

No Accounting for Taste: From Mar-A-Lago to the White House

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Departing the recent G-20 summit in Hamburg, Donald Trump and his wife Melania are boarding Air Force One. Before disappearing into the cabin, they stand for a few moments at the top of the mobile stairway waving to the cameras and assembled journalists. A stiff breeze is afoot. It musses the President's hair, whips his tie like a flag, and presses his suit up around him so as to reveal the soft contours of his body. At the same time, the First Lady seems immune to the gusts. A few strands of her hair are stirring, nothing more.

As the motto of my brief remarks I take the following statement from Jean Starobinski's *The Invention of Liberty* (1964), an elegant and erudite study of the shift in the arts and architecture that accompanied the decline of Absolutism and the gradual rise of the private, commercial classes: "The bourgeois who had just made his fortune was akin to the aristocrat who had nothing left *but* his fortune."¹ At a time when an unprecedented ostentation served to compensate for a decline in royal authority, the newly ascendant bourgeois, in his desire to imitate the aristocrat, became one with the latter's vanity. "Enriched financiers and traders became peers, acquired estates and titles, assumed a mask of nobility." In our historical present, descendants of those enriched financiers and traders compose a presidential cabinet whose collective wealth, untethered from life and from the lived experience of virtually all Americans, is so vast as to constitute a kind of

oblivion. Thus emptied of content, immense wealth affords the basis for the oft-trumpeted tautology of self-alienated self-summation, “I am really rich.”²

The absolute monarch was, to be sure, never his own flatterer. He may indeed have been a slave to the machinery of the monarchy, of which the elaborate staging of his magnificence was a crucial part. However, the splendor of his palaces, the opulence of his entertainments, the unequaled finery of his dress—all of these served to demonstrate publicly a sovereign “magic” in which all subjects had a stake. This was true of Louis XIV but less true of his successors, so that court ceremony shed its social substance and became empty. Let us say that Donald Trump, whose many houses are veritable caricatures of Versailles, is emptiness—*vanity*, in its original sense—personified.

Clearly, the habits and personal traits that distinguish the Sun King from our 45th president are considerable. One could mention, in the case of the latter, the glaring disregard of protocol, including (*most* glaringly) the protocols of courtesy. Likewise, our new chief executive has delegated the responsibility for dressing exquisitely to First Lady and third wife Melania. And yet, Donald Trump has an unmistakable predilection for the decorative style of the *ancien régime*. His Florida resort Mar-a-Lago, which he in true royal fashion has christened the “Winter White House,” features interiors that mimic the décor of Versailles, and his three-story penthouse in New York’s Trump Tower includes a spiral staircase with a neo-classical pastoral scene in the unmistakable style of the Rococo.

Let us take a moment to scratch our heads and wonder how the anointed standard-bearer of the “America First!” movement manages to surround himself with elements of ornament and design whose origins lie in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century *France*.³ Surely nothing could be more antithetical to the *populism* that helped sweep Donald Trump into office than the Rococo, with its refractive glitter, its playful sensualism, its sable, its cherubs and pearls, its prevailing air of



aristocratic leisure. One can speculate as to why Trump himself would favor a style that revels in its own luxury. One can wonder as well as to the void it fills. One can, after all, grow up wealthy and yet feel deprived, indeed empty.

Consider this formal family portrait. The interior, with its gilt furniture and pilasters, and its *trompe l'oeil* ceiling paintings, is incongruous with the gray, flat



expanse beyond the windows. The smiling Trump is somewhat animated, but Melania and the princeling might just as well be wax. The enormous toy lion lends the scene the look of a diorama in a museum of natural history. Other props include the toys placed near the lion's front paws: a race car and two stretch limousines. If one can for a moment empathize with the members of this family, then one is surely beset with a certain sadness. Everything about the scene confirms Sigmund Freud's observation that money cannot bring happiness, as it does not fulfill a wish from childhood.⁴ The expression on this child's face is one of seeming bewilderment. He is "bewildered" in the true sense of the word, i. e., abandoned to the wild. The Oedipal triad of this *tableau vivant* enforces the distance between mother and young son, whose very toys interpellate him as a shareholder in his

father's desire. The image proclaims the triumph of the superego, whose message to the son (every son) is constant and absolute: "You must want what I want, but you may not have what I have."⁵ The socio-economic implications of this claim are staggering.

The delusional *grandiosity* that is Donald Trump's defining characteristic is far less consistent with the presidency than with a monarchy, which could explain his preference for such excessively opulent interior design. Likewise, his notorious (and self-confessed) germophobia suggests a curious inversion of the age-old taboo against touching the king, traditionally thought to be the source of contagion—of dangerous magic. The minutely elaborated protocols concerning the sovereign's every word and gesture had their origin in the belief that kings, chiefs and priests not only had to be guarded but also guarded *against*. Freud who, following Sir Douglas Frazer, wrote on this phenomenon makes the following claim, which we are bound to hear with fresh ears in our current moment:

A king ... lives hedged in by ceremonial etiquette, a network of prohibitions and observances, of which the intention is not to contribute to his dignity ... but to restrain him from conduct which, by disturbing the harmony of nature, might involve himself, his people, and the universe in one common catastrophe.⁶

Again, Trump's peculiar taste in interior design is, to my mind, not an accident. For unless he has a secret self we haven't seen, he cannot possibly be attuned to the wit, charm, levity, delicacy, or cultivated effeminacy of the Rococo. Nor is he aware of the political and cultural history that led from the Baroque to the Rococo and on to the relative sobriety of, say, Mount Vernon, Monticello, not to mention the White House itself.

The difference, clearly, is one of class. These last-mentioned buildings are part of a world founded by the ascendant bourgeoisie, certain of whose core principles were articulated by no less than Michelle Obama in the speech famously cribbed by Melania Trump in her debut at the Republican National Convention. Here are the relevant lines:

Barack and I were raised with so many of the same values: that you work hard for what you want in life; that your word is your bond ... ; that you treat people with dignity and respect; ... that the only limit to the height of your achievements is the reach of your dreams and your willingness to work for them.⁷

These words comprise a small catalogue of the virtues championed by a bourgeoisie whose motto had been “careers open to talent”: honesty, hard work, agreeable commerce, reliability, tenacity, decency, measured ambition.⁸ This same social class rejected—with a vengeance—the unchecked expenditure and frivolity of the old aristocracy. Does Donald Trump’s embrace of the style of the aristocracy align him with that class, or perhaps with its decadence? For the Rococo was not the style of Absolutism; it was the style of Absolutism on the wane: In the Baroque age, quoting Starobinski,

ostentation was not simply the sign of sovereignty: it was the expression of power externalized, made perceptible to the senses, able to renew its outward manifestations indefinitely. The solemn image of the prince in the glory of his finery, exalted in his estates and palaces, demanded universal recognition.... [A]ccording to the myth of absolute power, the perception of this expansive glory should immediately transform the observer into a grateful subject, making him an integral element in the circle of royal possessions ... (14)

Later, as the power of the monarch yielded to that of the state apparatus, court ceremonial was no longer a symbol of the monarch’s far-reaching influence and will: it had degenerated into meaningless, unjustified spectacle. The ostentation was devoid of real political substance: the king seemed to be a bored man seeking refuge from his lassitude by hearing operas, hunting, changing mistresses. The buildings he had constructed to this end, or for more serious purposes, did have a certain majesty, but their attraction and ornamentation suggested that the king’s private pleasure took precedence over the public interest.... This was the epitome of the *narcissistic*, overweening aspect of the [Rococo]—which repudiated the

Baroque “rhetoric of persuasion,” or else transformed this rhetoric into incoherent nonsense or speeches consisting merely of high-flown facile clichés. (15)

Changing mistresses, constructing buildings, subordinating public interest to private pleasure, spouting incoherent nonsense, modeling *narcissism*—Starobinski’s picture of the prince of post-Absolutism easily doubles as a profile of the new Commander in Chief. Trump’s own *insouciant* preference for the style of the late aristocracy exposes the present to the past—makes *him* vulnerable to the history of which he knows nothing. In a time in which the level of material well-being that people enjoy is *radically* disproportionate to the amount or quality of labor they perform, Trump would seem intent on freezing history in the moment just prior to the age proclaimed by Michelle Obama, in which “the only limit to the height of your achievements is the reach of your dreams and your willingness to work for them.” That Melania could parrot this promise with a straight face is a fair indication of how laughable it has become.

¹ Jean Starobinski, *The Invention of Liberty (1700-1789)*, trans. Bernard C. Swift (Geneva: Skira, 1968), 15.

² Donald Trump on countless occasions.

³ See Robert Wellington, *Going for Gold: Trump, Louis XIV and Interior Design*

<https://theconversation.com/going-for-gold-trump-louis-xiv-and-interior-design-71698>

⁴ Sigmund Freud, *Briefe an Wilhelm Fliess*, ed. Jeffrey Moussaieff Masson and Michael Schröter (Frankfurt: Fischer, 1986), 320.

⁵ I have read this characterization (“You must want what I want ...”) elsewhere, but am no longer able to locate the source.

⁶ Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, trans. James Strachey (New York: Norton, 1989), 56.

⁷ <http://www.npr.org/2012/09/04/160578836/transcript-michelle-obamas-convention-speech>

⁸ See Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Revolution 1789-1848* (New York: Vintage, 1996), 182.