

Impeccability and the Ideal

*I saw a werewolf drinking a piña colada at Trader Vic's
And his hair was perfect.*

– Warren Zevon

Elegance is a means of showing one's power.

– Pascal

In the developed West, most of us have learned to associate property displayed in an impeccable state with the condition of wealth. When wealth assumes the form of a dynastic accumulation, this condition extends itself, as if by force of nature, into a utopia of impeccability. The rules of this utopia decree that objects within the dynastic embrace must not present evidence of wear or damage. Ideally, they should appear never to have been marked by human usage at all – a conceit which disconnects their present existence from the labor power that produced them, even as it gestures plainly to the owners' command over both labor power and materials.

In the utopia of impeccability, organic processes of all kinds are placed under house arrest. The visible environment repudiates any intimation of disorder. Pictures must hang absolutely straight, dust vanishes from the mantelpiece and window ledges. Instances of scuffed paint or peeling wallpaper are ruthlessly dealt with before they have a chance to spread. Impeccability can tolerate no stains upon the rug, cracked bathroom tiles or moldy grouting. Copper pans must appear to have been immunized against flame. If a venerated dynastic artifact, an ancient firearm for example, has sustained a gouge on the stock, then the whole object is enshrined as a relic, the wound well polished over. Wear and tear may have occurred in the past, objects may show traces of a biography, but decay claims no foothold here – its progress has been permanently foreclosed.

Outdoors, hedges are trimmed so as to suggest that they have not grown, but rather existed from time immemorial exactly as they are. Though cognitively we register, and at times witness, the material presence of gardeners, workmen and maids engaged in their tasks, the utopia of impeccability transforms their labor into an emblem of the timeless harmony between natural order and the dynastic will. Everywhere the eye falls,

the reign of impeccability appears total. Even the servants' quarters – however humbly appointed – are kept spotlessly clean.

The ideal of impeccability upholds the absolute sovereignty of surface: surface as armor which deflects the enemy lance. This foe, whether imagined as the rule of the mob, financial ruin, or social disgrace, is always death. Not death as the reaper of mortals, but rather death as the agent of decay, eating away at the dynastic accumulation, mocking the dynastic claim over the command of labor power upon which impeccability depends.

As a dynastic accumulation of wealth is divided and sub-divided over successive generations, preserving impeccability becomes an evermore consuming task. Yet each dynastic holding, however dispersed, must be kept as though it were a museum piece. The lower classes, lacking the resources for such death-defying idealizations to be carried out across a dynastic space-time, often confer impeccability upon a few treasured objects – generally highly-crafted machines, associated with sportsmanship and other non-productive activities, and redolent with the pleasure of aggression. An antique car may be restored to mint condition, or a cherished war trophy, perhaps taken from a vanquished enemy, and handed down from father to son in working order. In some working-class neighborhoods, entire rows of cottage-sized houses with barely an alley's breadth between them vie for the status of most impeccable facade.

Such toy-sized displays of impeccability serve as gestures of fealty to those who control the means of production. This practice constitutes a feudal survival *par excellence*. It bears material witness to the persistent yearning for a vanished system of inherited rights and obligations. That a permanent kinship among impeccable objects extends beyond the lifespan of any individual, beyond class, race or political system, is a resilient and enduring notion. It persists because such wish-fulfillment comforts billions of souls who, despite objective material constraints, harbor dynastic aspirations and cherish dreams of organizing their own property into a utopia of impeccability.

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This past summer, I had the good fortune to visit friends who had rented a cottage on a peninsula near a very lovely bay. The cottage is one of perhaps a dozen buildings on a dynastic compound which once occupied the whole of the peninsula. Under financial

pressure, the current generation had sold off much of the original acreage and, on what remained of the compound, converted several outbuildings into cottages for summer vacationers. A good part of the compound's property is taken up by what used to be called a gentleman farm, populated by a four horses, several goats, a pair of llamas and their young. The ancient, but still-functioning tractors and other machinery are housed in a shed built into a quite substantial brick building which serves as a combined barn and silo. The animals seem adequately enough cared for, but the fence posts and feeding troughs are weathered and worn. The tractors' bright green enamel paint is pocked with rust and the tires are networked with cracks and nearly bald. From what once must have served as a cornerstone of idealized order, all pretense of impeccability has dropped away.

A tremendous brick chimney, utterly out of scale with the dwelling it dominates, rises from the low wooden home of one of the matriarch's two daughters. A decoratively carved sign nailed to a gatepost denominates the house as The Chimney. When she waves from a distance of thirty yards or so, The Chimney's occupant appears trim and youthful. In conversation though, one hears the gravelly voice of a chain-smoker and it becomes apparent that, though it is not yet noon, she has already had a fair amount to drink.

Nearby, the largest house on the property is occupied by the matriarch who inherited the compound as part of a prior division of dynastic wealth. The matriarch's late father, a politically prominent judge, was short-listed for a vice-presidential nomination in the 1950s. A second daughter lives with the matriarch and her husband. When the weather is temperate, this young, mildly retarded woman spends her days roaming about the property in company with a large black Labrador.

While no longer impeccable, the family members' dwellings appear to be holding their own against decay. It is the outbuildings, particularly those converted into rental cottages, that show signs of chronic neglect. But the abdication of impeccability achieves its highest relief in the condition of compound's most imposing structure: a clocktower, tall enough to be visible from well out in the bay and constructed of the same robust brickwork as the barn and chimney. Rising above the tops of the flourishing grove that surrounds the tower, the clockface announces, twenty-four hours a day, that the time is eleven minutes past five. The mechanism that, for a half century, rotated the hands and sounded the chimes has ceased to function a decade ago and has yet to be repaired.

Along the eastern border of the property, running parallel to the compound's main driveway, lies a narrow, dusty meadow known as "the airstrip." A walk along the airstrip's length reveals no evidence that planes have taken off or landed in the recent past, but confirms that sand is gaining the upper hand over the grass. Restoring the airstrip to impeccability would require investment in seed, fertilizer, sprinklers and, of course, labor power. Such an expenditure of resources would suppose a significant refreshment of the current dynasty's wealth. More likely, the impeccable ideal will continue its steady retreat. Eventually, a new accumulation of wealth will no doubt take title to what remains of the property and perhaps even replace some of what was lost. The future owner might knock down the buildings, or renovate them, or carry out some compromise between the two. Borne along on the surging tide of its wealth the parvenu dynasty will, in any case, seek to render the whole of its purview impeccable. For however long it may, it will reign over a utopia of impeccability. It will glide, without apparent friction, over the burnished armor of its own impenetrable skin.