# Edmund de Waal's History of Touch: *The Hare with Amber Eyes. A Hidden Inheritance*

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**Abstract:** *The British ceramist artist Edmund de Waal's book* The Hare with Amber Eyes *(2010)—a sort of netsuke saga—is, upon his confession, a way of building a history of restitution: of a family, collection, an epoch. By paying tribute to the power of place and objects (from houses, monuments, paintings to netsuke), this artist of touch has managed to restore the most intimate feeling of possession and dispossession to a family whose history spans over a century. In my argument I bring evidence meant to show, on the one hand, how objects can map the soul by falling away into the territory of personal storytelling; and, on the other hand, how the handing on of objects is all about story-telling, wherein historical fact as memory, imagination, personal feeling and memory intertwine to the point of effacing boundaries like in an Impressionistic painting, which manages to achieve harmony even by way of discords. The book can then read as a manifesto for art and history together as it can represent the author-artist's joint effort to recompose that moment of apprehension and response, a possible dialogue between the creator/artist and the spectator/collector, between the past life of the object and its new life.*
**Keywords:** *memory, history, identity, story-telling, imagination*

## *Introduction: On the autobiographic and the trial of the reader*

As Philippe Lejeune, a world authority in the field of the autobiographic genre, explains in a recent interview [2012: 20] that, autobiography nowadays, like the novel, has developed many other hybrid forms of expression. The reasons for such metamorphoses, Lejeune tells us, coincide with those which have shaped the "post-modern" subject, which is to say, the democratization of writing, the internalization of psychology, the unprecedented war violence which has turned people into "witnesses," the media intrusion in our lives, the rapid technological advances. Consequently, while the engagement of the truth about the author's life remains the minimal nucleus

of autobiographical writing, the genre has lately trespassed on the territories of the novel, in its search for new forms of expression. The suspicion surrounding the 'autobiographical pact' has then engaged not only the writer's personal history but that of the reader too, who cannot help comparing her/his life experience to that of the writer, which may induce certain uneasiness to the former. On the same line of thinking, Lejeune calls autobiographical reading, 'lecture embrayée'/'geared-up' reading, and fictional reading, autofiction (Doubrovsky's term) included, 'lecture débrayée'/'un-geared-up' reading. In the first case, the readers are directly connected to the author and have turned on their defense strategies, and in the latter case, they can totally but imaginatively involve themselves, while letting the guard off. Lejeune's main reproach then to such twofold or "oxymoronic" pact (autobiographical and fictional at once) relates to its differing perception by the author (mindful of the dosage between reality and invention) and by the reader (unable to distinguish what the dosage of reality and invention is). In Lejeune's mind, the danger of reading "autofictions" as autobiographies consists in not knowing where the "twisting paths towards the truth" are: "Autobiographers are often suspected of having a weakness for invention, something that autofiction writers embrace on purpose but that autobiographers turn to out of naïveté," or on account of their "narrative identity" [Lejeune, 2009/10/01]. Lejeune's subsequent research, upon the theorist's confession in the same interview given to Iulian Boldea, has veered towards genetic studies such as the «brouillons de soi» (*Les Brouillons de soi,* Seuil, 1998; *Autogenèses,* Seuil, 2013) and the «brouillons» of the autobiographic text so as to uncover the workings of memory and of the mechanisms giving birth to narrative identity.

In my subsequent reading of Edmund de Waal's book *The Hare with Amber Eyes: A Hidden Inheritance* (2011), I shall address the issue of the slippery slope of memory, the writer-protagonist's and eventually my own,—that which Paul Ricoeur calls "narrative identity," and which Philippe Lejeune researches so as to discover new forms of expression for autobiographical writing.

## Edmund de Waal's *The Hare with Amber Eyes* or the art of *thing*ifying

The English potter Edmund de Waal's book *The Hare with Amber Eyes* was awarded the 2010 Costa Biography Award and is unanimously praised for its content—"part treasure hunt, part family saga"— and, its form—"original memoir"…[which] "[c]ombines all the charm of a personal memoir with the resonance of world history" [Rosemary Hill, *Evening Standard*]. A. S. Byatt's appreciation in *The Guardian*—"Wise, strange and gripping"—is also evidence that Edmund de Waal's book proposes his own hybrid form of autobiography: a composite of biography, history, and art history, wherein fictionalization of history, people, places is achieved by the same means as their authentication is: fictional descriptions are prompts to historical facts and historical facts are prompts to fictional constructs to the point of admitting with the author-narrator-protagonist: "I have a netsuke of a brindled wolf in my pocket. It is almost too strange to find how interwoven Charles is with Proust's figure of Swann."

> If there has to be a first owner of my wolf, I want him to be Swann – driven, loved, graceful – but I don't want Charles to disappear into source material, into literary footnotes. Charles has become so real to me that I fear losing him into Proust studies. And I care too much about Proust to turn his fiction into some Belle Epoque acrostic. [De Waal, 2011: 104-105].

Edmund de Waal, an artist of touch par excellence, and an attentive reader of literature too, is enthralled by the power of objects (from houses to art objects—paintings, netsuke), firstly, to map the soul by falling away into the territory of personal storytelling, and, secondly, to tell stories of restitution through their handing on to future generations. As "[t]here is no easy story in legacy" [p. 17], throughout a 354 page memoir, ceramist artist Edmund de Waal strives to understand what is being passed on to him with all those small Japanese objects he inherited from his great uncle Iggie/Ignace Ephrussi, who lived most of his life in Japan: "What is remembered and what is forgotten? There can be a chain of forgetting, the rubbing away of previous ownership as much as the slow accretion of stories. What is being passed on to me with all these small Japanese objects?" [p. 17]

The exquisite artist of touch is neither interested in nor satisfied with a nostalgic, thin story of loss, which "could write itself": "A few

stitched-together wistful anecdotes, more about the Orient-Express, of course, a bit of wandering round Prague or somewhere equally photogenic, some clippings from Google on ballrooms in the Belle Époque." [p. 15]. De Waal avows instead:

> I want to know what the relationship has been between this wooden object that I am rolling between my fingers – hard and tricky and Japanese – and where it has been. I want to be able to reach to the handle of the door and turn it and feel it open. I want to walk into each room where this object has lived, to feel the volume of the space, to know what pictures were on the walls, how the light fell from the windows. And I want to know whose hands it has been in, and what they felt about it and thought about it – if they thought about it. I want to know what it has witnessed. [De Waal, pp. 15-16]

De Waal's journey into the memory of the turbulences of his own family over a century and three continents, compares to Edmond de Goncourt's "exhaustive inventory of a house through objects" from his book *La Maison d'un artiste*—"an autobiography and a travelogue" in one [p. 58]. While de Goncourt writes his book as an act of homage to his dead brother, de Waal writes his book as a tribute to the netsuke-makers and the people who have owned them: "I try and imagine who owned the medlar. It was made long before the opening up of Japan to foreign trade in the 1850s, and thus created for the Japanese taste: it might have been carved for a merchant or a scholar. […] Making something to hold out of a very hard material that feels so soft is a slow and rather good tactile pun" [pp. 12-13]. De Waal's unscrambling of this "good tactile pun" runs parallel with his endeavour to discover the interpenetration of the real and the invented in the stories one hears/tells about people.

Two concerns seem then to evolve in the unfolding of the story: the first refers to how an object can have its palpable/touchable history traced back as material proof of living memory since "some objects do seem to retain the pulse of their making" [p. 16] and owning; and the second refers to how intimate (i.e. authentic) a fictional character can become vs. how fictional a real person can turn when the subject of a research journey. In addressing the second concern, de Waal reiterates Lejeune's idea that autobiography, "even when guided by an ethical concern for truthfulness," through its narrative reconstruction, "means flirting with invention." Since, in Lejeune's words again, "we are

narrative beings, constantly reconstructing the past in order to fit it into our plans for today's world" [2009/10/01].

The leading argument in favour of construing a narrative from exact sources, such as family letters, photos, archive documents, newspaper articles concerns de Waal's formation as a creator of fine porcelain objects, with a deep understanding of how art communicates with its creator and the audience. Melancholy or "default vagueness" cannot be the issue here as it would cause "a smothering lack of focus." "And this netsuke," the artist remarks, "is a small, tough explosion of exactitude. It deserves this kind of exactitude in return" [p. 16]. The artist's task in hand becomes his coat of arms:

> All this matters because my job is to make things. How objects get handled, used and handed on is not just a mildly interesting question for me. It is *my* question. I have made many, many thousands of pots. I am very bad at names, I mumble and fudge, but I am good on pots. I can remember the weight and the balance of a pot, and how its surface works with its volume. I can read how an edge creates tension or loses it. I can feel if it has been made at speed or with diligence. If it has warmth.
> I can see how it works with the objects that sit nearby. How it displaces a small part of the world around it. [De Waal, p.16]

As de Waal knows asymmetry well – that is, one cannot understand the whole from the part –, he can only trust his senses if he wants to trace "the sensuous, sinuous intertwining of things with memories" [p. 17]. To him, history made out of oral stories lacks the spirit of authenticity when fixed in writing. If he wants to meet the responsibility handed down to him through the 264 netsuke collection, he "need[s] to find a way of unravelling its story." Although he knows the "bones of this journey" from his father and great uncle, he has to make it himself so as not "to get into the sepia saga business, writing up some elegiac Mitteleuropa narrative of loss" [p. 15].

The first stop in his journey of discovery is the Hôtel Ephrussi at Number 81 rue de Monceau, Paris, now, an office for medical insurance, where Charles, the first collector of the netsuke lived between 1871-1899. This particular house, like the one in Vienna on the Ringstrasse, looks "stagey" since they are meant as "a staging of intent": "the Ephrussi family was 'doing a Rothschild'. Just as the Rothschilds had sent their sons and daughters out from Frankfurt at the start of the nineteenth century to colonise European capital cities, so the Abraham of my family, Charles Joachim Ephrussi, had

masterminded this expansion from Odessa in the 1850s" [pp. 23-24]. The writer's quest for authenticity in family history making bases first and foremost on his deep understanding into the life of all art:

> House-watching is an art. You have to develop a way of seeing how a building sits in its landscape or streetscape. You have to discover how much room it takes up in the world, how much of the world it displaces. Number 81, for instance, is a house that cannily disappears into its neighbours: there are other houses that are grander, some are plainer, but few are more discreet. [De Waal, p. 22]

Yet this quest is also based on reading the documents of the epoch – journalistic accounts, literary writings, paintings – in order to understand the making of the banking/financing world of power several Jewish families set up in Europe at mid 19th century:

> This hill was the perfect setting for the Ephrussi family. Just as the Ringstrasse in Vienna, where the other half of the family lives, was acerbically known as Zionstrasse, so Jewish money was a key denominator of life here in the rue de Monceau. The area was developed in the 1860s by Isaac and Emile Péreire, two Sephardic brothers who had made their fortunes as financiers, railroad-builders and property magnates, creating colossal developments of hotels and department stores. They acquired the plaine de Monceau, a large nondescript area that was originally beyond the city limits, and set to work developing houses for the burgeoning financial and commercial elite, an appropriate landscape for the newly arrived Jewish families from Russia and the Levant. These streets became a virtual colony, a complex of intermarriage, obligation and religious sympathy. [De Waal, p. 27]

The houses built for the "burgeoning financial and commercial elite" of the newly arrived Jewish families are their coats of arms, since "this play between discretion and opulence, a sort of breathing-in and breathing-out of invisibility and visibility" [p. 29] stands out as vivid testimony for their passing through history, which the writer can "feel" one hundred and sixty years after: "You feel this street as the family move in: it is a street of Jews, a street full of people on display in their lavish golden houses. *Monceau* is slang in Paris for nouveau riche, newly arrived" [p. 28].

De Waal also "tastes" history while looking at two paintings of Gustave Caillebotte, *Le pont de l'Europe* and *Jeune homme à sa fenêtre,* wherein the bridge, the people and the streets tell the tale in

Impressionistic style: “It is like the start of the world: a litany of perfect movements and shadows” [p. 30]. In this world in the making, these well-off people very quickly learn their lessons: for instance, the fact “that to move in public means a series of encounters and avoidances” [p. 30]; the need to learn “their languages” – Latin, Greek, German and English – since “they are denominators of class” [p. 31]; the pleasure of art learning, “They open the cabinets of drawings in the Albertina” [p. 31] and of sport/dance learning “The boys are taught to fence and all the cousins take dance lessons. All the cousins dance well” [p. 31]; but mostly, they are “taught the catechism of profit from the endless columns in the ledgers” [p. 31]. Wealth then becomes the guarantee of freedom, charm, all possibility: “Charles is free to do what he wants,” [p. 32]. After a year away from his family in order to take a Grand Tour through the canon of Renaissance art, Charles Ephrussi can afford to become a collector, that is: “to turn looking into having and having into knowing” [p. 33].

De Waal gradually develops a liking for his great granduncle Charles and his mannerisms, since he feels, upon reading his notes on exhibitions, books, publications, and essays from the *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, that Charles “is not showing off about how much he knows (…). He wants to make us see more clearly what is in front of him” [p. 37].

> I realise that I must understand how Charles looked at things, and for this I must read his writings. (…). But, as the weeks go by, I find myself starting to relax into Charles’s company: this first collector of the netsuke begins to write more fluidly. There are unexpected registers of feeling. Three weeks of my precious spring go by, and then another fortnight, a mad expense of days unspooling in the dimness in Periodicals. Charles learns to spend time with a picture. He has been and looked, you feel, and then gone back and looked again. There are essays on exhibitions where you feel this touch on the shoulder, that turn to look again, move closer, move further away. You feel his growing confidence and his passion, and then at last the beginning of a steeliness in his writings, a dislike of set opinions. Charles holds his feelings in balance with his judgements, but writes so that you are aware of both. This is rare in writing on art, I think, as the weeks fall away from me in the library and my stack of *Gazettes* builds around me, a tower of new questions, each volume a matrix of bookmarks and yellow Post-it notes and reserve slips. [De Waal, pp. 36-37]

While Charles learns how art unfolds through history, the writer learns how history unfolds through art salons, which are viewed "as a minefield of fiercely contested geographies of political, artistic, religious and aristocratic taste" [p. 39]. By hacking his way assiduously through the social columns of Parisian newspapers of the 1870s, de Waal finds plenty of evidence about the "acolytes" – poets, playwrights, painters, 'clubmen,' *mondains* – of the three main salons of the times: of Madame Straus (the widow of Bizet), of the Countess Greffuhle, and of a rarefied painter of watercolours of flowers, Madame Madeleine Lemaire. Finding "the traces of these intersections" [p. 42] becomes strangely compelling both for the writer, who thus takes the pulse of history as process, and for the reader, who is enmeshed into history as product, which is more like a narrative, as it comes out from one of Marcel Proust's early essays, as de Waal tells us:

> He evokes the scent of lilacs filling her studio and drifting into the rue de Monceau, crowded with the carriages of the beau monde. You could never get through the rue de Monceau on a Thursday. Proust notices Charles. There is a hubbub and he moves closer through the throng of writers and socialites. Charles is there in a corner talking to a portrait painter, their heads bowed and conversing so softly and intensely that, though he hovers nearby, Proust cannot overhear even a scintilla of their conversation. [De Waal, p. 40]

The author-narrator gradually discovers how the netsuke comes into focus as "part of a complex, fractious Paris life that really existed" [p. 46], and which they subtly focalize. Charles's love for netsuke intertwines with his passion for Louise Cahen d'Anvers, wife to a Jewish banker, and mother to five children. Once again, the artist of fine porcelain feels the itch of finding out how Charles and his mistress handled Japanese things, since:

> This mass of Japanese art inspired reverie. De Goncourt recorded a day spent at the Sichels soon after a delivery had arrived from Japan, surrounded by '*tout cet art capiteux et hallucinatoire*' – all this intoxicating, mesmerising art. Since 1859 prints and ceramics had begun to seep into France; by the early 1870s this had become a flood of *things*. A writer looking back on the very earliest days of this infatuation with Japanese art wrote in the *Gazette* in 1878:
> *One kept oneself informed about new cargoes. Old ivories, enamels, faience and porcelain, bronzes, lacquer, wooden sculptures . . . embroidered satins, playthings, simply arrived at a merchant's shop and*

> *immediately left for artists' studios or writers' studies . . . They entered the hands of . . . Carolus Duran, Manet, James Tissot, Fantin-Latour, Degas, Monet, the writers Edmond and Jules de Goncourt, Philippe Burty, Zola . . . the travellers Cernuschi, Duret, Emile Guimet . . . The movement was established, the amateurs followed.* [De Waal, p. 47]

The explanation for this infatuation with Japanese *things* seems to relate to our genesis, to our lost innocence too, since: "When you held a Japanese objet, it revealed itself. Touch tells you what you need to know: it tells you about yourself"; "[h]aving a feel for beauty was enough: touch was a kind of sensory innocence"; it is "plus gras, plus simple, plus caresse – very rich, very simple, very tactile"; "[p]assionate touch, discovery in the hands, things enveloped lovingly, plus caresse. Japonisme and touch were a seductive combination for Charles and Louise, amongst many others" [pp. 49; 50; 51]. Charles Ephrussis, an art critic and connaisseur in *Japonisme* too*,* dedicates a long essay to the lacquer exhibition at the Trocadéro in Paris, in 1878, where, as usual, he is in turn academic, descriptive and lyrical, as de Waal tells us:

> These lacquers, of a legendary rarity and so technically complex that they are almost unmakeable, the possessions of Japanese princes or Western queens, are now here in a Parisian shop, available to buy. For Charles, this lacquer has a quality of embedded poetry: not just rich and strange, but latent with stories of desire. His passion for Louise is palpable. The unobtainability of this lacquer creates the aura that surrounds it. You feel him reaching towards the golden Louise as he writes. [De Waal, p. 52]

It soon becomes conspicuous that the collection records Charles and Louise's love-affair, their own secret history of touch. Charles's own collection of lacquers is reviewed in *Le Gaulois* in 1884, and stands proof of Charles's love of art as much as of life: "Japanese things – lacquers, netsuke, prints – conjure a picture of a place where sensations are always new, where art pours out of daily life, where everything exists in a dream of endless beautiful flow" [p. 53]. It is equally interesting to notice the power that these small objects had on people: to own in order to be owned, as the young writer Guy de Maupassant also claimed: "'Of all the passions, of all without exception, the passion for the bibelot is perhaps the most terrible and invincible. The man smitten by an antique is a lost man. The bibelot is not only a passion, it is a mania'" [p. 57].

The lure of Japanese things, such as fans, bibelots and robes, carried an air of "eroticized possibility" [p. 56], which couldn't have escaped the artists in the epoch. De Waal in his turn credits artistic representations for their uses of interpretative description, which attempt to make a coherent argument on broadly historical or philosophical lines reconstructing the atmosphere of fin de siècle in France. He thus makes the interpenetration between the real and the invented difficult to decipher. De Waal's method reminds me of Jaś Elsner's consistent argumentation meant to show that art history is nothing other than an extended argument based on ekphrasis, namely "it represents the tendentious application of rhetorical description to the work of art (or to several works or even to whole categories of art) for the purpose of making an argument of some kind to suit the author's prior intent" [2010: 10]. In de Waal's case, his manifest intent is to show that history, like art history in Jaś Elsner's argument, is "ultimately grounded in a method founded on and inextricable from the description of objects" [Elsner, 2010: 10].

So, James Tissot, Monet, Proust, de Goncourt, Kipling are summoned up to evoke the power of these Japanese objects to travel into the world so as to recreate their anonymous creator's every day life and emotion. For instance, de Waal cites Edmond de Goncourt's story of "the obsessive search for perfection that lies behind each object":

> Alongside these professional artists, amid this manually gifted populace, there would be amateur netsuke sculptors, who amuse themselves by sculpting a little masterpiece for themselves. One day, Mr Philippe Sichel approached a Japanese man sitting on his threshold, notching a netsuke that was in its last stages of completion. Mr Sichel asked him if he would like to sell it . . . when it was completed. The Japanese man started laughing, and ended up telling him that that would take approximately a further eighteen months; then he showed him another netsuke that was attached to his belt, and informed him that it had taken him several years of work to make it. And as the conversation progressed between the two men, the amateur artist confessed to Mr Sichel that he did 'not work like that in such a long-drawn out manner . . . that he needed to be in the process . . . that it was only on certain days . . . on days when he had smoked a pipe or two, after he felt gay and refreshed', essentially letting him know that for this work, he needed hours of inspiration. [De Waal, pp. 58-59]

De Waal, the ceramist artist, is accustomed to caring about everything connected to an object of art, from its birth to its display; that is why he revaluates the importance of the "vitrine" with reference to these tiny ivory or wooden sculptures. If as a potter he has always tried to get objects out of the glass cases so as to liberate them from the confinement of what he called a "coffin," the netsuke lover has come to see both the protective and enticing role of the vitrine, which functions as a "threshold" between the object meant for touching and its owner: "But the vitrine – as opposed to the museum's case – is for opening. And that opening glass door and the moment of looking, then choosing, and then reaching in and then picking up is a moment of seduction, an encounter between a hand and an object that is electric" [p. 66].

De Waal's Charles Ephrussi, the "'benedictine-dandy of the rue Monceau,'" the mondain art historian, the "black-coated scholar, but flaneurial" [p. 68] has grown out from his own letters, art book on Albert Dürer, magazine reviews, and mostly the writer's object studying, as an intimate/authentic conversation partner whose methods of research in art are as good today as they were in the past. Charles, like de Waal, knows well "that different ages informed each other, that a sketch by Dürer could talk to a sketch by Degas" [p. 73]; they understand the conjunction of Japanese objects and pictures and the shimmering new style of Impressionistic painting: "This almost violent conjunction of storytelling with graphic, calligraphic clarity was catalytic" [p. 77].

Here is an example of Charles's competent comment on the aim of Impressionistic art:

> to make the figures indivisible from their background, as though they were the product of it, so that to appreciate the picture the eye must take it in as a whole, looking at it from the correct distance – such are the ideals of the new school. It has not learnt its optical catechism, it disdains pictorial rules and regulations, it renders what it sees as it sees it, spontaneously, well or badly, uncompromisingly, without comment, without verbiage. In its horror of platitude it seeks for fresh themes, it haunts the corridors of theatres, cafés, cabarets, even low music-halls; the glare of cheap dance-halls does not alarm its members; and they go boating on the Seine in the Paris suburbs. [De Waal, p. 80]

But Charles Ephrussi has also earned the status of an art patron, associated to the poet Laforgue and the prose writer Proust – which

should work toward the character's authentication; in fact, it works against it, as the epigraph to the book, from Proust's *Cities of the Plain,* might well suggest it.

De Waal, the minute observer of detail, gives an equally poignant and documented account of anti-Semitism in France, at the end of 19th century, as when he quotes from Drumont's *La France Juive* (1886), or peruses the newspapers, and pamphlets of those days, which, as he says, made him feel nauseated:

> Charles is pilloried as someone 'who *operates* . . . in the world of literature and the arts'. He is abused as someone who has power in French art, but treats art as commerce. Everything Charles does comes back to gold, say the writers in *La France Juive*. Meltable, transportable, mutable gold to be carried, bought and sold by Jews who do not understand land or country. Even his book on Dürer is scrutinised for Semitic tendencies. How can Charles understand this great German artist, writes one angry art historian, for he is only a '*Landesman aus dem Osten*', an oriental. [De Waal, pp. 92-93]

These *angry* people, such as, the anti-Dreyfusards of the day – among whom some were famous artists, like Degas, Cézanne, Renoir –, are only mild heralds of the unimaginable violence in store for the Jews in France, Germany, Austria and elsewhere. History counts its victims, fiction counts its heroes. De Waal counts the correspondences between his Charles and Proust's Charles, "the lineaments of their lives" [p. 105]. *I* just wonder whether the fictionalization of history can cure its pains, and whether the authentication of fiction can make us more alert and less prone to pitch into history's traps again. The history of these days seems to demonstrate the opposite.

The Viennese period in the life of the netsuke collection starts in 1899 when Charles offered it as a wedding gift to Viktor, his first cousin, and Emmy, who lived in the Palais Ephrussi in Vienna – nowadays, the headquarters of Casinos Austria –, on the corner of the Ringstrasse and the Schottengasse. So, de Waal must start reading *Die Neue Freie Presse* and concentrating on Viennese street life and German literature from the turn of the century. In order to fill in the gaps of memory, so as to "*see clearly*," the writer, walking nearby Freud's apartment, hears himself say: "Bring on the symbolism" [p. 112].

The Emperor Franz Josef's Vienna became a modern metropolis out of an old medieval city, "an Athens, an ideal efflorescence of Prachtbauten – buildings of splendor," the grandest public space in

Europe; in Karl Kraus's words: "Vienna […] was being 'demolished into a great city'" [p. 114]. Although the Ringstrasse was substantially Jewish, the Viennese Jews have become so assimilated by mimicking their Gentile neighbours, that "they had tricked the Viennese and simply disappeared into the fabric of the Ring" [p. 118].

But, according to de Waal's inquiries, the Jewish camouflage tactic served Vienna right, since Vienna has become a "Potemkin city," that is, a highly self-consciously grandiloquent city.

> And these Jews had perfect façades – they vanished. It was a Potemkin city and they were Potemkin inhabitants. Just as this Russian general had put a wood-and-plaster town together to impress the visiting Catherine the Great, so the Ringstrasse, wrote the young firebrand architect Adolf Loos, was nothing but a huge pretence. It was potemkinische. The façades bore no relation to the buildings. The stone was only stucco, it was all a confection for parvenus. The Viennese must stop living in this stage-set 'hoping that no one will notice they are fake'. The satirist Karl Kraus concurred. It was the 'debasement of practical life by ornament'. What was more, through this debasement, language had become infected by this 'catastrophic confusion. Phraseology is the ornament of the mind.' These ornamental buildings, their ornamental disposition, the ornamental life that went on around them: Vienna had become orotund. [De Waal, p. 120]

Ignace von Ephrussi, Viktor's father, was considered "*a Gründer,* a founding father, of the *Gründerzeit*, the founding age of Austrian modernity" [p. 122], and the second-richest banker in Vienna too. His Ephrussi Palace, just across the University, like the Palace on the rue de Monceau, was meant "to dramatise the ascendancy of his family" [p. 122]. The decorous interior was a replica of Vienna as well. The ballroom bore identity marks engraved on the ceiling: "a long-lasting, covert way of staking a claim for who you are" [p. 125].

In Vienna, the Jewish Question was becoming ever more dramatic, as the writer's rummaging excursus through literary, psychoanalytical, historical, essayistic, journalistic writings prove it. This research journey helps de Waal reinvent his self:

> My picture of Jewish life in fin-de-siècle Vienna is perfectly burnished, mostly consisting of Freud and vignettes of acerbic and intellectual talk in the cafés. I'm rather in love with my 'Vienna as crucible of the twentieth century' motif, as are many curators and academics. Now I am in the Vienna part of the story, I am listening to Mahler and reading my Schnitzler and Loos, and feeling very Jewish myself. [p. 141]

It is in this rich, multifarious Viennese atmosphere that the vitrine with the netsuke collection will have to fit and accommodate itself. The writer gathers information, as he has previously done, from newspapers, travelogues, synagogue lists, photo albums, archive letters, the grandmother's memoir, so that he could see, feel the human presence as mapped out by the objects they have own. However, the writer feels his "Vienna has thinned into other people's Vienna": "The real keeps slipping out of my hands. The lives of my family in Vienna were refracted into books, just like Charles in Proust's Paris. The dislike of the Ephrussi keeps turning up in novels. I stumble. I realise that I do not understand what it means to be part of an assimilated, acculturated Jewish family. I simply don't understand" [p. 151].

From Elizabeth, the writer's grandmother's memoir, the writer finds out the new settlement of the netsuke vitrine in their mother's dressing-room and can infer the children's hour of bliss around their mother and how storytelling could build worlds into being: "As they sit on their green velvet shelves in Emmy's dressing-room, these daily feuilletons are doing what Vienna likes to do, telling stories about itself" [p. 176]. They are toy things, "part of those Sunday mornings' story-telling, part of *The Arabian Nights*, the travels of Sinbad the Sailor and the *Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám*. They are locked into their vitrine, behind the dressing-room door, […], which is behind the double oak doors with the porter waiting, which is in the fairytale castle of a Palais on a street that is part of *The Thousand and One Nights* [p. 177].

As fairytale spell dissipates easily, children, mother, father, uncles, aunts soon fall out of murderous history – the Nazi regime –, as if "the Ringstrasse becomes 'an enchantment out of "The Thousand-and One-Nights"', but one of those stories where someone is transfigured before your eyes into something terrible, morphing out of control as you say the wrong words" [p. 244]. But what were those terrible words that managed to change a world beyond recognition, to undo families, houses, to rob people of their identity?

> This is the strange undoing of a collection, of a house and of a family. It is the moment of fissure when grand things are taken and when family objects, known and handled and loved, become stuff. [p. 252]

> Jews matter less than what they once possessed. […] It is a trial of how to run a society without Jews. Vienna is once again 'an experimental station for the end of the world'. [p. 257]
> There is no longer a Palais Ephrussi and there is no longer an Ephrussi Bank in Vienna. The Ephrussi family has been cleansed from the city.
> It is on this visit that I go to the Jewish archive in Vienna, the one seized by Eichmann, to check up on the details of a marriage. I look through a ledger to find Viktor, and there is an official red stamp across his first name. It reads 'Israel'. An edict decreed that all Jews had to take new names. Someone has gone through every single name in the lists of Viennese Jews and stamped them: 'Israel' for the men, 'Sara' for the women.
> I am wrong. The family is not erased, but written over. And, finally, it is this that makes me cry. [p. 259]
> *Sunt lacrimae rerum*, Aeneas says. These are the tears of things, [Viktor]he reads, at the kitchen table as the boys try to finish their algebra, 'Write a Day in the Life of a Pencil', note 'The Dissolution of the Monasteries: Triumph or Tragedy?' [p. 270]

Rescued and returned to the family by their loyal maid Anna, the netsuke collection has survived to prompt the telling of the story. De Waal's story of restoring the most intimate feeling of possession and dispossession to his own family brings "thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears." [Wordsworth, "Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood"]

## *Coda or how others' stories regard us too*

Just as Charles Ephrussi "is buying pictures from his friends, with all the complexities that brings with it" [p. 87], so I find myself now reflecting on the circumstances which favoured my encounter with de Waal's memoir. In 2011, my first cousin who lives in Vienna offered the book to me as a token of our power to overcome history's difficulties over the past years, and in the hope that our children will also find the ways and strength to stay in *touch* for the sake of their own sense of belonging. This book, a very tactile object as well, has deeply touched my soul and mind, since "[t]ouch is not only through the fingers, but through the whole body, too" [p. 279].

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