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21L.472 Major European Novels
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Cervantes, *Don Quixote*

Don Quixote was written for what I am going to call the "gentry" (derived from the same root as "gentleman"), people of education who could appreciate the rhetorical prodigality of Cervantes's prose, or at least have the ambition to do so. It proved, nonetheless, popular with all types, even the illiterate, who had to listen to it read aloud. To understand the book, we have to understand the world of human connection and activity as Cervantes would have understood it-grasping some of the assumptions that would have guided Cervantes in writing the book (possibly without even knowing that he was doing so) and that he would have expected his readers to project into it, as the background to its action. The social world as Cervantes understood it was hierarchical, stratified, even as ours is, but in it, unlike ours, one's position was determined largely by birth. I distinguish six groups:

1. **Royalty and Upper Nobility:** These were people whose names each had a history behind it, a record of important accomplishment in defending and extending the interests of large numbers of dependents, not just members of their family. Their name was associated with a distinct territory, with lands, villages, even towns and the people that went with them. (Shakespeare calls Cleopatra "Egypt", the King of France "France", the duke of Kent "Kent". We would not call the President of the United States "United States".) Without some connection to the name, people of a lesser sort would live in relative obscurity, known by name only to their acquaintances, but through their connection to the name they acquire a larger identity. The name, even if you did not bear it as your own, gave you your social identity-you were so-and-so's servant, bailiff, seneschal, man-at-arms, resident of town, village or hamlet in the keeping of the lord, the chief member of the family directly identified by the name. You paid the lord, and thereby the family, tithes and taxes and submitted to various forms of service, including armed service, for which you might be selected at random or by lot; in return, the one bearing the name provided managerial oversight and justice in the territory through appointed agents and security from invasion and plunder; thereby, he gave you your substance in the world at large. Not only did your fortunes rise and fall with those of the bearer of the name; you had a defined claim on the attention of the world only in relation to the lord. One who could not claim dependency on the person bearing the name (at whatever remove) had no social being, either in the local community or elsewhere. He or she was a nobody.

2. **Lesser Nobility:** The bearer of the name could be advanced in title as a reward for service to someone higher in the ranks of nobility. A gift of lands (carrying with it lordship over those who dwelt therein) was part of this advancement. One might suppose that sooner or later all the lands would be duly allotted and no more nobles created, but territories changed hands in war, and advancement was generally consequent upon performance in battle. (And there was always the conquest of the New World.) Titles already existing were transmitted by birth, generally by primogeniture-that is to say, they devolved upon the eldest male offspring. Siblings of the eldest male might gain ascent to the upper nobility by distinguished military achievement, duly rewarded by the lord's lord; otherwise, if male, they staffed the upper cadres of the military, serving under the lord who bore the family name (and the name of its territories) or under the banner of the lord's lord. Or they might join the clergy and become part of the upper clergy-bishops and archbishops. (Sancho's dream that Don Quixote might become an archbishop was as crazy as the notion that he might marry a princess. The upper clergy was closed to anyone of rank below that of the lesser nobility.) In the book, Don Fernando belongs to this class; this is why it is to Cardenio's advantage to be of service to him.

3. **Upper Gentry:** These were people of real consequence within the territory of a lord; they had amassed large areas of property and wealth of various kinds and been adding to it for several generations, but they had no genealogical history, no public lineage that might be put, say, on a coat-of-arms. Their grandfather or great-grandfather might be remembered for bravery in battle or dignity in local office, but no one besides other members of the family derived their social identities from such a person. They remain *relatively* obscure. Dorotea, Lucinda, Cardenio, the two friends in the story of "ill-advised curiosity" belong to this class. The rule for advancement here is explained by Dorotea; a member of the lower nobility might take someone of her class for a wife, because ancestry

was not so important when traced back through the female line as it was when traced back through the male-this fact reflects the rules for inheriting the name and the territories going with it. For the same reason, a female of the lower nobility would not marry beneath her. (In Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* when the comic villain of the piece, Malvolio, comes to believe that the noble woman he serves might take him for a husband, he is regarded as a madman by the other characters.)

4. **Lower Gentry:** This is the class to which Don Quixote belongs and Cervantes as well. Don Quixote is often described as possessed of heroic ambitions in a world that doesn't afford opportunity for heroic ambitions, and he talks at one point, sadly, about how hard it is to be knight when any peasant at a distance can shoot you off your horse, but his foolishness, nonetheless, is not just a foolishness about mixing up fiction and truth or about heroic achievement in a world that affords no opportunity for heroic achievement. (There still seems to be opportunity for heroism in military service among the lower gentry, for example, in the war against the Turks, in which Cervantes and his fictional "Captive" took part.) To a contemporary reader, Don Quixote's ambition would carry an air of misguided social importance. The assumption of the title "Don" (equivalent to "Lord") is a piece of social effrontery and when the Don wants Sancho to address him as "his natural lord and master", his madness is making him act too big for his social britches. Don Quixote's excess in this connection is indicated by his discourse about the two kinds of lineage in the world (in chapter XXI)-a piece of upside-down logic, in which Don Quixote argues that he must have a noble ancestor *just because* he is not noble himself. To continue the list of characters who belong to the lower gentry: Leandra (in the goatherd's story) belongs here, as do the Captive and his siblings; the success of the last three in the military, the judiciary, and the world of business indicate that forms of social advancement are available to them, but there is no chance that they will penetrate to the rank of lower nobility. Marcella, the mock-shepherdess (she isn't keeping sheep for a living) belongs here, too.

5. **Students Belong to Both Lower and Upper Gentries:** They train for either the clergy (all universities of the time were originally founded to train in theology) or law. University training was not required for a Bishopric or Archbishopric; these ranks were closed to the gentry and the lower nobility who occupied them did not take on student status. The curate belongs to the gentry; he'll never become a bishop. (After all, he keeps company with the town barber.) The canon represents a rank higher in the range accessible to members of the gentry. Being literate, members of the lower gentry are particularly inclined to model themselves on literary types, and they take to the woods, adopting the roles of shepherds and rustic poets, in some ways as we might choose to spend time, like George W. Bush, running a ranch, doing carpentry, studying art or vacationing on a dude ranch. Are they silly to do this sort of thing? They have read pastoral poems, in which shepherds and shepherdesses are represented as simplified versions of literate people, who spend their time composing poetry, while the sheep take care of themselves; in the sixties and seventies, American students did much the same thing part-time, living in communes, dressing liked cowboys, and composing folk ballads on electric guitars.

Members of the gentry can certainly improve their fortunes and their status within the group to which they belong; if male, they can become soldier-mercenaries or seek fortune in arms in a company bound for the New World, or they might enter the clergy (Don Quixote's discourse on the relative merits of the military and religious vocations in chapter XXXVIII would have had a genuine interest for his original readership) but there is a "glass ceiling", a limit to how high the gentry can rise in either career. Their name may become memorable (like those of the brave commanders extolled by the curate to the landlord at the inn in chapter XXXII), but no one outside their family will derive a sense of their social reality, that is, of their own relative importance in the world, by reason of relation to that name. (Don Quixote's grandfather, he insists, had behaved gallantly in some battle or other; the fact is important to him and locals might know about it, but it confers no *inheritable* social distinction.)

6. **Common Folk:** Sancho, the landlord and his wife, Maritornes, various muleteers and the like that Don Quixote encounters on the road and at inns. These are the good, often illiterate folk, who are quite unrefined and do the labors of the world for those above them.

The point about these class divisions is two-fold. First, no one imagines that the world's hierarchy of authority can be reinvented or new parts of it created. The world's hierarchy of authority has the authority of God behind it. That is why authority by birth is so important; life is granted or withheld, wombs made fruitful or barren for a reason, even if we do not understand it, and people are suited to the station in which they are born. In this conception of things, therefore, an immense stability is imputed to the world's arrangements; however violently human activity may displace its order, the world will return to its stable, enduring dispositions (or else-Shakespeare considers this possibility in some plays-devolve into chaos). Some mobility of social position is granted, but Don Quixote's idea that he has nobility in his blood is lunacy. In the "books of chivalry" that have addled his brains, things work the other way about: the unknown stranger, the very type who has no social identity, no position in the world whatever, turns out to be of noble descent-an idea entertained as an amiable joke in comic plots from the ancient world down to Gilbert and Sullivan. Our own world, of course, share something of Don Quixote's view; however much social mobility is or is not a fact, we believe in it, both as a reality and as an ideal. Parents generally want their children to "do better" than themselves, not just by way of income, but also in manner of life, and we freely invent new orders of authority or shuffle existing ones about both within corporations and the nation-state. Authority may still be thought to have God behind it, but the enduring features of the social world are not established by birth.

Second, the delineation of people in literary fiction must allow readers to recognize what sort of person the delineation represents. All fiction operates with implicit rules about the range and kinds of consequence that characters might have in the world, depending upon the conditions of their existence, their social rank, their stage of life, and also with the range and kinds of effect that chance or other people's designs can impose upon them. This is to say that characters in fiction possess typical as well as individual traits, reflecting something of the division of people into groups in the real world. Since we believe in social mobility, our fictions tend to privilege individual traits; typical characters and formulaic plots will abound-the intelligibility of fiction cannot do without them-but they will be qualified by a predominant assumption that people can *redefine* their possibilities and that it makes sense to worry about what they are. In contrast, thanks to the tight relation that was supposed to obtain in Cervantes's day between individual identity and an enduring social hierarchy, fiction was expected to privilege typical over individual traits; characters in fiction were expected to embody habits, ambitions, motives, hopes, and general dispositions that ran close to type.

The typicality of character need not be simply a matter of social rank (for example, jealousy is typically different in young and old, in husbands and bachelors) but it will always be discernably touched by social rank. A character like Don Fernando, a member of the lower nobility, would be unsuitable as a comic figure in a book as accepting of social distinctions as is Don Quixote. He will never have "his cheeks bathed in blood" in the course of a fist-fight; he will not struggle over saddlebags or have lengthy arguments with a servant, and be vomited upon by a comic assistant, as Don Quixote is vomited upon by Sancho in the episode of Fierebras's balsam. Any portrayal that gave him such possibilities as a character would be implausible, lacking in verisimilitude, unbelievable, even though the real world might supply plenty of examples of atypical nobility. He also has greater latitude than a member of the gentry when it is a question of overcoming one's lapses of character in response to the love of a beautiful woman. Don Quixote takes such limitations in fiction as rules for conducting oneself in the real world (in this case, as a member of the lower nobility if you happen to be one); to some extent, he is correct, but Don Quixote has been reading the wrong sort of books, the implausible kind, which do not portray characters adequately in respect of social reality. Further, he supposes that the rules may be easily read out of fiction, as if they were manuals of instruction-telling you what is proper and improper behavior among members of a particular social group. This is of a piece with the Don's *literalism*-his sense that books of chivalry incorporate all relevant minor details of the action truthfully, and if something is not mentioned, its absence must be in accord with a rule of behavior. The Don does not grasp that in fiction there are rules about irrelevant details-what needn't be made explicit because the competent reader will take them for granted. Don Quixote is an incompetent reader-he supposes that omitted details signify something about the impropriety of the details with regard to knightly conduct. (One might contrast the Don's failure here with his impatience over Sancho's ferrying of goats, where Sancho is the literalist and Don Quixote, for a change, is a sensible reader.)

There seem to be two aspects to the Don's literary madness—the first concerns what makes fiction plausible, believable, verisimilar (like the truth); the second concerns how the rules governing plausibility in fiction may be translated into rules for behavior in fact. In a book concerned with reading and the nature of fiction, it is unsurprising to find explicit discussions of these topics among the characters themselves. Inspired by Don Quixote's antics, sensible readers like the curate or canon talk about the nature of fiction and its relation to fact. In all literary fiction, there is a kind of pruning and simplification going on; there is also what we might call an excess of meaning granted to the actions of characters, a larger scope for success or failure, than is available in the real world. In connection with these two features, the theory of fiction subscribed to by the curate and canon is roughly Aristotelian in nature, appealing to the notion that fiction idealizes its subject-matter in order to offer humanity a clearer glimpse than history can furnish of what is most typical about human relationships, particularly in martial exercise and in matters of love. What is verisimilar (like the truth) need not be truthful; what is believable may not be true. Worth-while books provide models for imitation, in the sense of offering an ideal that is worth living up to; the truth that can be found in them is ethical truth. Worth-while books, however, need not be relentlessly lofty or inspirational. There is, evidently, a range of genres, or literary kinds, extending from the epic (which deals with legendary heroes), exemplary tales, like the story of inappropriate curiosity (which deals with gentry) or the captive's tale, and there is even room for outright fantasy (but not enchantment) in pastoral romances, which present images of what simple refinement was like when all people were country people, the corruptions of civilization had not yet come into existence, and nobody had to spend a lot of time working for a living. Because such idealizations are *exemplars* (object meant to be imitated), their depiction engages rules about what should not be said in relations to them; it would be improper to describe the personal toiletry of an exemplary character in a heroic work of fiction, for example. These fictive characters are a valuable kind of artifice, and the ruder necessities of life do not touch their description or receive mention in accounts of their activities. (It becomes important not to say of an exemplar of beauty, capable of inspiring good in a man, that she has a faint moustache, hair on her legs, sweats heavily, experiences menstrual cramps, or knows anything about sexual practice.) Exemplary characters still exist in modern fictions, but the nature of their exemplarity has changed somewhat since Cervantes's day. In consequence, the presence of Cardenio, Dorotea, or the Captive's Zoraida may cause us to raise an eyebrow where verisimilitude is concerned—they seem so unlike our notions of realistic characters.

What sort of a book is *Don Quixote*, then? *Don Quixote* is a comedy, a mode having its own genres, all dealing precisely with the material, circumstantial, ruder aspects of life, and how they interfere with the ambitions of those unsuited to be exemplars, mere pretenders to authority, refinement, grace, courage and intelligence (or in the case of clowns, mere pretenders to simple competence with physical objects). We note, for example, that Don Quixote's pretensions to enchantment are momentarily undone near the end of Book One by his need to do "what a man can do only for himself". And yet *Don Quixote* is not all comedy, for it includes the so-called "interpolated" tales, which are exemplary fictions, and even writes exemplary characters into the main body of the story. (Sancho reports at the outset of Part II that readers find the exemplary aspects of the book an annoying interruption of the really good bits—the comedy of Quixote's adventures and his conversations with Sancho.) It is the exemplary characters who talk about fiction and who remark of Don Quixote that if you found him in work of fiction, you wouldn't find him believable. In this respect, quite apart from its rhetorical achievements, the genius of *Don Quixote* is two-fold. First, it combines exemplary characters with comic ones, one of the first books to do so—confronting, let us say, the mad Cardenio, whose fictive derangement is in accord with the type of manly loved betrayed by its ideal object, with the madness of Quixote, who, fictively mad himself, pretends to go mad in compliance with the best literary examples and cannot do it properly. And second, it provides a comic figure whose pretensions all turn upon misconceptions about literature. In inventing such a figure, the text not only prompts its characters to engage in discussion about the nature of fiction; it also, by way of further entertainment, involves the reader in a continual series of jokes and games about what he or she is doing—reading a book, in which only the madman believes that things happen as they do because they are fit to be represented in a book.

It is this aspect of the *Don Quixote* that has chiefly attracted modern critics. We all live by fictions, many of them argue, because there are no large, encompassing truths, and we try to find out who we are by finding our place in the right narrative. But we are largely unaware of this fact, like the exemplary characters in the book. The book presents these exemplary characters in the first instance as if they have a fair sense of

reality, in contrast to Don Quixote, who does not. And yet the book also insistently reminds the reader by a variety of devices that these characters are, after all, exemplary *fictions*-that their sense of reality does not touch the most important thing about them, whereas Don Quixote, in a twisted way, does seem to understand that what happens is happening in a narrative.