

Den Boer, Harm. 1999. "The Truthful Fiction of Death and Life of the Author: Cervantes and Marlowe." In *The Author as Character: Representing Historical Writers in Western Literature*, edited by Paul Franssen and Ton Hoenselaars, 264–74. Madison; London: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press; Associated University Press.

The Truthful Fiction of the Death and Life of the Author: Cervantes and Marlowe

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To the best of my knowledge, *The Death and Life of Miguel de Cervantes* by Stephen Marlowe is the first novel in which the master of Spanish literature appears as the protagonist.¹ This may seem somewhat strange, for the great number of biographies written about Cervantes shows that the author's life is not lacking in interest, that it constantly invites romanticization, and is interpreted in very different ways.² There are some short fictionalized evocations of the author, of which those by Azorin deserve to be mentioned.³ Both provide an explanation for the limited fictional exploitation of the writer: he is constantly compared to his greatest creation, the spirited Knight of La Mancha. Yet Cervantes's life would make a fertile subject for many a novel, even without *Don Quixote*.

Cervantes belonged to a complicated family, which constantly found itself in economic trouble and was constantly on the move. In the Spanish climate of his lifetime, poisoned by notions of "purity of blood," he was thought to be descended from recent converts.

Intriguingly, this issue is still a topic for discussion, as when attempts are made to find an explanation for Cervantes's "tolerant," mildly ironical view of reality.

Through his exploits both in literature and on the battlefield, Cervantes embodied the ideal of the Renaissance man. Before acquiring fame as a writer, he had distinguished himself by his heroism as a soldier in the Battle of Lepanto (1571), the finest hour of Philip II's Spain. Having spent five years in the service of the Spanish empire, he spent another five as a captive of the Barbary pirates in Algiers, where he earned the admiration of his fellow prisoners for his exemplary attitude in the face of so much adversity, and because of his three, albeit unsuccessful, attempts to escape. However, there was also a completely unheroic side to his life; on his return to Spain, Cervantes was forced by lack of money to accept an obscure, frustrating job as a commissary and tax [265] collector in Andalusia, a personal humiliation

that coincided with the Armada disaster, the symbolic nadir of the reign of Philip II. This was followed by renewed imprisonment, this time on account of debt, in the course of which he began his history of the hidalgo of La Mancha, the novel which met with enormous success as soon as it was published but brought its author little profit. While this oversimplified summary may give the impression of a richly documented life, it is remarkable how little is known about Cervantes, who himself was both reticent and selective as far as information about his life was concerned. There are gaps in his biography—including one of nearly four years—which are as intriguing as the well-known, spectacular episodes.

As an *author*, Cervantes, with his remarkably wide range of work, is an elusive, fascinating figure, someone with great potential as a literary character. His debut as a dramatist was not promising, although in the end he was to make a reputation for himself with a number of *entremeses*, or interludes, including the magisterial *El retablo de las maravillas*. He repeatedly tried writing poetry but never managed to distinguish himself in that field. What is striking in his brilliant mastery of prose is that, alongside the modernity of *Don Quixote*, he kept supporting the more traditional notions of fiction in his novel *Los trabajos de Persiles*, as well as in the *Novelas ejemplares*.

The American Stephen Marlowe, after exploring the potential of the pseudo-autobiographical form in his Columbus novel, was well placed to take up the challenge of fictionalizing the discoverer of that other New World, that of fiction.⁴ The very title, *The Death and Life of Miguel de Cervantes*, suggests that this is no conventional biography. The subtitle, “A novel by Stephen Marlowe,” the cover embellished with jolly “quixotic” figures, and the blurb quoting a review as saying, “Ride in triumph through remarkable Renaissance byways with this other Marlowe,” leave no doubt about the book’s fictional nature. Marlowe’s Miguel de Cervantes begins recounting his “life” in spectacular novelistic fashion with a prologue in medias res, in which he describes his imminent execution. He finds himself in Algiers, on the scaffold of the Plaza of Atrocities, and preparatory to his hanging, the noose is placed around his neck. The reader may not be alarmed by such an opening, which might, after all, be followed by a long series of flashbacks, but he might be disconcerted by his historical knowledge: for, from this moment onwards, what is going to happen to Cervantes, who still [266] has 36 years of his life and nearly his entire literary production ahead of him after Algiers?

THE DEATH OF HISTORY

The prologue announces an ingenious plot, which completely exhausts its possibilities and

intentionally undermines the verisimilitude of the story. At the end of the first part—*The Death of Miguel de Cervantes*—the writer is actually hanged, but that is not the end of the story:

It is what, on the scaffold, I feel now. (Although, with a noose throttling me, a frightening inability to breathe is perhaps not so strange.)
Another thing reminds me of The Naval. Rather unmiraculously (or so it seems), I rise out of my body and from a height of a few feet look down at it. This I realize must be a part of dying, at least my way of dying.
I hover for a moment, then float above the unremarkable-looking executioner and off the stage. ...
Off to one side Gabriel Munoz the taverner, still at liberty and apparently back at his old job, is briefing a prisoner obviously just out of his first softening-up in solitary. As I swoop in, I get the shock of my life (or death). The new prisoner is *me*, Miguel de Cervantes—but a me with a normal left hand and a maimed right hand. (227-28)

From this moment on, it is clear to the reader that the “historical” Cervantes has been discarded; for, in contrast to the “old” one, the “new” one has a maimed *right* hand, so he is a double. In the second part this Cervantes again meets himself (or another self) in a duel with a “Knight of the Mirrors.”⁵ *The Death and Life of Miguel de Cervantes* is full of all sorts of unexpected events, sudden turns, and impossibilities. The reader is told by Cervantes-Marlowe not to be too amazed at these, even to anticipate them, although the author still wants to remain one step ahead of the reader. It is a game that lays bare its devices, yet wants to remain a game.

In this way the story explicitly points to the death of the “historical” Cervantes and to his new life as a literary character, or to the Death of History and the Life of the Imagination. This lands us in familiar territory: Marlowe seems to side with those postmodern writers who constantly and in various ways play with representations, in order to point at the limitations to an objective rendering of historical reality. History is demythologized, attacked, made fun of, by way of parody, irony, or gross exaggeration.⁶

Marlowe repeatedly puts statements in his character’s mouth on the [267] limitations of history, and therefore of the “official” biography of an author:

So in historical time Andrea could not have been in Alcalá when Don Carlos fell downstairs. But in fictional time she *was* there. I know this for a fact because I was there too. (30)
“But,” I began to object, “but history is the —”
“Truth?” Cide Hamete supplied. “Because it is documented? But why should the ledger be truer than the legend? The merely measurable truer than the truly memorable?” (30)
At a certain point in time (it is always a point in time for historians, never a moment in space, we shall return to this strange prejudice), the afternoon of 15 September 1569 to be exact, historians do agree that Sigura and I fought: there is documentation. But about the princess Eboli they are mute. Was the Princess there? Of course she was. I saw her. (62)

The history that has been passed down is no more than a selection, after all, and one that always falls far short when it comes to providing a (psychological) explanation for a person's life.

In Marlowe's novel, the gaps in the author's life are filled in a way that is typical of the postmodern attitude: a generally accepted rendering is denied and replaced by an interpretation that undermines its own credibility. Cervantes mocks those critics who have postulated that he underwent traumatic sexual experiences as a consequence of his captivity in Algiers, but he does let on that the course of his life was to a large extent determined by the love he had conceived for his sister, Andrea.⁷ That love, with its constant threat of incest, motivates the hero's travels, now in pursuit of his desire, then fleeing it. It also leads to years of impotence in his marriage with Catalina. When a solution presents itself—the discovery that Andrea is not Miguel's "real" sister—it is too late. The hero also admits to having had recourse to self-abuse in difficult moments, he turns out to be a stammerer, and his feats, including his conduct in the Battle of Lepanto (Cervantes is also known as "the hero of Lepanto") come about by accident, almost as if he has no control over them.

The writer is not the only distorted or grotesque reflection of reality as it has been handed down to us. The novel's universe is [268] full of imposters, whores, sorceresses, spies, esoterics, and sadists. The seemingly unremarkable Catalina, Cervantes's wife, turns out to be one of the most original characters. Having been raised like a Sancho Panza in village simplicity, she regards sex as something completely natural, which she likes to discuss in all openness, and which she likes to engage in as often as she can, whenever and wherever possible. At the same time, however, she has an unwavering sense of morality, so that it never even occurs to her to seek her pleasure elsewhere when her husband becomes impotent, and so she enters a convent rather than give in to her desires. Finally, she sublimates her longing by devoting herself to the care of animals, a comic allusion on Marlowe's part to a onetime French sex symbol of recent cinema history, and maybe also to the slightly less complicated relations with animals typical of Spaniards in and around the bull ring.

Constant allusions in many forms are a typical way of undermining history. Characters and events are denied ontological status in "reality" by deliberate breaks with the conventions of realist fiction. There are absurdities on numerous levels. The narrator steps out of the fiction in a hilarious way by having his father say: "I didn't kill nobody," and adding that "the double negative, I ought to say, is no indication of a deficient education—my father was speaking Spanish, after all" (6). There are constant anachronisms: The Supreme and General Council of the Inquisition turns out to have an Investment Branch (155), and all the stops are pulled out

when Cervantes speaks of a secret Nameless Organization, which runs the top-secret archives of the “so-called R&R Centre (more properly Base Iberia)” in the south of Spain, and which is preparing for an operation called “Weltschmerz,” employing agents under the code names Mnemosyne, Quillpusher, and Von Nacht zu Nebel (287-94).

Many characters owe their existence to literature. The sleazy, plea-bargaining lawyer Picapleitos is reminiscent of Quevedo’s satires (quite apart from a possible relatedness with his modern-day colleagues in the United States). Cide Hamete Benengeli, who serves as the friend-in-need/adviser to Marlowe’s Cervantes, is not only the chronicler of *Don Quixote*, but also Faust’s Mephistopheles and Candide’s Pangloss. He is probably also the Dickensian “certain mutual friend” who has a hand in many events befalling the young Cervantes.

Christopher Marlowe, dramatist and spy for a secret network, can be read as private-eye Philip Marlowe and probably also alludes to the author Stephen Marlowe. Lope de Vega is Cervantes’s grotesque opposite: in the novel, he is depicted [269] as a vain, superficial writer, who neglects his literary calling in favor of easy successes. Literature also demands, in despite of historical probability, that Cervantes should encounter Torquato Tasso, Christopher Marlowe, and Shakespeare. All of these meetings give rise to amusing dialogues and more or less profound exchanges about being an author.

From the preceding examples it may have emerged that the events in *The Death and Life of Miguel de Cervantes* bear little relation to the historical facts that are known to us concerning the author’s life. As is the case with the characters, however, reality is indispensable in an ancillary role:

If this were only fiction, I could write here that they were married on April 23rd. But this is the story of my death and life, in which fiction and that lesser truth, history, from time to time form a seamless whole. And truth constrains me to say the wedding took place on a blustery day earlier in the month. (323)

Some references to historical reality are necessary, then, if only because in this historical genre it is to be undermined and stood on its head. Stephen Marlowe does this with great skill and humor by adding an enormous number of stories and subplots, with so many turns and impossibilities all at once (disguises, changes of identity, disappearances, magic) that in the end Cervantes’s “real life” completely disappears from view. It is the narrator himself who comes to this realization during his imprisonment in Sevilla, where he has decided to record his life:

I thought about the family’s Columbus connection and its converso origins. I thought

about my father in debtors' prison, and the death of the Patriarch, and the first twinges of an illicit attachment to my sister Andrea who wasn't my sister. I thought about Picapleitos a/k/a Senor Zum, and about Luis the black slave, later Luis Blackslave, now Gold-fang. I remembered rescuing Juan-O, who wasn't Juan-O yet, from the gypsies in Triana. I remembered the birth of postmature little Constanza, and my duel with Nicolas de Ovando's hulking stand-in Sigura, and my flight to Italy, and Cousin Gaspar and poor crazy-brilliant Tasso and his sister Cornelia ("e bella, bella!"). I remembered my brother Rodrigo pursuing glory like the Holy Grail, and I relived The Naval and our capture by Barbary pirates, met again Cide Hamete Benengeli on his deathmat and Zoraida the trance dancer and her uncle Suleiman Sa'adah Sometimes (how Erroneously Called the Wise) and Michele-Micaela of the classic callipygean curve (are you still playing your dangerous games, Micaela?). And I remember Shakashik-Who-Sings-His-Own-Songs and what he sang about me, and how could I forget [270] my own death in the Plaza of Atrocities? I remembered my poor dwindled father off the old road for ever, defending himself at the Bench of If-Only with an ancient rusty sword. I remembered Catalina as a bride, and Andrea. I remembered Gabriel Munoz and Pierre Papin, and the Sands of Terminal Despair and the Fuggerman Hasko von Nacht zu Nebel and Kit Marlowe a/k/a Quillpusher and the brigand Aurelio Otero whom I never met, and all the people and places that had gone by but also into me, and I looked at that stack of paper and that full inkhorn and those quill-pens. (397-98)

This is a magisterial and absurd summary of his life, an anagnorisis of the "I," and a key passage in the novel, for Cervantes decides on a definitive settling of accounts and a new beginning:

I wrote about none of that. ... I started on a fresh page.
El ingenioso hidalgo Don Quixote de la Mancha. (398)

THE LIFE OF FICTION

Marlowe surveys Cervantes's life and decides that the only authentic way for him to approach this life is by way of fiction. This is the serious side to the playful provocateur, Marlowe. Write about what you know? It's not just bad advice, it's backwards. A writer *must go beyond* what he knows. And when he does, if he does it in the right way, a strange and wonderful thing happens. When he does, if he does it in the right way, the things he's not writing about, the things he knows firsthand, nevertheless by some inexplicable alchemy are there lending their truth to what he does write. (398)

In the last instance, the story of Cervantes-Marlowe looks like the poetics of a believer. It is no coincidence that the novel takes the creeds of two authors as its epigraphs: "The delusions of history and the illusions of art both require a suspension of disbelief" (Arthur Koestler) and "Art gives life to what history killed" (Carlos Fuentes). All narrative strategies that infringe upon reality in a grotesque, comic, and playful way at the same time create a world of

independent validity. In that sense, the double meanings and pitfalls of the novel cause only limited damage. Accordingly, the [271] text lends itself to a comparison—and actually invites such a comparison itself—with *Don Quixote*, which, apart from parodying chivalric romances, of course, also creates an autonomous world.

If the novel is read as pure fiction, we see that the character of Cervantes gives way to the author of *Don Quixote*. The destructive strategies which the writer applies when discrediting history, at the same time create an imaginary universe and form a tribute to the Cervantes of literature.

This is easy to see in the constant transformations, disappearances, and doubles. The best example is undoubtedly Michele/ Micaela. During Cervantes's captivity in Algiers, we meet a fellow prisoner, an adolescent, who is continually provoking the Arab hostage takers sexually, but in reality turns out to be a young lady. She later becomes a secret agent, operating under the code name of Mnemosyne, which takes her to, among other places, Andalusia, Amsterdam, and London, where Cervantes unexpectedly recognizes her every time (the element of surprise ultimately disappears entirely, because there are constantly lots of transformations, disappearances, and sudden appearances). To these, add the doubles—Cervantes, Pedro (the Killer) Pacheco Portocarrero, Pedro (the Choirboy) Pacheco Portocarrero—, characters that are easy to mix up because of specific qualities (the brown and blue-eyed Constanza, Cide Hamete Benengeli . . .)—known as “mappings” in the criticism of postmodern fiction (McHale, 78-80)—and few characters remain with stable identities. Their lives, however, are firmly rooted in literature, for instance in *Don Quixote* and the narrative art of Cervantes. Girls/women disguised as boys/men like Michele/Micaela are a favorite motif in the prose and drama of the Spanish Golden Age. The presence of Micaela in England, where she is driven around the city in a coach by the queen, is a tribute to Cervantes's short story *La espahola inglesa*, just like Andrea's decision to live among the gypsies alludes to *La gitanilla*.⁸

In the narrator, too, a double, undermining and constructive force can be discerned. On the one hand, we can speak of the progressive erosion of his ontological status. The autobiographical “I,” whose transfer from the dead Cervantes to a living double has already been described, is remarkable as a witness-narrator, because he moves freely through his past, his present, and his future. He talks about his youth as if he were in the middle of it, while at the same time he is able to elaborate on the historians and critics who have established and interpreted this or that moment of his life. And, although it becomes clear why Cervantes is telling his story, up to the end of the text, it remains unclear when he [272] sickbed or

imagining that he would have told his *Death and Life* to Micaela—the last remaining passion of his life—if he had succeeded in getting into the coach with her instead of falling and consequently ending up in his sickbed.

In addition, the limited perspective of Cervantes sometimes unexpectedly gives way to an omniscient narrator, who recounts what is happening to the other characters in his absence. The writer, of course, is aware of these breaches of narrative convention and puts forward a justification for this which takes away any illusion of verisimilitude: every author has to admit that characters in a story start to lead a life of their own and do not cease to exist when the writer is not telling you about them; so he regards his life as a story and the people in it as characters. Even the text exists by virtue of the fiction: in the middle of the autobiography we find an erratum, inserted by the printer, which informs us that several pages are missing; a bit further on in the book, Cervantes explains to us that a character had just walked in through a wall and inserted this misleading text in his story (356).

Although reality and representation are constantly intermingled in this way, the story can be fully explained by accepting that the master of storytellers, Cervantes, has invented and directed his own text/life. After all, is not the text also a tribute to *El ingenioso hidalgo Don Quixote de la Mancha*, which also features an omniscient narrator, who occasionally addresses the reader directly, attributes the beginning of his story to the Arab chronicler Cide Hamete Benengeli, in which characters from real life appear— Gines de Pasamonte—who have read the work and in which Don Quixote and Sancho Panza, at the beginning of the second volume, discuss the readers of the first volume?

Marlowe's novel, too, has two parts. It is no coincidence that these are entitled *Part the First* and *Part the Second*; it has chapters with titles like "In Which I Am Excommunicated And Declared Anathema, And in Which Worse Things Happen." All these constitute unmistakable references to the author of *Don Quixote*, while Miguel de Cervantes perishes in his own life. Together, the carefully documented "history" and the unlikely series of events inspired by *Don Quixote* (or by Literature) that supplement it, reduce the man Miguel de Cervantes to a passive character in a huge theater of the world, a dedicated storyteller, perhaps, but someone who does not get round to a genuine reflection on his own life.

What I learned about writing, mostly, was this. The first thing writers of fiction have to do is willingly—and not just willingly but joyfully— [273] suspend *their own* disbelief. Then everything else follows. It's harder, of course, if you're a writer who worries a lot, telling yourself that even if what happens in imagination is as intense as the real world, still, you could be doing everything wrong; that writing about a hero who tries to impose on the world an impossible reality, a hero who must forever fail, is all a mistake, hopeless, irremediable. What if, pretty soon, you do more worrying than writing? There's a solution. I found it by

accident when writing *Don Quixote*, and I'll pass it along. If you want to stop worrying, you must make so much go wrong for your hapless hero that there's no time left to agonize over your hapless self. (455)

That is the ineluctable corollary of Marlowe's professed belief in the epistemological superiority of fiction to reality: for an explanation of his person, his Cervantes ingeniously refers us back to his work. *The Death and Life of Miguel de Cervantes* is, above all, a paraphrase of other novels, with extremely amusing, but never convincing characters. In this respect, the author cannot, in the end, bear comparison with the Man from la Mancha.

CONCLUSION

In dealing with the author of the most famous of all fictions, *The Death and Life of Miguel de Cervantes* by Stephen Marlowe reflects both the possibilities and the limitations of using an author as character. Exploiting the rich and agitated life of Cervantes, Marlowe creates an elaborate narration full of witty and hilarious games with History and Literature. He turns upside down the known facts about Cervantes's biography, and gives way to a provocative, heterodox interpretation of the canonized writer. Literature enables Marlowe to create a fictional universe inhabited by a colorful range of characters, picked up from contemporary Spanish authors, Cervantes, world literature, and even modern cinema; Cervantes's undisputed art of storytelling inspires him to spin a dazzling narrative full of subplots, sudden turns, and intrigue.

At a first glance, *The Death and Life of Miguel de Cervantes* seems to land us on the familiar ground of postmodern fiction, in which the limitations of representing reality are continually challenged. Hence, the doubles, parallel versions of a "historical truth," constant quotes and paraphrases, the narrator's stepping into and out of fiction, a narrator who himself tells us that historical truth is not really to be found. The "death" of Miguel de Cervantes is thus his historical death. But in confessing that fiction is the only realm of meaning, the "living Cervantes," that is the character [274] created by Marlowe, willingly submits whatever was left of his autonomous existence to Don Quixote, the character he had given life to. Thereby, the novel illustrates one of the pitfalls of this kind of fiction: at best *The Death and Life of Miguel de Cervantes* is a supreme parody on history and literature, but it does not appear to go beyond that. Depriving reality of any sense by confessing an absolute belief in fiction, Marlowe appears to have ignored the most important and enduring contribution of cervantine fiction, its essential, fascinating dialogue with History.

**NOTES TO “THE TRUTHFUL FICTION OF THE DEATH AND LIFE OF THE AUTHOR:
CERVANTES AND MARLOWE”**

Translated from the Dutch by Paul Franssen.

1. Marlowe, *The Death and Life of Miguel de Cervantes* (London: Bloomsbury, 1987).
2. Including Luis Astrana Martin, *Vida ejemplar y heroica de Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra*, 1 vols. (Madrid: Reus, 1948-57). A well-documented, penetrating and captivating biography is that by Jean Canavaggio, *Cervantes* (Paris: Mazarine, 1986).
3. Azorin (a.k.a. Jose Martinez Ruiz, 1873-1967) felt particularly attracted to the person and work of Miguel de Cervantes. The work in this case nearly always means: *Don Quixote*. He wrote several short pieces about Cervantes and *Don Quixote*, some of them essays, some impressionistic fictional sketches. As far as the figure of Cervantes is concerned, the following are worth mentioning: “Genesis del Quijote” (1905), published in the collection *Al voleo* (1905-53); “Cervantes,” one of the “portraits” in *Lecturas Espaholas* (1912); and “Aventuras de Miguel de Cervantes,” in *Pensando in Espaha* (1940). Several impressions of scenes from Cervantes’s life were included in *Con Cervantes* (1947) and *Con permiso de los cervantistas* (1948). Also of interest is his play *Cervantes, o la casa encantada* (1931), which depicts the penniless author in his last few years. See also Anthony Burgess, “A Meeting in Valladolid,” in *The Devil's Mode* (London: Hutchinson, 1989), 5-21, which, like Stephen Marlowe’s novel, features a meeting between Cervantes and Shakespeare; Jorge Luis Borges’s short poem on Cervantes in *The Book of Sand*, with a translation by Alastair Reid (Harmonds- worth: Penguin, 1979), 157; and, more recently, Federico Jeanmaire, *Miguel: Phantasmata Speculari* (Barcelona: Anagrama, 1991).
4. *The Memoirs of Christopher Columbus* (London: Bloomsbury, 1987).
5. See chapter 34, with the meaningful title “The Fateful Adventure of the Flying Horse Clavileno And Other Impossibilities,” 440-44.
6. For a lucid account of postmodern fiction, see Brian McHale, *Constructing Postmodernism* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992).
7. Marlowe may have had in mind Rossi Rosa’s *Ascoltare Cervantes: Saggio biografico* (Roma: Editori Riuniti, 1987), in which the author is able to “establish,” with the help of psychoanalytical methods, that Cervantes’s family were *con- versos*—converted Jews—and that Miguel was a homosexual.
8. Both short stories may be found in Cervantes’s *Novelas ejemplares*.