

Discovering the “Effective Text”: A Method of Esoteric Text Transmission

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Abstract

This paper presents the “effective text” as a type of esoteric literature that works by itself to provide initiatory experiences and statuses. Because they operate independently of any external mediators, effective texts are ideal methods of esoteric knowledge transmission in situations where continuity of transmission is understood as disrupted. This paper presents four effective texts from four different contexts; they address four continuity-disrupting interstices.

- I. Death: Ancient Egyptian heart scarab inscription
- II. Old order falling; last days underway: Indian Buddhist Mahayana Sutras
- III. Old order falling; new age at hand: Reformation-era Europe’s *Fama Fraternitatis*
- IV. Alternate reality re-emerging: Carlos Castaneda’s sorcery stories

The following themes characteristic of the effective text emerge from these four case studies. The effective text uses self-reference to describe its effects, and paradox typically permeates its story. For this reason, effective texts are often perceived as novel or fraudulent. Nonetheless, predilection for study of the text makes its reader a potential member of a hidden elite. An initiator from the distant past will generally transmit the text’s wisdom, while esoteric formulae encode information beyond the literal. To grasp these formulae is to gain virtual initiatory statuses that reveal the seeker’s previously hidden destiny. If all goes well, this text-mediated process can independently bridge discontinuities of history or memory when no other mediators are available. This is the nature and potential of the effective text.

A la découverte du « texte effectif »: une méthode de transmission du texte ésotérique

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Résumé

Cet article présente le « texte effectif » en tant qu’un type de littérature ésotérique qui fonctionne seul et proposer des expériences initiatiques et des statuts. Puisqu’ils opèrent indépendamment de tout médiateur externe, les textes effectifs sont des méthodes idéales de transmission de la connaissance ésotérique dans des situations où il est sous-entendu que la continuité sera interrompue. Cet article présente quatre textes effectifs provenant de quatre contextes différents; ils adressent quatre interstices de perturbation de la continuité.

- I. La mort: inscription de cœur de scarabée de l’Ancienne Egypte
- II. La chute de l’ordre ancien; les derniers jours en cours: les sutras mahayana bouddhiste indien
- III. La chute de l’ordre ancien; le nouvel âge à proximité: l’ère de la Réforme, la *Fama Fraternitatis* en Europe

IV. La réémergence de la réalité alterne: les histoires de sorcelleries de Carlos Castaneda

Les thèmes suivants, caractéristiques du texte effectif, émergent de ces quatre études de cas. Le texte effectif utilise l'autoréférence pour décrire ses effets, et le paradoxe généralement imprègne son histoire. Pour cette raison, les textes effectifs sont souvent perçus comme originaux ou illicites. Néanmoins, la prédilection pour l'étude du texte fait du lecteur un membre potentiel d'une élite secrète. Un initiateur d'un passé lointain va généralement transmettre la sagesse du texte tandis que les formules ésotériques encodent l'information au delà du littéral. La maîtrise de ces formules signifie l'acquisition virtuelle des statuts initiatiques qui révèlent la destinée du chercheur qui était auparavant cachée. Si tout ce passe bien, ce processus influencé par le texte peut de façon indépendante faire un rapprochement des discontinuités de l'histoire ou de la mémoire lorsque d'autres médiateurs ne sont pas disponibles. Telle est la nature et le potentiel du texte effectif.

Descubriendo el “Texto Efectivo”: un método de transmisión de textos esotéricos.

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Resumen

Este escrito presenta el “texto efectivo” como un tipo de literatura esotérica que trabaja por si mismo para proveer experiencias iniciáticas y estados. Porque ellos operan independientemente de cualquier mediador externo, los textos efectivos son métodos ideales para la transmisión de conocimiento esotérico en situaciones donde la continuidad de la transmisión es comprendida e interrumpida. Este escrito presenta cuatro textos efectivos desde cuatro diferentes contextos; ellos hacen énfasis en cuatro intercesiones de continuidad-interrupción.

- I. Muerte: Inscripción del escarabajo del Antiguo Egipto
- II. Caída de la vieja Orden; ultimo día venidero; Sutra Hindúes Budistas Mahayanas
- III. Caída de la vieja Orden; Nueva era a la mano: Reformación-era Fama Fraternalitatis Europea.
- IV. Alternación realidad re-emergencia: Carlos Castañeda historias de hechicería

Los siguientes temas característicos del texto efectivo emergen de estos cuatro Studios. El texto efectivo utiliza auto referencia para describir sus efectos, y paradojas típicamente permean su historia. Por esta razón, los textos efectivos son percibidos a menudo como novedosos o fraudulentos. Sin embargo, la predisposición para el estudio del texto hace al lector un miembro potencial de una elite oculta. Un iniciador de un pasado distante generalmente transmitirá la sabiduría del texto, mientras que los códigos de formulas esotéricas transmitirán mas allá de lo literal. El atrapar esta fórmula es como obtener una iniciación virtual en el estatus que revela al buscador su destino oculto. Si todo procede bien., este proceso de mediación de Texto puede independientemente servir como puente para discontinuidades de la historia de la memoria cuando no existen otros mediadores disponibles. Esta es la naturaleza y el potencial del texto efectivo.

Descobrimos o “texto efetivo”: um método de transmissão de texto esotérico

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Resumo

Este artigo apresenta o "texto eficaz" como um tipo de literatura esotérica que funciona por si só para proporcionar experiências iniciáticas e status. Como eles operam de forma independente de qualquer mediadores externos, os textos eficazes são métodos ideais de transmissão do conhecimento esotérico em situações onde a continuidade da transmissão é entendida como desregulado. Este relatório apresenta quatro textos efetivos a partir de quatro contextos diferentes, eles abordam quatro continuidade de desregulação interstícios.

- I. Morte: Inscrição no coração do escaravelho do Egito antigo
- II. Queda da velha ordem; curso dos últimos dias: Sutras Mahayana Budistas Indianas
- III. Queda da velha ordem; nova era iminente: Era de reforma: Fama Fraternitatis da Europa
- IV. Realidade alternativa re-emergentes: Estórias de magia de Carlos Castaneda

Os seguintes temas característicos dos textos efetivos emergem desses quatro estudos. O texto eficaz usa a auto-referência para descrever seus efeitos, e o paradoxo normalmente permeia sua história. Por esta razão, os textos eficazes são muitas vezes vistos como romance ou fraudulentos. No entanto, a predileção para o estudo do texto faz do leitor um potencial membro de uma elite secreta. Um iniciador de um passado distante, geralmente transmite a sabedoria do texto, enquanto que a fórmula esotérica codifica a informação para além do literal. Compreender estas fórmulas é ganhar status iniciático virtual que revela o destino – anteriormente oculto - do candidato. Se tudo correr bem, este texto de processo mediado pode ligar as discontinuidades da história ou da memória quando outros mediadores não estão disponíveis. Esta é a natureza e o potencial do texto eficaz.

Die Entdeckung des “effektiven Texts”: Eine Methode esoterischer Text Uebertragung

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Zusammenfassung

Diese Schrift legt den “effektiven Text” dar, als eine Art esoterischer Literatur die aus sich selbst heraus wirkt um initiatorische Erlebnisse und Stadien hervor zu bringen. Da sie unabhangig von auesseren Vermittlern wirken, sind effektive Texte ideale Methoden zur Uebertragung von esoterischem Wissen in Situationen wo die Kontinuitat der Uebertragung als unterbrochen verstanden ist. Diese Schrift praesentiert vier effektive Texte von vier verschiedenen Zusammenhaengen; sie wenden sich an vier verschiedene, Kontinuitat-unterbrechenden Zwischenraume.

- I. Tod: Alt-Aegyptische Herz Scarabaeus Inschrift
- II. Das Ende der alten Ordnung; die letzten Tage; Sutren des indischen Mahajana Buddhismus

- III. Das Ende der alten Ordnung; Europas *Fama Fraternitatis* in der Aera der Reformation.
- IV. Das Wieder-Hervorkommen der alternativen Realitaet: Carlos Castaneda's Zaubereigeschichten

Die folgenden Themen, charakteristisch fuer den effektiven Text, stammen aus diesen vier Studien. Der Effektive Text benutzt Selbsthinweise in der Beschreibung seiner Effekte, und das Paradox ist typischerweise im Spiel. Aus diesem Grunde sind effektive Texte oft als ungewoehnlich oder sogar als Schwindel betrachtet. Nichtsdestoweniger, macht die Neigung zum Studieren des Textes aus seinem Leser ein potentielles Mitglied einer geheimen Elite. Ein Initiator aus grauer Vorzeit wird gewoehnlich die Weissheit des Textes uebermitteln, waehrend esoterische Formeln das Wissen aufdecken, dass ueber das Woertliche hinaus geht. Das Begreifen dieser Formeln bedeutet das virtuelle Erstellen eines initiatorischen Stadiums, welches das bisher verborgene Schicksal des Suchenden zum Vorschein bringt. Wenn alles gut geht, kann dieser Text-vermittelte Vorgang auf unabhaengige Weise Unterbrechungen der Geschichte oder des Gedaechnisses ueberbruecken wenn keine anderen Vermittler vorhanden sind. Das ist die Natur und das Potential des effektiven Texts.

I. Heart Scarab Inscription

The Egyptian heart scarab is one of humanity's most ancient initiation-bestowing effective texts. Beginning in the late Middle Kingdom (ca. 1800 BCE) funerary priests began to place stones carved in the shape of a scarab beetle in the chest cavities of Egyptian mummies. These scarabs, which are the very first references to the judgment of the dead,¹ bear an inscription that appears in the *Pert em heru*, or the New Kingdom Book of the Dead. However, the heart scarab itself is a temporal anomaly. On the account contained in the *Pert em heru*, the heart scarab text dates to the Fourth Dynasty. According to the heart scarab inscription, it was discovered by one Heru-ta-ta-ef, son of the pharaoh Menkaure, while conducting an inspection of the temples. He found it on an iron slab inscribed with lapis hieroglyphs "under the feet of the majesty of the deity," an apparent reference to the Sphinx at Giza. When Heru-ta-ta-ef brought it to Menkaure, the king praised it as "a great secret, unseen and unbeheld"—a theme that will emerge in all four of our case studies.²

The centerpiece of the heart scarab text comes at its end. Where normally we might expect to find a spell of some sort, our inscribed scarab instead has a self-referential instruction regarding the form and function of the heart scarab itself. The phrase verbatim: "Make a scarab of green stone and put in the heart of the mummy." By placing a scarab so inscribed within the mummy's heart cavity, the heart will not speak out against the deceased in Osiris's judgment hall. Together, the scarab and its inscribed text work in this manner to acquit the deceased of any offenses committed while alive, thus qualifying them for existence beyond the discontinuity of physical death.

As an effective text, the heart scarab inscription will bestow a key initiatory status on the deceased. By helping the deceased to successfully pass the initiatory trial of the weighing of the heart, the deceased discovers a new, spiritual identity as "an Osiris," a being who has died and been reborn. Such beings share a common identity because they share a common story, an initiatory trial at once private and universal.

Self-reference is the key to the scarab's ability to act independently in achieving its awareness-extending purpose. At the first and most basic level, the heart scarab text must *ipso facto* use self-reference to describe its own effects. At another level, the text's self-referential account of its own origins aligns any given use of the heart scarab with its first, most ancient discovery. Under these conditions, the account of the heart scarab's discovery becomes a magical spell that activates the artifact's ability to extend awareness beyond death. At a third level, the scarab itself glyphs the concept self-reference. Emblem of the process of 'becoming,' and in particular independent genesis, the scarab is a sculptural analogue to the self-referential form of the text, which works by itself. As a whole, then, the heart scarab is a hieroglyph of recursion both artistically and textually, such that form and function combine in this active text. When combined, the artifact and the text comprise a symbolic formula capable of influencing experience. For in Egyptian thought, to represent something properly is to precipitate that thing into the field of experience.

The inclusion of its own history in the inscription suggests that some perceived that the heart scarab might be an innovation. Accordingly, the hieroglyphic text on the physical scarab presents the practice not as an invention, but rather as the rediscovery of a magical custom already ancient in the Fourth Dynasty. It is of course impossible to know the objective truth of this claim, but as we shall see, objective truth is often unimportant in active texts.

II. Mahayana Sutra as Effective Text

During the first century CE, ancient Indian Buddhism produced a large number of active texts called Mahayana Sutras. These cryptic books mark the first appearance of Great Vehicle or Mahayana Buddhism, today the prevalent form of the tradition in Tibet and East Asia. Philosophically, the Mahayana Sutras focus on the concept of emptiness or *shunyata*, where no analysis can ever discover any ultimately existing thing or person behind matter or mind. As active texts, however, their purpose is more subtle: to bestow initiatory advancements by themselves.

The Mahayana Sutras walk a dangerous tightrope between truth and fiction. On one hand, these earliest texts present themselves as the voice of the historical Buddha Shakyamuni, expounding the ultimate truth of universal emptiness. On the other, the Sutras date historically from five hundred years later, around the turn of the millennium. They are "previously unheard of" (*ashruta-purvam*), and for this reason earn the accusation that they are fraudulent and the "work of poets" (*kavya-kṛta*).³ Like the heart scarab, the Mahayana Sutras are thus temporal anomalies.

To account for the anachronism and explain their own novelty, the Mahayana Sutras present the historical Buddha Shakyamuni delivering a prophecy. In his sermon, the Buddha casts the historical time when the sutras appear as "the age of entropy," (*kshaya-kala*). In those "last five hundred years," says the Buddha, there will be people in monastic authority who wear the robe of the monk, but do so only for material gain. As a result, it will be difficult to find masters qualified to transmit his knowledge.⁴

With this situation in mind, the Mahayana Sutras then present themselves as the preeminent means of securing initiatory certainty during the Age of Entropy. Self-reference is the

narrative tool that propels the Mahayana Sutras' active magic, for it lets the text present itself as a sign of subtle states and conditions presently unfolding. For example, states the *Perfection of Wisdom in Eight Thousand Lines*, "it is impossible that this book should appear to beings with little merit." The reader may therefore conclude that they possess significant merit, *ipso facto*. The texts go further, describing its own presence that the definitive Buddhist spiritual state of "irreversibility" (*avaivartya*) is at hand for its readers.⁵

The Mahayana Sutras identify certain of their passages as containing the "hidden meaning" (*samdha*) of the Buddha. Many of these hidden meanings involve puns, and as a result cannot be stated explicitly without losing all their impact. For example, the word *ananta* means "infinite" in Sanskrit. *Ananda*, a near-homonym, means "ecstasy." The linguistic similarity between *ananta* and *ananda* suggests a hidden relationship between infinity and ecstasy.

Other hidden meanings in the Mahayana Sutras involve self-referential inquiries into the text itself. For example, the *King of Concentration* asks through its interlocutor what "this concentration," that is the text itself, could possibly be.⁶ Similarly, the *Diamond Cutter Perfection of Wisdom* proposes to answer the riddle of "how to practice this perfection of wisdom."⁷ In both of these cases, self-reference marks the very inception of the text, setting the stage for the intensively recursive dialogues between the Buddha and Mahayana seekers that follow.

Self-reference lets the Mahayana Sutras unfold their holographic vision of the cosmos. In the Escher-like world they weave, both characters in the sutra and readers of the text become participants in a cosmic story contained in the text itself, a story that recurs throughout time in a self-similar way. The *Perfection of Wisdom in Eight Thousand Lines*, for example, records the initiatory search of one Sadaprarudita. At its culmination, the seeker sees Buddhas throughout the cosmos as they taught to him "this very perfection of wisdom," that is, the book in which his story appears. Adding another layer of recursion, these same Buddhas themselves praised Sadaprarudita, saying "we also in the past when we were bodhisattvas searched for this perfection of wisdom in just the same way."⁸ Which search is the original search—Sadaprarudita's, those of the cosmic Buddhas, or the reader's own? Given how the Mahayana Sutras create a story in a story in a story, it becomes meaningless and in fact impossible to isolate a basic, original version of the initiatory story. Perhaps for this reason, the Buddha of the Mahayana Sutras is fully content to acknowledge that "there is neither truth nor falsehood in what the Buddha knows and teaches"⁹—a theme that will emerge again in the work of Carlos Castaneda.

III. *Fama Fraternalitatis* as Effective Text

The *Fama* initially appears an odd esoteric text, for it was widely published and circulated in Germany and throughout Europe. Like the Egyptian heart scarab inscription, the *Fama Fraternalitatis* is an active text that intends to make initiatory changes, not merely document events. Like the Mahayana Sutras, it intends to collate and transmit wisdom across a discontinuity, in this case the dawning new age of the Protestant Reformation. Promising its members all the mysteries of the universe, and sufficient gold to make their way in the world, the *Fama* tells the story of "our Father and Brother CR(C)." While a young man, CR took an initiatory journey to collect the wisdom of the far-flung lands. At the end of this journey, he collected a group of disciples, and with their help created a set of *Axiomata* capable of

integrating all human arts and sciences. Now, the third generation of disciples has published the *Fama* to make it available—to those “erudite” applicants whom the Fraternity perceive as fit vessels for it.¹⁰

On its surface, then, the *Fama* will appear an invitation addressed to the “erudite” to join a concrete community dedicated to a “universal reformation.” In this respect, it presents itself as tuned to the sensibilities of literate seekers, as are the Mahayana Sutras. But there is an old question here regarding just how literal the *Fama*’s invitation really is. There was a long-standing parallel question in alchemy, an important influence on the *Fama*, regarding whether physical or symbolic gold results from its study. And a similar issue arises when studying the *Fama*’s Fraternity of the Rosy Cross. Certainly, literalist applicants to the Fraternity published their qualifications in newspapers and received no reply, just as disappointed alchemical “puffers” failed to transform base metal into gold. As a result, the *Fama* became the target of allegations of fraud, thus exhibiting a key feature of the active text model it shares with the Mahayana Sutras. Indeed, the Fraternity’s “new axiomata, whereby all things may be restored” were, in another close parallel to the Mahayana Sutras, “a laughing matter” to the conventionally minded, “being a new thing unto them.”¹¹ The *Fama* counters accusations of fraud by asserting its own antiquity and thus authenticity; in its own words, “our philosophy also is not a new invention, but as Adam after his fall hath received it.”¹² Finally, the *Fama*, again like the Mahayana Sutras, identifies its own historical milieu as the “latter days.”¹³

The *Fama* becomes effective only when the symbology and numerology it contains are properly decoded. For example, translation of the *Fama*’s words into numbers, which further correspond to formulae derived from the Hebrew Kabbalah, can bestow insights associated with initiatory advancement. Another means of decoding the *Fama* involves sacred geometry, for it was only after he had “ruminated his voyage and philosophy,” that Brother CR “reduced them together in a true memorial,”¹⁴ that is, encoded his “voyage and philosophy” into his seven-sided sepulchre. Finally, CR placed still more active texts inside his coded tomb as further concentrations of his wisdom. Book M’s presence in the tomb creates still more recursion, for like the sepulchre itself, it is a compendium of universal knowledge, containing “the image and pattern of the world.”¹⁵ The *Fama*, like the sepulchre of CR that it describes, is thus a code in a code in a code. Its nested structure is thus similar to that of the Mahayana Sutras, in which self-reference creates a holographic story in a story in a story.

IV. Carlos Castaneda’s effective texts

In the late 1960s, the anthropologist Carlos Castaneda began to publish accounts of his often other-worldly experiences as an apprentice shaman in northern Mexico. With their dual focus on social science theory and non-ordinary states of awareness, Castaneda’s books rapidly became bestsellers among an intelligentsia ready to liquidate its intellectual capital for re-investment in countercultural experience. These volumes were criticized for fraud as much as praised for opening literary “doors of perception.” At the center of the controversy lay don Juan, Castaneda’s shamanic mentor, whose curiously good grasp of anthropology made many readers suspicious. Perhaps most problematically, no one could actually identify or locate don Juan. Over time, these factors combined with clear narrative inconsistencies from volume to volume to suggest that the don Juan chronicles were fictitious. For his part,

Castaneda doggedly maintained in print that his books were “factual accounts.” When directly questioned about their veracity, however, the elusive Castaneda would respond more cryptically, “does it matter?” perhaps implying that his books were designed to actively alter rather than passively describe the course of experience.

There is good reason to infer that Castaneda did in fact intend to write an effective text. Carlos identifies his own books as sorcery feats, undertaken at the direct behest of don Juan. “For you, writing should not be a literary exercise, but rather an exercise in sorcery,” says the wily old shaman. Castaneda goes on to say explicitly, “I have written in that manner [i.e., as an exercise in sorcery] about the premises of sorcery just as don Juan explained them to me.”¹⁶

As exercises in sorcery, don Juan clearly distinguishes his own instructions from those available in colleges, telling Castaneda that “teaching is talking about patterns” when presented as a rational exercise. His sorcery teachings, on the other hand, are “active,” as they work to shift students from the miserable human’s reason-made world into a warrior’s intention-made world. Of particular importance in this respect is don Juan’s emphasis on “silencing the internal dialogue.” By eliminating language from awareness, warriors simultaneously overcome social conditioning and open a gateway into non-ordinary experience. For don Juan, ordinary socialization “compels us to believe we are surrounded by objects.” Under its influence, we then become perceivers of an illusory world “created by a description that was told to us since the moment we were born.”¹⁷ The warrior, however, sees that “things are only real after one has learned to agree on their realness,”¹⁸ a situation sustained by our constant stream of internal words. To “silence the internal dialogue” is therefore to “stop the world” of ordinary experience, and thereby to discover the “key to all sorcery feats.”¹⁹

As Carlos nears the culmination of don Juan’s teaching, he discovers his hidden destiny—a common theme across all four active texts examined in this paper. As with the *Fama*, Castaneda’s destiny has to do with his place in the lineage of masters. He will in fact succeed don Juan as *nagual*, or leader of a party of warriors.

In Castaneda’s books, sorcery stories transmit lineage secrets. These sorcery stories, he says, worked more to “open my mind than to explain anything in a rational manner.” Accordingly, no transmission of literal secrets is involved here. Instead, the substance of the secret consists in “a blueprint for events, or a recurring pattern that appeared every time intent was giving an indication of something meaningful.”²⁰ In this respect, Castaneda’s lineage secrets closely resemble the Mahayana Sutras’ conception of a recurrent initiatory motif that the appearance of the teachings augurs.

Since the initiatory motif contained in sorcery stories recurs, successive initiatory careers will appear similar and tend to conflate with one another, as do those of the Egyptian “Osirises.” As with the Mahayana Sutras, temporal anomalies caused by similar repetitions of the same motif can make the narrative non-linear, such that one “can no longer make the world chronological.”²¹ Castaneda’s books certainly reflect this state of affairs, and their inconsistencies have provided much ammunition for debunkers. The author, however, attributes these inconsistencies to the nature of sorcery training, which includes both memorable, rational instruction for the “right side,” and parallel but forgotten instruction in

expanded awareness for the “left side.” According to Castaneda, the co-existence of these two streams accounts for the inconsistencies in his tales.²²

In the end, however, consistency is not at issue in Castaneda’s books. His work is a sorcery story about sorcery stories, a recursive tale encoding the secrets of awareness in the idiom of modern social science. By understanding how we use stories to construct experience, we learn to live in an active world fashioned by conscious intent, not any passive “reality.” With this principle in mind, we can easily see why fiction and truth become irrelevant in the world of the active text whether ancient or modern.

Conclusion

During historical periods when esoteric lineages are disrupted, "effective texts" enable traditions to transmit their knowledge without mediating institutions. Since they must supply esoteric advancement by themselves, these texts universally use self-referential language. As a result, they come to contain paradoxes and anomalies that can raise the suspicion of readers. Yet such suspicion regarding factuality is generally unwarranted in the case of effective texts, since they operate not to document rational ideas but to reframe experience. By diligent comparison of effective texts across cultures, it may be possible not only to identify a previously hidden esoteric technique, but also to gain important insights into the nature of esoteric literature itself. For with attention to the "effective" characteristics of any given esoteric text, it becomes possible to read for transformation rather than mere information.

Notes and References:

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 - ⁵ Conze, *Perfection of Wisdom*, 156.
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 - ¹² Case, *True and Invisible Rosicrucian Order*, 17.
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 - ¹⁴ Case, *True and Invisible Rosicrucian Order*, 10.
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 - ¹⁶ Carlos Castaneda, *The Power of Silence*, (New York: Washington Square, 1987), xiv.
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 - ¹⁹ Castaneda, *Tales of Power*, 92.

²⁰ Castaneda, *Power of Silence*, 6.

²¹ Castaneda, *Tales of Power*, 46.

²² Carlos Castaneda. *The Fire from Within*, (New York: Washington Square, 1985), 9.