In this book, Torres offers up some compelling descriptions of the sorcerers’ world which he claims are transcriptions of (unrecorded) dialogues with Castaneda. Fittingly, his book puts Carlos in the role of don Juan, the great sorcerer-seer, while Torres assumes the Castaneda role of asking “the right questions.” At one point in their exchange, Castaneda tells Armando Torres that don Juan was *the real author of the books*, and that, although he didn’t write them letter by letter, he was in charge and supervised every statement. “In time,” Castaneda tells Torres, “I discovered don Juan’s strategy had been carefully calculated.”

Here Castaneda confirms that he was chosen specifically to disclose the sorcerers' knowledge, and that this was at least partially why he was allowed into that world to begin with. Another factor to support this hypothesis is Castaneda's description of himself (in his own books as well as Torres') as "a three-pronged nagual," an energetic facet which meant he didn't really belong among the other sorcerers. Because of his strange "configuration," Carlos' function as a nagual wasn't to continue don Juan's lineage, but *to end it*. Presumably, writing the books was a central part of that denouement. In Torres' account, Castaneda states that the three-pronged nagual is "destructive to the established order, because their nature is not creative or nurturing," and that "they have the tendency to enslave all those who surround them." Torres' Castaneda adds that, to achieve freedom, these naguals must do it alone, "because their energy is not tuned to guide groups of warriors." This was born out by Castaneda's actions as a leader: he eventually went insane, and in the process he created an abusive cult in place of a group of warriors. Two of his closest apprentices—"the witches" Florinda Donner and Taisha Abelar, who also wrote sorcery books—allegedly wound up committing suicide after their nagual died.

Elsewhere in his book, Torres quotes Castaneda on his ideas about the different ways of dying:

The soul does not exist. What exists is energy. Once the physical body disappears, the only thing left is an energy entity fed by memory. Some individuals are so oblivious of themselves that they die almost without realizing it. People who die with a blockage of their assemblage point are like people with amnesia. They can no longer align memories because they do not have any continuity. As such, while they live they feel permanently on the brink of oblivion. Then when they die, those people disintegrate almost instantaneously. The impulse of their lives only lasts for a few years at the most. However, most people take a little longer disintegrating, between one hundred and two hundred years. The ones who had lives full of meaning can resist for half a millennium. The range expands even more for those who were able to create bonds with masses of people. They can retain their awareness during entire millennia. . . .

In a general sense, the duration of our existence depends in a great measure on how we treat our energy. Ordinarily we leave this life filled to the brim with everyday concerns. We are eroded by the things we see and touch. For that reason we die. But if we call back to ourselves all of that vital force through recapitulation, death can no longer be the same because we will have our totality. From the seers' point of view, a warrior who has recapitulated his life does not die. His attention is not dispersed, and is so compact that it is one continuous and coherent line. So his recapitulation never ends. It continues for eternity because it is the work of retracing his steps of existing on his own and being complete. . . .

A sorcerer is somebody who spends his life tuning himself through arduous discipline. When his time arrives, he faces death like a new stage in his travel along the path. Unlike an ordinary man, he does not try to soothe his fear with false hopes. The warrior departs for his definitive journey filled with joy, and his death greets him and allows him to keep his individuality like a trophy. His sense of being is so finely tuned that he becomes pure energy, and disappears with the fire from within. In that way, he is able to extend his individuality for thousands of millions of years. We are children of the Earth. It is our ultimate source. The option of sorcerers is to unite with the awareness of the Earth for as long as the Earth will live.

As everyone knows, the idea that our actions determine whether we are damned for all eternity or get to go to heaven is something that millions of Christians believe. Christians have a convenient loophole that makes such a burdensome belief bearable, however: as long as they accept Jesus Christ into their hearts and keep their faith in the Lord, they will be saved. Their belief isn't primarily about their actions on a moment to moment basis, and is not anchored in ordinary reality but is based on *faith*. Castaneda's belief system, on the other hand, was predicated on the same kind of stakes—the difference between dying and being erased forever or living for eternity (or thousands of millions of years)—but the outcome isn't based on faith but on “impeccability.” Each and every one of Carlos' actions played a part in determining whether or not he attained the sorcerers' goal of total freedom.

I have had my own experience of such an all-consuming belief, when under the influence of psychedelics I entered into a state of consciousness in which I was convinced that each of my actions determined whether I would be damned or not. I couldn't handle it. The reason I couldn't handle it was because the burden of such an awareness was too great for my person to bear. Essentially, I went insane for a brief period of time while I was living with that knowledge, or rather, with a distorted version of knowledge which *made it all about my personal actions*. Whether Carlos really believed in the two options of dying, and whether he really went insane, the message is the same: the sorcerers' knowledge is to be approached with utmost caution, and even with suspicion. In one of the books, Castaneda writes how it was necessary for the new seers (don Juan's lineage) to understand the teachings of the old seers, and even to incorporate them into their own teachings, in order to be sure not to make the same mistakes. Judging by how he ended up, the teachings of Carlos Castaneda—which supposedly pertain to the new seers—might best be seen in a similar light. Since they have been filtered through Carlos' own perceptions, and since Castaneda supposedly had some similar features to the old seers, they may be closer in essence to the teachings of those old seers, and may even be equally erroneous at some basic level. In a word, and going by Castaneda's example, they do not lead to freedom.

One way to judge a fruit (besides eating it) is to look very closely at the tree. If it's covered with bugs and other diseases, chances are the fruit isn't that healthy either. Carlos never attained freedom, and he never became one with his path with a heart. He remained a somebody on a path, and all his teachings were colored by that lack of alignment, that lack of heart. So in the end he became a negative example. He wound up

sick and alone, surrounded by the women he had enslaved. From what I can piece together of the clues, this was the result of using his “sorcerers’ task” as the rationale for gratifying his baser desires. The reason it went awry for Carlos, I think, is that he never fully let go of those desires, those personal agendas, and eventually they drove him into a sorcerer’s corner. If he never erased his personal history or healed the wounds of his past, then it would have been those same wounds that drove him into that corner.

Another way of saying this is that Castaneda never surrendered his will to power. The will to power is the masculine prerogative, and it is all about *doing*. The feminine energy (which might be called the power of love) is the energy of *being*, and ideally the two energies balance and complete one another. When the will to power is not balanced and kept in check by the surrendering energy of love, it leads not to freedom but to self-destruction. According to one of the most intriguing areas of Castaneda’s books, the old seers drove themselves into a corner when they attempted to attain freedom (to defy death) by becoming more than human. Power then becomes a way to avoid one’s humanness—vulnerability and fallibility—by *prematurely transcending* it instead of accepting and integrating it, and attaining freedom that way. Much like the old seers—only in his case as a writer and speaker—Castaneda was able to create a cloak with which to persuade thousands of people that he was something other—something greater—than he was. Pay no attention to the man behind the curtain. The efficacy of that cloak ensured that some critical blind spot within his psyche remained securely in place, and so he went deeper and deeper into distortion. Like a cancer, that blind spot worked away at an unconscious level until it took him over completely. He became delusional, and finally he went insane.

A little knowledge is a dangerous thing. Too much of it can kill. It was too much knowledge, and too much power, that drove Castaneda insane. Yet the problem of that knowledge may have been less the quantity, or even its quality, than *the way in which he interpreted it*. Judging by his books, Carlos’ downfall came about because he insisted on clinging to a personal perspective in which it was up to him to *do* something with the knowledge he had been given (something besides communicate it, that is). “Reality is a doing and a doing is measured by its fruits,” Castaneda told Torres. It’s a statement that speaks volumes about the bent of Carlos’ character. Although Castaneda wrote about “not-doing,” about becoming a nothing, erasing personal history and all the rest, his books are imbued with the energy of *doing*. They are romances—gripping mystery novels in which the author, as much as don Juan, is the protagonist. His decision to present his experiences as a dramatized narrative was probably based on a desire to convey the sorcerers’ knowledge in a way that was both arresting and absorbing to the public. His books, like all good novels, allow the reader to identify with Carlos’ narrative and to enter into it and experience it viscerally, as if it were happening to them. It was, I think, a calculated decision, and one that ensured the success of the books, as well as creating controversy and confusion around them, and a general consensus that they were largely fictional accounts. In a way, then, Castaneda chose popularity over credibility. I think it was the right decision for the books and for the readers; but it may have been the wrong one for Carlos.

Castaneda allegedly kept framed copies of his book covers on the walls of his “compound” in Los Angeles. It’s a strange decision for someone dedicated to erasing their personal history, and it suggests that Carlos’ identity was heavily invested in his

books and in the role of best-selling author. His books consolidated his identity as a writer-sorcerer, not only by turning him into a literary celebrity but also, in a less obvious way, by creating the character of “Carlos Castaneda.” The books cemented that character, the sorcerer’s apprentice and three-pronged nagual, in the collective consciousness by (optimistically) charting his addled and arduous path to freedom. Eventually, however, Carlos’ path with a heart became a road to ruin, as described by his “wife” Amy Wallace, in *her* book, *A Sorcerer’s Apprentice*.⁵ Over the course of his ten books, Castaneda reinvented himself by weaving a sorcerer’s narrative. The primary function of that narrative, apparently, was to convey the sorcery knowledge which he had accessed, via encounters with shape-shifting naguals either in ordinary reality or via *dreaming* (the first or second attentions). The secondary function of his sorcerer’s narrative was to turn its author into a somebody—a rock and roll nagual with millions of readers and hundreds of adoring (and sexually available) disciples. This secondary function—that of inflating his personal history instead of erasing it—appears to have become primary to Carlos, and that would be precisely why it brought about his personal downfall. The narrative then had to be *completed*, not by Castaneda but by Wallace (the feminine perspective), whose book put Carlos’ sorcery romance into a far more mundane (and sordid) perspective, and revealed that Castaneda had stacked the deck of his literary-sorcerer’s enterprise so as to come out a winner, and, as a consequence, been kicked out of the game.

He who lives by the pen, dies by the pen. Castaneda’s decision to romanticize the sorcerers’ knowledge, to turn it into a dramatic narrative to draw readers in, inevitably meant that the knowledge was also *personalized*. It then became *his* story. And like all mythic narratives, Castaneda’s journey was a heroic quest in which *the possibility of failure, defeat, and ignominy was always present*. Since it was up to Castaneda, the writer, to *do* something with the sorcerers’ knowledge, it was up to Carlos, the character, to live up to the teachings of don Juan, or not. And failure in that mighty endeavor would mean much more than simply losing face. What was at stake was not merely his worldly reputation, but the continuance of his individual consciousness. Playing for such stakes, the sorcerers’ knowledge became a burden that would overwhelm the very best of men. I wonder if, when he saw that he could never beat the odds, and like the old seers, Castaneda chose to try and cheat death instead of surrender to it? When it became obvious to him that he was going to fail, did he decide to settle for the next best thing to immortality and focus his intent instead on “creat[ing] bonds with masses of people” so as to “retain [his] awareness during entire millennia”? If so, then he wrote himself into a corner from which no amount of sorcery can ever free him.

He may be out there still.

Aeolus Kephias, 2011

⁵ By which time, Castaneda was reputedly working on a novel about his alleged stint as a government assassin, but was too ill and deranged to come up with anything coherent. The decline of his sanity and writing capacity is evinced by the relatively poor quality of writing in *The Art of Dreaming*, his last book to be released while he was alive. *The Active Side of Infinity*, the final book in the series, maintained the high literary standard of his other books, but was released after his death. Since the book contains “sensitive” material—autobiographical details about Castaneda, and the revelation of “the sorcerers’ topic of topics (the flyer mind)”—it’s possible it was written some years before Castaneda died, with a stipulation to publish only after his departure.