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**William Egginton, *The Man Who Invented Fiction:  
How Cervantes Ushered in the Modern World.* Bloomsbury, 2016**

Reviewed by Ernest B. Hook

This book's title must puzzle anyone even vaguely familiar with the history of world literature. Did Cervantes (1547-1615) invent fiction?

Unfortunately, the author's focus is exclusively Western. Neither "India" nor "China" appears in the index, for instance. But China provides a tradition of fiction that long antedates *Don Quixote* (published in two volumes, the first in 1605). *The Water Margin* and *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms* appeared the 1300s of the Current Era (CE). *Journey to the West* appeared about 1590. Many regard the even earlier *Tale of Genji* (11<sup>th</sup> century CE) from Japan as the first psychological novel in a modern sense.\*

Even restricting our focus to the West, how plausible is the title's claim? It obviously depends on what one means by "fiction". In what sense was *Don Quixote* (book one 1605, book two 1615) different from all that went before?

First, do we include poetry or plays as fiction? On plays Egginton is ambiguous, implying in some places he will accept them as fiction. In this case clearly Sophocles and other notable Greek playwrights two millennia before Cervantes have clear priority. (I think one can exclude the even earlier *Iliad* and *Odyssey* on the grounds the initial author[s] and listeners probably regarded them as history, despite our present perspective.) Narrative poems, clearly fictional, include *Chaucer's Canterbury's Tales*, or Dante's *Inferno* among a great number which clearly predate Cervantes.

But even limiting oneself to narrative prose from the West, the claim of the title is incorrect. Complete Greek romantic novels survive from the 1st to the 3rd centuries of the Current Era (CE). \*\* From the Romans we have among others *The Satyricon* by Petronius (27- 66 CE), *The Golden Ass* by Apuleius (124 CE - 170 CE) and *A True Story* by Lucian (125 CE- 180 CE), which despite its title is a fictional satire of false claims. Its plot includes what would be called science *fiction* 2000 years later.

Egginton might claim that these were lost and not rediscovered until after Cervantes wrote. That is not correct. For example, Cervantes himself knew of and drew on at least one work of antiquity, *The Golden Ass*.

Egginton does mention at least *The Decameron*, 1345, by Boccaccio (1313 – 1376), *Utopia* 1516 by Thomas More (1478 -- 1535), and *Gargantua and Pantagruel* (appearing in print from about 1532 up to 1564) by Rabelais (1490 – 1553).

He concedes priority in a sense to Boccaccio because, in the Decameron, he created the form of the novella. But that along with the works of the others remain insufficient because “his [Boccaccio’s] characters remain only objects in this world”. Presumably this means the reader has little or no access to the “inner life” of the characters. Cervantes by contrast plumbs the depth of character and shifts fluidly among different points of view. *Don Quixote* constantly leads us “to question the intent behind the descriptions, the difference between the masks the characters show to one another and the emotions that animate them.”

If *this* is the modern (Western) world created by any literature, then Cervantes did not invent it in 1605! Novelist or no novelist, Shakespeare did it starting 15 years earlier. (*Hamlet* appeared no later than 1602.) Egginton rather grudgingly concedes Shakespeare’s importance, but only in a footnote at the end of the book, where he defends the primacy he gives to Cervantes because the latter “created a *more* potent vehicle for influencing culture and thought.” (My emphasis.) I dispute this, and wonder if Egginton knows how widely Shakespeare has influenced the world.

But the “modern world” aside, what does Egginton *mean* precisely when he claims Cervantes invented “fiction”? He means Western *modern* (non-dramatic) fiction, i.e. the modern novel, hardly the modern world. One may forgive a critic for a little literary braggadocio, but Egginton’s title goes too far.

Many writers and literary critics (and politicians and advertisers) use language sloppily. Others speak and write as if they believe they have a right to take license with language. Because language evolves, these actors may think they are justifiably hastening the process. They may not go as far as Humpty Dumpty who openly asserts his sense of dogmatic entitlement. (“When I use a word it means just what I choose it to mean” nor moreover, will you know the meaning “till I tell you”!) But, one may ask them, where is the boundary between a clearly understood new use, a misleading use, and a misuse?

At what point does misleading or misuse of language become dangerous in the sense George Orwell discussed in his essay “Politics and the English Language”? As long as an author makes clear directly, or at least by implication, that the exaggeration or the distortion of truth embodied by “literary license” s/he employs, *is in fact such*, and the reader understands that, then we avoid such corruption. But often we may not.

Egginton refers often to the equivalent of “truths in fiction”, as e.g. “a novel giving access to a truth otherwise inaccessible.” Thus allegedly, such fiction enables moral questions to be explored that could not otherwise be. Certainly, prose fiction, as well as plays and narrative poetry, may convey “truths.” John Steinbeck’s novel the *Grapes of Wrath* (1939) — or the film, the play, or the opera — presented movingly the poignant bleak effects of the Dust Bowl and the Depression on human lives. But vivid as it was, one hardly needed fiction to have access to these facts. Steinbeck made vivid the despair of those affected. But no one needed fiction to be aware of that.

Fiction can help us *find* truth. But it may not. It can as readily convey lies as well as truths, and lead us to believe things that are untrue! Nazis’ children’s fiction portrayed Jews as moral monsters. Some novels have glorified anti-semitism and race hatred. Fiction in Communist Poland served the Party’s ideology. So how is the reader or observer to know which fiction lies for the sake of propaganda in service to some ideology, or, for other reasons, deliberately presents harmful untruths in the guise of “fiction,” and which does not? It may be obvious. But it may not be.

There is in a location I cannot relocate in this book reference to the “glorious art of facts that aren’t.”

In two lines Shakespeare in his 138th sonnet put this notion better and more honestly than Cervantes and Egginton:

“When my love swears that she is made of truth,  
I do believe her, though I know she lies...”

There is no ambiguity in this paradox. The poet acknowledges he loves the maiden so much, he will accept her lies knowing them for what they are.

Setting aside the courtesy of taking the title at face value with the knowledge that it is exaggerated bluff, let us examine the contents within.

We find a vivid biography of both Cervantes (1547-1616) intermingled with a discussion of his creation. Cervantes had a remarkable life, full of incident and which itself could be the nidus of a great historical novel. His five year military career resulted in extensive battlefield exposure, maiming wounds (he lost use of his left arm), long hospitalization, and ultimately capture and then enslavement for another five years in Algiers before ransom by his family. Despite tribulations for the sake of the State and cause to which he was devoted, he received no financial reward for what he suffered for his sincere patriotism. Even at age 58, with the publication and immediate success of the first volume of *Don Quixote* in 1605 in the twilight of his life, he still endured financial difficulties, despite the fact the work was immediately and widely successful, and translated into many languages. He had 11 more years before dying in 1616, the same year in which the second volume of the work appeared.

Egginton starts a richly imagined chronicle with a scene of the raucous enjoyment of a reading aloud of *Don Quixote* in a low Spanish inn. This along with a large number of other descriptions and comments are simply speculative. “Cervantes *might well have* looked up and reflected...,” after some event “...friends *likely* gathered at a restaurant [with him]...,” here “Cervantes *may well have met...*,” “...*it is hard to believe this is not* how Cervantes felt...,” “...*undoubtedly* he felt relief...,” etc. My favorite is the image reported as fact of Cervantes on a hot August day in the dusty streets of Valladolid clutching a heavy package (the manuscript of the work) with his one useful hand. It was likely dusty in Valladolid (average rainfall is about 0.9 inches for the month) and maybe it was hot that August day or maybe it wasn’t (the average high August temperature in this era of global warming in that city is 86 and low 56), but how does Egginton know that Cervantes and not a friend didn’t carry it for him, especially if it was heavy. And we are frustrated by being told that while he stepped gingerly over blood and offal in the streets, we don’t know where he is going, although we are left to infer the package contains the manuscript of volume one of *Don Quixote* and it is being taken to a scribe to make a fair copy for the publisher. These speculative imaginations in a work of biography and literary criticism are signs of a novelist manqué. I suspect the author has been trying too hard to emulate Cervantes in attempts to probe aspects of his mind and life to which *he* really has no access.

Egginton, in discussing the variable viewpoints Cervantes creates in his novel, notes the similarity of Jorge Borges’ 20<sup>th</sup> century multi-perspectival approach to fiction. Borges, who was a great admirer of *Don Quixote*, had great fun writing, and his public reading, reviews of non-existent books. One such was of a work by an-of-course non-existent Frenchman who, Borges reports, recreated parts of *Don Quixote*, word for word, not by copying but through his own experience. Yet though the Frenchman’s work is identical, Borges’ review of his non-existent book pronounces it better than the original.

Borges and Cervantes enjoy the mischievous approach, as do we readers. And also does Egginton. Indeed, every once in a while, I got the sense he was enjoying playing a joke or two on his own readers in his text. Perhaps *that* accounts for his title.

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\* I thank Yunzhong Shu for calling my attention to these works.

\*\* I thank Michael Palencia-Roth for calling my attention to the Greek Romances. This led me to discovery of the Latin novels.