

COMMENTARY

Journey to Ixtlan (1972)

Carlos Castaneda

(1925?-1998)

INTRODUCTION

“*The Teachings* has sold more than 300,000 copies in paperback and is currently selling at a rate of 16,000 copies a week. But Castaneda’s books are not drug propaganda, and now the middle-class middlebrows have taken him up. *Ixtlan* is a hardback bestseller, and its paperback sales...will make its author a millionaire.... To tens of thousands of readers, young and old, the first meeting of Castaneda with Juan Matus—which took place in 1960 in a dusty Arizona bus depot near the Mexican border—is a better-known literary event than the encounter of Dante and Beatrice beside the Arno.... Though the man is an enigma wrapped in mystery wrapped in a tortilla, the work is beautifully lucid. Castaneda’s story unfolds with a narrative power unmatched in other anthropological studies.... “Writing to get my Ph.D. was my ...sorcery...” *Journey to Ixtlan*...deals with ‘seeing’ without drugs.... Says Mike Murphy, a founder of the Esalen Institute: “The essential lessons Don Juan has to teach are the timeless ones that have been taught by the great sages of India and the spiritual masters of modern times’....

Invited to a 1964 East Village party that was attended by such luminaries as Timothy Leary, he merely found the talk absurd: “They were children, indulging in incoherent revelations. A sorcerer takes hallucinogens for a different reason than heads do, and after he has gotten where he wants to go, he stops taking them”.... [His] books communicate a primal sense of power running through the world, arranging our perceptions of reality like so many iron filings in a huge magnetic field....

DON JUAN

[Don Juan] Castaneda asserts, was born in 1891, and suffered in the diaspora of the Yaquis all over Mexico from the 1890s until the 1910 revolution. His parents were murdered by soldiers. He became a nomad. This helps explain why the elements of Don Juan’s sorcery are a combination of shamanistic beliefs from several cultures. Some of them are not at all ‘representative’ of the Yaquis. Many Indian tribes, such as the Huichols, use peyote ritually, both north and south of the border—some in a syncretic blend of Christianity and shamanism. But the Yaqui are not peyote users.”

“Don Juan and the Sorcerer’s Apprentice”
Time (1972)

CASTANEDA INTERVIEW

“I came from Latin America where intellectuals were always talking about political and social revolution and where a lot of bombs were thrown. But revolution hasn’t changed much. It takes little daring to bomb a building, but in order to give up cigarettes or to stop being anxious or to stop internal chattering, you have to remake yourself. This is where real reform begins.... My mind has been in control all of my life and it would kill me rather than relinquish control....

In 1965 I began to change my habits.... I couldn’t have cared less about finding a weirdo like Don Juan. I was in a bus depot in Arizona with a high-school friend of mine. He pointed out an old Indian man to me and said he knew about peyote and medicinal plants.... After that I began to visit him and about a year later he told me he had decided to pass on to me the knowledge of sorcery he had learned from his teacher... I know three sorcerers and seven apprentices and there are many more.... Catholic inquisitors tried to stamp out sorcery because they considered it the work of the devil. It has been around for many hundreds of years. Most of the techniques don Juan taught me are very old.... One of the earliest things Don Juan

taught me was that I must erase my personal history.... That is the reason I avoid tape recordings when I lecture, and photographs... Don Juan is a good existentialist...

The trick of socialization is to convince us that the descriptions we agree upon define the limits of the real world. What we call reality is only one way of seeing the world, a way that is supported by a social consensus.... Don Juan thinks that what he calls seeing is apprehending the world without any interpretation; it is pure wondering perception. Sorcery is a means to this end. To break the certainty that the world is the way you have always been taught you must learn a new description of the world—sorcery—and then hold the old and the new together. Then you will see that neither description is final. At that moment you slip between the descriptions; you stop the world and see. You are left with wonder; the true wonder of seeing the world without interpretation....the miraculous character of ordinary reality.... For me the way to live—the path with heart—is not introspection or mystical transcendence but presence in the world. This world is the warrior's hunting ground....

I have never taken LSD, but what I gather from Don Juan's teachings is that psychotropics are used to stop the flow of ordinary interpretations, to enhance the contradictions within the glosses, and to shatter certainty. But the drugs alone do not allow you to stop the world. To do that you need an alternative description of the world. That is why Don Juan had to teach me sorcery.... In sorcery the total body is used as a preceptor... Don Juan used psychotropic plants only in the middle period of my apprenticeship because I was so stupid, sophisticated and cocky. I held on to my description of the world as if it were the only truth.... He told me that for me to try to see without the aid of psychotropic plants would be useless. But if I behaved like a warrior and assumed responsibility I would not need them; they would only weaken my body.... Psychotropics...destroyed my dogmatic certainty. But I paid a tremendous price. When the glue that held my world together was dissolved, my body was weakened and it took months to recuperate. I was anxious and functioned at a very low level."

Sam Keen
"Sorcerer's Apprentice"
Psychology Today (December 1972)

CRITICS COMMENT

"Mysticism is in fashion.... The text is narrowly confined to the personal interactions between Don Juan and the author between the summer of 1960 and the autumn of 1965. It is a relationship which is at once intimate yet tense, as between Moby Dick and Ahab, God and Job, or any psychoanalyst and his patient.... The apprentice Castaneda is trained to experience three different kinds of hallucination consequent upon partaking of concoctions made of (1) the *Datura* plant ('Jimson's Weed'), (2) a variety of the mushroom species *Psilocybe*, and (3) the cactus peyote...[Mescalito] Don Juan interprets these states as resulting from the influence of supernatural personal powers (familiaris).... [These drugs supposedly lead] the addict into an understanding of philosophic mysteries.... But just how much of this 'philosophy' is really that of Don Juan and how much is Castaneda...regurgitating the Book of Revelations is hard to say. The Yaqui Indians incidentally have been Catholic Christians of a sort for several hundred years."

Edmund Leach
Review
The New York Review of Books (1969)

"The psychologist who has overlearned logical positivism will be both frustrated and enlightened by taking this voyage into the personalized ethnography of a sorcerer. The voyage involves the conscious suspension of a social scientist's well-developed standards for credibility of evidence...Through the medium of peyote or psilocybin, Carlos Castaneda experiences, as an apprentice, the separate reality of the 'man of knowledge, Don Juan, a Yaqui Indian *brujo*, or sorcerer.... Castaneda violates the rules of the game of science; getting 'too close' to his subject in a very successful effort to enlighten his audience.... The reader shares the anguish of a professional social scientist whose sense of reason and borders of 'reality' are shaken to their very foundations...."

Robert Buckhout
On Being Chained to Reason
(American Psychological Association 1972)

“The long disquisition of Don Juan and the detailing of each confused emotional reaction of the author, in the present volume, imply either total recall, novelistic talent, or a tape recorder. No banality goes unrecorded, nothing is summarized, nothing is spared us, and yet the nourishment of it all hardly matches that in Jello. The total effect is self-dramatizing and vague, and Castaneda curiously manages to be at once disingenuous and naïve. Even as belles lettres the book is wanting, for the writing is pretentious (twice we read of ‘insidious hair’... An ego trip. Everything is smarmy with self-importance and really quite trivial feelings and narcissistic self-preoccupation.... The book is pseudo-profound, sophomoric and deeply vulgar. To one reader at least, for decades interested in Amerindian hallucinogens, the book is frustratingly and tiresomely dull, posturing pseudo-ethnography and, intellectually, kitsch.”

Weston LaBarre
Stinging Criticism from the Author of The Peyote Cult
(The New York Times Company 1972)

“We are incredibly fortunate to have Carlos Castaneda’s books. Taken together—and they should be read in the order they were written—they form a work which is among the best that the science of anthropology had produced. Three aspects of the work have profoundly influenced my response to it: first, the interest and value of the teachings of Don Juan are extraordinary in themselves; second, Carlos Castaneda has conveyed these teachings with great artistry so that they affect us at many levels; third, he shows us the conditions under which the teachings were transmitted to him, and not only makes us feel the relation he had with his teacher, but also reveals something of his personal struggle with standard Western reality whose thrall kept preventing him from accepting Don Juan’s lessons on their own terms....

While *A Separate Reality* is a sequel to *The Teachings of Don Juan*, *Journey to Ixtlan* is not a sequel except for the last three of its 20 chapters. Rather, because of a new sense of his relationship to the world which arose in him through experiences described in those chapters, Carlos saw the significance of a whole series of other ‘lessons’ which Don Juan had given him during the period described in *The Teachings of Don Juan* and he recounts those lessons in *Journey to Ixtlan*.... None of the experiences described in *Journey to Ixtlan* take place under the influence of psychotropic plants, but simply in relation to hills, valleys, animals and plants and, of course, Don Juan himself.”

Paul Riesman
A Comprehensive Anthropological Assessment
(New York Times Company 1972)

“*Ixtlan* is even richer than Castaneda’s previous books in these eerie, supernatural events and flickering glimpses at retina’s edge... Carlos, although he actually stops the world toward the end of the book, is more the obtuse Ugly American than ever.... Crazy Juan views the world as ‘stupendous, awesome, mysterious, unfathomable,’ while Carlos’ university-ordered mind can churn out only indecision, depression and fear.... Juan is a master at yin-yang, or... ‘the paradoxical unity of opposites’.”

Don Strachan
The Word from Rolling Stone
(Straight Arrow Publishers 1973)

“Many a drug-oriented reader was ‘hooked’ by it... But despite reading there that the long hallucinogenic tutelage detailed in the first two books was only undertaken grudgingly by don Juan after realizing Carlos’ insensitivity, many Castaneda aficionados stubbornly see psychotropic plants as the only path to a knowledge of what the tetralogy has to teach... It certainly will not do, by the way, to call what Carlos sees illusions, hallucinations, or tricks of the eye.... Don Juan undeceives us...by telling Carlos that he cannot understand the teachings if he thinks he is ‘a solid body’.... [Yet] there is no ‘true reality’ behind or above the ordinary one in Don Juan’s teachings, no ‘proper abode’ for man’s ‘immortal soul’ behind the *maya* of gross matter... What makes Castaneda’s texts *post-modern* [is] that these perfectly accessible interpretations simply will not suffice for us.... None of the many paths he has taken has led him anywhere.”

Daniel C. Noel, ed.
“Taking Castaneda Seriously”
Seeing Castaneda: Reactions to the ‘Don Juan’ Writings of Carlos Castaneda

“There are two ways to go about things on the journey to transcendence—either bring the human baggage along or leave it behind. As in the mystic tradition Don Juan leaves it behind. He has power but he is empty. It seems to me that it would be preferable to bring it along, and that the more you can bring along the better. That’s what makes the difference between a saint and a mere ascetic, I suppose. And I suppose the greatest saint would bring along not only all his own baggage but everyone else’s as well, and by the passion of his involvement with the human community would become a prophet: Moses, Christ, Gandhi. Don Juan goes the other way: personal power, personal composure, at the price of withdrawal from the community, an awesome isolation.”

Ronald Sukenick
“Upward and Juanward: The Possible Dream”
The Village Voice (1973)

“Don Juan’s teachings...refuse to differentiate between self and other, good and evil, ‘God’ and the ‘Devil’.... It is almost as if a Zen koan were seriously fleshed out and experienced, instead of being posed merely in the mind. One follows with interest and occasionally with impatience the gradual awakening of an introverted easily bored, self-pitying young man into his maturity: the classic pattern of initiation, and no less ‘authentic’ for being in this tradition.... No one feigns mystical experience; before having had it, one simply does not believe in it, and would have absolutely no interest in writing about it, especially not at great length... Much of Don Juan’s teaching is mysticism of a high intellectual quality, exactly like Zen and certain forms of yoga.”

Joyce Carol Oates
“Don Juan’s Last Laugh”
Psychology Today (September 1974)

“Don Juan tells Carlos that he cannot make him understand. He can only lead him to the Unknown.... The hallucinogens of his early training...seem more designed to break the grip of his habitual conceptions than to dignify a drug culture as a self-sufficient mode of life.... It makes no difference whether the books are a record of an actual encounter or whether Castaneda is the author of a clever fiction. In either case Don Juan is an utterly unforgettable presence—not merely a character and more than a man. Whatever affinities there may be between the teachings and the gifts of Don Juan and the standard philosophies and mystery cults of the world, we ourselves are confronted by the teacher himself, face to face...”

Joseph Margolis
“Don Juan as Philosopher”
ed. Daniel C. Noel
Seeing Castaneda: Reactions to the ‘Don Juan’ Writings of Carlos Castaneda
(Putnam's/Capricorn 1976) 229, 231-32

“Raised from the start by his Brazilian grandparents, Castaneda lost his 15-year-old mother before knowing her.... Castaneda entered UCLA as an undergraduate in 1959 and received a B.A. in anthropology September 1962. He was enrolled on and off as a graduate student until 1971, receiving a Ph.D. in anthropology March 1973.... The Irvine campus of the University of California...appointed Castaneda to lecture during the spring quarter of 1972. His graduate seminar, ‘The Phenomenology of Shamanism,’ drew over 50 persons... His undergraduate class in primitive religions was packed to the rafters and turned away hundreds.... Castaneda’s favorite adjective is ‘weird’... Castaneda told the Irvine students he had never heard of a woman apprentice—‘Maybe it’s because sorcerers are chauvinistic male pigs’ [yet] he was charming, graceful, and attentive to the women around him... Castaneda forsook human companionship for a separate reality where he could substitute ideas for love....

At least six professional interviewers have reported what they learned by talking at length—some for days—with Castaneda. Most of what they learned was not true.... A majority of the professional anthropologists who have rendered public judgments on Castaneda’s works have either questioned or denied their factuality.... How did *Journey to Ixtlan*, easily shown to be logically incompatible with *The Teachings*, get by as a dissertation after so many critics had said Castaneda was writing fiction?...

Confidently rejecting the rumor that Castaneda duped his professors, I do suspect he seduced them.... They must have known they were dealing with an illusionist rather than a fieldworker.... I would not for a minute challenged the right of Castaneda's committee to doctor him in anthropology for writing a fantasy, provided they said that was what they were doing and invited their colleagues to judge their action. As it turned out, the colleagues rendered judgment uninvited, and it was far from favorable... 'Waiving red tape' for a 'native genius' is neither frank nor explanatory, it is artful dodging.... More than anything else, Castaneda is...a mythmaker who has made himself a myth."

Richard de Mille

Castaneda's Journey: The Power and the Allegory
(Capra Press, Santa Barbara 1976) 22, 27, 31, 34, 76-77, 103, 155-56

Michael Hollister (2015)