



EDMUND DE WAAL

In Conversation with Paul Holdengräber

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LIVE from the New York Public Library

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Celeste Bartos Forum

TONY MARX: Good evening. Welcome to the Bartos Forum at the New York Public Library. I'm Tony Marx. I'm the new President of the New York Public Library.

(applause) We have in store for us—as we often do but spectacularly so tonight—a magical evening, a great author and a great dialogue, and of course Paul Holdengräber always putting together the most stimulating programs in New York. We're delighted that you could be here. These are exciting days at the New York Public Library. There

are people who think libraries don't have a future. They couldn't be more wrong. This institution is the bedrock of an informed society in the city of New York, the greatest city in the world and beyond. **(applause)**

We have our work cut out for us, all of us together to ensure that for the future. We're working hard to think about how to make this building, this iconic building, the unquestioned center for all people who are writing in the city of New York. We're trying to imagine an even more vibrant center for the New York Public Library system here and in the back of the building facing Bryant Park. We have eighty-seven branches around the city. I've been to seventy of them so far, I still have a few to go. It is so exciting to see New Yorkers running the gamut across the diversity of the economy and race and ethnicity and geography and interests coming together in their neighborhoods for a place where they can think at a moment in world history where there isn't enough thinking going on. **(applause)**

Our commitment is to see even more activity in those vibrant centers of the communities. We're going to partner with the public schools of New York—all schools in New York—to make sure that our children have a future that can land them on the stage with Paul Holdengräber. All our children should have that opportunity. Paul, you have your work cut out for you. And of course this institution, as the largest circulating library in the world, has to be front and center in making sure that as information increasingly goes digital, not to replace books but to complement books that those New Yorkers who depend on the free and public access to information are not denied that information by

the costs of access in the digital age. If we can't succeed, if we don't succeed, as an institution, as a community, in making sure that this building is bursting with life, that all ninety of the buildings in the New York Public Library system are bursting with life, that the digital world is bursting with access for all people, we simply will not have the democracy and the economy for our children that we all aspire for them to have.

Thank you for your support of the New York Public Library and, of course, thank you for being here tonight. This institution is the place of holding, of collecting and sharing of the greatest collections of civilization. It is the place everyone comes to. We don't—we have netsukes in our collection. We may not have *the* collection that you're going to hear about tonight, but we share with Mr. de Waal the respect and the importance, the sense of the importance, of holding on to our heritage and learning from that heritage and teaching it to our children so that they can be the citizens that we are going to need. Thank you again for being here. Susan Morgenthau.

(applause)

SUSAN MORGENTHAU: I have to say that was spontaneous. We are delighted to have you here, Tony. July first and he has been visiting so many branches, in the Bronx, here in Manhattan, Staten Island, so thank you so very much. It is a historical year. It is the centennial year of this very building. I think that one thing that Tony was not able to really press home, but I would like to let everyone who is here tonight know, is that your

membership dollars, which are part of what the LIVE programming hopes to entice you to become, a member at the library, are very, very important to keeping us open and free.

It is my distinct honor to introduce you to tonight's speakers, Paul Holdengräber and Edmund de Waal. As many of you know in this room, Paul Holdengräber is the founder and the director of LIVE at the New York Public Library. Since 2004 he became a self-described one-man mission to create cognitive theater. Paul has hosted over 450 events on this library stage. His programs have become known nationwide. They provide a forum that is unique, where audiences can engage with some of the world's most influential public figures, including writers, historians, actors, artists, and even politicians. It is a city, as you know, full of unique cultural opportunities, but I believe that Paul's evening programs are without a doubt some that are the most ambitious and certainly as you can see tonight, the most successful. He is a master at encouraging his guests to speak.

Traditionally he prepares his own introductions, and one thing that he always asks his guests to do is to provide him with seven words they feel define themselves. So tonight I decided to have a little bit of fun and ask Paul for those seven words. He replied thusly: "Mother always said: two ears, one mouth." **(laughter/applause)** Wise words, indeed, from the man who has made our lions roar. Paul, we are very lucky to have your two ears and your one mouth working so deftly on behalf of the New York Public Library.

Our luck continues this evening as we welcome Edmund de Waal. Mr. de Waal was apprenticed as a potter in Canterbury. He studied in Japan and then read English at Cambridge. His porcelain is now in thirty international museum collections. Most recently he has created a major installation at the V&A, the dome of the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, as well as work at the Tate. He is working on exhibitions here in the United States and for several other museums in the UK as well as on many commissions for private clients. He has written widely on art and ceramics. He is currently a professor of ceramics at the University of Westminster.

His book *The Hare with Amber Eyes: A Family's Century of Art and Loss* was published in 2010 by Farrar, Straus, and Giroux. It is a very big story about a collection of 264 small, very small objects, called netsuke: Japanese figures carved from mostly wood or ivory. This is a collection which became Mr. de Waal's compass on a personal journey of family discovery as he navigates the collective voyage of these figures through the drama of his own family's odyssey, beginning in Odessa in 1857, on to Paris in 1870, Vienna at the turn of the century and through both world wars, on to Tokyo in 1947, and finally back to London, to the home of today's storyteller.

His observation and insights into the relationship between people and objects, places and time, are compelling to any of us who have either given or received an object deemed significant enough to hold on to its own story, its own meaning. Mr. de Waal himself writes, "How objects are handed on is all about storytelling. I am giving you this because I love you, or because it was given to me, or because I bought it somewhere special,

because you might take care of it, because it will complicate your life, because it will make someone else envious. There is no easy story in legacy.” Thank you very much for taking the time away from your potter’s wheel to write what is not an easy story, but a pleasure to read. You spent time conducting research in many of the world’s greatest libraries, and we are so very honored to have you welcome with all of the people in this room to this library tonight.

Paul Holdengräber, I have one more thing to say about you. You have many, many, many too many good programs. Quickly—because there will be information about this on the way out, and I wanted to make sure you knew that following tonight—next week we have here in this very room John Lithgow in conversation with Bill Moyers on October 11; Harry Belafonte on October 12; Tom Brokaw on November 1; Diane Keaton on November 14—she will be reading from her new memoir, *Then Again*; Joan Didion on November 21, in conversation with Sloane Crosley; and Mary Beard, our annual Robert B. Silvers lecture guest, who will be talking on *Do the Classics Have a Future?*. So we hope you will join us, and thank you so much for welcoming Edmund de Waal.

(applause)

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Thank you so much for this very warm introduction, Susan and Tony. I really appreciate it very, very deeply, and I’m extremely honored and pleased to have you here. I always say I don’t believe that one should have chumminess on stage, so I will try to restrain myself, as much as your book has managed to be poised and

restrained. But in order to get ourselves started I thought that the most important thing I could ask you to do is actually to read from it. And I have asked you to read some specific passages, because I think they will set the stage for tonight.

EDMUND DE WAAL: I am thrilled to be here in this beautiful and scary room.

Luckily, I can't see anything because the lights are in my face, so I'm just going to talk to one person out there, and read. Thank you.

(reading)

It could write itself, I think, this kind of story. 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. It would come out as nostalgic. And *thin*.

And I'm not entitled to nostalgia about all that lost wealth and glamour from a century ago. And I am not interested in *thin*. 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.

Melancholy, I think, is a sort of default vagueness, a get-out clause, a smothering lack of focus. And this netsuke is a small, tough explosion of exactitude. It deserves this kind of exactitude in return.

And 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.

I can also remember if something invited touch with the whole hand or just the fingers, or was an object that asked you to stay away. It is not that handling something is *better* than not handling it. Some things in the world are meant to be looked at from a distance and not fumbled around with. And, as a potter, I find it a bit strange when people who have my pots talk of them as if they are alive: I am not sure if I can cope with the afterlife of what I have made. But some objects do seem to retain the pulse of their making.

This pulse intrigues me. There is a breath of hesitancy before touching or not touching, a strange moment. If I choose to pick up this small white cup with its single chip near the handle, will it figure in my life? A simple object, this cup that is more ivory than white, too small for morning coffee, not quite balanced, could become part of my life of handled things. It could fall away into the territory of personal story-telling; the sensuous, sinuous intertwining of things with memories. I could put it away. Or I could pass it on.

Because how objects are handed on is all about story-telling. I am giving you this because I love you. Or because it was given to me. Because I bought it somewhere special. Because you will care for it. Because it will complicate your life. Because it will make someone else envious. There is no easy story in legacy. 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?

I realize that I've been living with this netsuke business for far too long. I can either anecdotalize it for the rest of my life—my odd inheritance from a beloved aged relative—or go out and find out what it means. One evening I find myself at dinner telling some academics what I know of the story, and feel slightly sickened by how poised it sounds. I hear myself entertaining them, and the story echoes back in their reactions. It isn't just getting smoother, it is getting thinner. I must sort it out now or it will disappear.

Being busy is no excuse. I have just finished an exhibition of my porcelain in a museum and can postpone a commission for a collector, if I play my cards right. I have negotiated with my wife and cleared my diary. Three or four months should see me right. That gives me enough time to go back to see Jiro in Japan and to visit Paris and Tokyo.

As my grandmother and my great-uncle Iggie have died, I must also ask for my father's help to get started. He is eighty and kindness itself and will look out family things for me, he says, for background information. He seems delighted that one of his four sons is interested. There isn't much, he warns me. He comes down to my studio with a small cache of photographs, forty-odd. He also brings two thin blue files of letters to which he has added yellow Post-it notes, mostly legible, a family tree annotated by my grandmother sometime in the 1970s, the membership book for the Wiener Club in 1935, and, in a supermarket bag, a pile of Thomas Mann novels with inscriptions. We lay them out on the long table in my office up the stairs. You are now the keeper of the family archive, he tells me, and I look at the piles and am not sure how funny I should find this.

I ask, somewhat desperately, if there is any more material. He looks again in the evening in his small flat in the courtyard of retired clergymen where he lives. And he telephones me to say that he has found another volume of Thomas Mann.

(laughter) This journey is going to be more complicated than I had thought.

But I can't start with a complaint. I know very little of substance about Charles Ephrussi, the first collector of the netsuke, but I found out where he lived in Paris. So I put a netsuke in my pocket and set out.

(applause)

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: And I see you put one on the table, the very famous hare with amber eyes.

EDMUND DE WAAL: No, this is three tumbling rats. I have to tell you—can I tell you a story?

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Can you imagine if I said no?

EDMUND DE WAAL: I finished this book and we don't know what to call the book, so I call a family conference with my children and I say, we all have a vote—bad mistake in any family—and I say, “We're going to call the book after a netsuke. What should we call it?” This is five years, I've taken on this book. And my children say, “We've got an idea for the title of the book, Dad. We should call it *The Rat*.” **(laughter)** And I say, “I'm not calling, I'm never, ever calling a book *The Rat*.”

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: The reason I wanted you to read this passage is because I wanted people to get a sense of the way in which so much of the book seems to be about the importance of touch, the importance of things, the heaviness of things, the fear also that things might become thin. All of that made me think that reading this prologue is like reading your manifesto.

EDMUND DE WAAL: It's a very—it's a manifesto.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: For what?

EDMUND DE WAAL: It's a simple manifesto. It's a manifesto for things and against things. It's a manifesto for making space to think about tactility, about the world of objects, about how much of the world they displace, about their presence in our lives, and in some way the resonance in which objects have. That's one thing. That's the good thing. It's an absolute manifesto about exactitude and about returning to the world of things and engaging with it with intelligence and passion, which is something that doesn't happen. The second thing, it's a manifesto against thinness. It's an absolute cry against the danger of nostalgia, the thinness of nostalgia, the make-believe, the fantasy that sort of swirls round the inexact, the melancholic, the untactile.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: A manifesto against nostalgia.

EDMUND DE WAAL: Yeah. Sign up. Sign up for that!

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: You know, I need that class. Because I feel that most of my life is lived under the sign of melancholia and nostalgia (**laughter**) and how—how at the same time do you espouse the importance of things, the passion, the notion in some way, I think, like Benjamin in “Unpacking My Library,” when he says that possession is perhaps the deepest relationship we can have to things and at the same time you keep a distance from them because not keeping a distance from them is being possessed by them.

EDMUND DE WAAL: You can be completely possessed by them, but you can be completely—I mean, that’s, people who have lost things can be completely possessed by what they’ve lost. The whole thing about a collection is that it’s always diasporic. Any collection you make is this temporal, delicate attempt to keep something together in the world, this fantasy that you can keep things together, you can keep a world together, you can keep a family together, you can keep these objects together.

And things fall apart. Things are intrinsically diasporic. They wander, they go, they get stolen, they get given away, they get broken, and so I love the world of things. I make things, so I’m always caught in this moment of the creation and the dispersion. And telling this story I’m trying all the time to kind of navigate this extraordinary story about accumulation and this extraordinary story of loss, simultaneously. Now, if—if, Paul, if I tried, if I wrote another—if I tried to tell—if I tried—if I tried—if I wrote a book which

channeled the melancholia of loss, I would be doing—it would be a criminal act. It would be—what I would be doing—

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: So unpack that idea. Unpack the idea that it would be a criminal act, because it's certainly a crime that has been committed many times.

EDMUND DE WAAL: Again and again and again and again and again. That's why memoir is so bloody difficult.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Memory is bloody difficult.

EDMUND DE WAAL: No, memoir. Memoir. Memory is great. Memory is what we have. Memory is what we—it's our breathing in and breathing out. It's our systole and diastole. It's what we live with. Memoir has this tendency towards the elegiac, which is incredibly difficult. So okay. Melancholia, nostalgia, elegy. You have this incredible, dynastic Jewish family who loses everything. Okay. What's that story about? It's an arc of nostalgia. It's all about balls in the fin de siècle. It's all about the big ballroom and the small ballroom. It's all about guest lists and Renoir and Proust and Rilke.

Except it isn't. There's all that, but that's not the story. If I just told this story, people would go, "You know what? We've read it. We know exactly what this is about. This is all about someone else grandstanding about their loss." And that's not the point. I'm not entitled to sit here seventy years after the Anschluss and say, "You know what? It was

tragic.” That’s not the point of the book. That’s not why I set off on the journey. I set off on the journey to give dignity to real people over a huge period of time and try and understand how they lived and what they were silent about and that’s something completely different from melancholia, completely different from melancholia.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: I sense in you certainly the passion of the collector, but also an anger. Anger against the kind of story that has been written, precisely after the Anschluss, about great families and great dynasties.

EDMUND DE WAAL: The world doesn’t need another dynastic, epic miniseries.

(laughter) It just doesn’t. We all know what a room full of pretty people in ball dresses looks like. You know, I don’t want to inflict that on people I care about, you know, and readers and the like, and I just don’t want to do that. And the challenge was considerable, because there’s an awful lot of that material that I can—so I have to find a different way and that’s why my pact with myself is to do it through tactility, is to make it real through my hands and through my walking.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: And the notion of tactility is so important, because the tactile inebriation in some way you feel from these objects, the notion that the word “tact” itself, to be touched by, to be tactile, is a sense in some way that has been, I think one could say, defavored.

EDMUND DE WAAL: Where’s the literature on touch?

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Well, you say you want to write the history of touch.

EDMUND DE WAAL: Yeah. Okay, this is New York, I'm allowed to be ambitious. I want to write the history of touch. **(laughter)** I want to write the history of touch. Nobody has written—

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: You mention Rilke in the book and I remember Rilke, in the letters to Cézanne, says, “Has anybody written the history of blue,” of the color? You have taken upon yourself to write in a tactful way, the history of touch. How do you go about it?

EDMUND DE WAAL: How do you go about it? Well, for a start you get it wrong. I mean, I got it so completely wrong. I mean, I got it wrong on so many levels. Okay, do you want to know the—I got it wrong first. The first book I wrote is academic. The first book I tell people, I tell people about Japonisme and about assimilation. Okay, that's— and I'm not in the book. The second huge problem—

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: So do you miss yourself in that first version?

EDMUND DE WAAL: Yeah, what I do is to write a book where I'm so scared by what I've undertaken that I keep myself out of it. I'm absolutely petrified by this idea of being

present. So then I have to start again, and what I do is to say actually, genuinely, what happens. And what happens when you **(coughs)**—this is not emotion. **(coughs)**

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: What happens when—you're looking towards me.

EDMUND DE WAAL: Excuse me.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Please, please, please, please. When talking about the netsuke you talk about them in Paris first of all under the sign of Charles. And I want you to obviously talk about Charles. And he talks about it as *plus gras, plus simple, plus caresse*. I think that's very close to what we're trying to describe here, *plus caresse*.

EDMUND DE WAAL: Well, I mean, the thing about—The thing about this pact I made myself to actually go and—go and discover the life of these objects in the hands of the people who manipulated them. Of course, what I'm also trying to do there is to do the thing about what does the place do to the person in it? So it's not just the person touching the object, but the place touching the person. And that's Jewish. That's the story of, “How do you make sense of where you are?” So I'm trying to do two rather ambitious things at the same time. I'm trying to tell a story about what it's like to pick up an object in 1880 with your friends after dinner, after a good dinner, and what does that mean? But I'm also trying to say, “What's it like to be touched by the place, what's it like to be a person who's born in Odessa and is given an apartment and makes this life in Paris, and what does that do to you? How does that touch you?”

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: The relationship—I want us to unravel this story, because it is an extraordinary story, and you speak about yourself very much under the sign I think of Benjamin as a flâneur, as vagabonding, as digressing. I mean, really in this particular way, digression is really the sunshine of narrative. But before we get to that, I would like to—for you to address this relationship between being Jewish and collecting, because in some way one might say that the Wandering Jew can't be a great collector.

EDMUND DE WAAL: I mean, this is it. I mean, this is—My journey is a journey where I keep finding people who make a place for themselves, become Parisian, become Viennese, become Japanese. And what do they do? The first thing they do is to start to collect. Collecting is a way of saying that you're there, that you're not moving, that you have got more than that sort of satchel on your back. That's what collecting's about. It's saying—it's staking a place in the world, and it's taking a place in the world, and so the history of this story of Jewish collecting is completely about staying put. It's making that bet on assimilation and on belonging. It's saying, "This is the place I belong, and this is what I'm going to do. I am here, I'm not wandering, and now I'm not wandering. I need pictures, and I need objects, and I need a library." And so it's—that's the story. That's the story. And it happens again and again and again and again. Each time members of my family stop and adopt a place, they start to collect. Not just acquire, but collect.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Not hoard, but systematically collect.

EDMUND DE WAAL: Yeah, they project themselves out into the world of things and make sense of themselves through collections. And I completely understand that. It's taking a bet on belonging.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: And you have—since we're in a library at this present moment in this great hall—you have this extraordinary line of a non-Jewish writer, namely Victor Hugo, talking about libraries being a bet, and a bet against dispersion.

EDMUND DE WAAL: Exactly. And the book is my journey. It's a journey also through objects and it's a journey through books as objects, which isn't to say you don't read them, but the books are objects, books are things. It's a book of passion, about my passion and the passion of my family to read and hold, to possess books. And to write them. I mean, Charles, this great flâneur, this man, this vagabond. But he's also vagabonding for a purpose. He's vagabonding in order to write a beautiful book about Dürer. And then my—

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: You're not taken by him, though, in the beginning.

EDMUND DE WAAL: How can you—I mean, for goodness sake, he's twenty-two, and he buys a Medici bed for his bedroom. **(laughter)** Can you think of any more bling than that? **(laughter)** He buys a Medici bed, you know, from—and it's got an M for Medici embroidered and he takes out the M and puts E. **(laughter)** I mean, really, really, really, really.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: That's ambitious.

EDMUND DE WAAL: He buys a carpet from—a Savonnerie, a beautiful Savonnerie carpet, of the Golden Winds, a famous carpet, which was woven for the Louvre, for the Palais of the Louvre, in 1720. And he gets it cut down to size for his summer place.

(laughter) This is decorating on a kind of Upper East Side level **(laughter)**, this is kind of—oh, God, I didn't—that was—

(laughter)

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: That was a moment we won't forget here.

EDMUND DE WAAL: Cut that, I'll cut that myself.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: We'll cut that out of the tape, I promise you. What you meant was in fact I think to some extent, to put it in context, is that Charles at the beginning is someone you dislike very strongly actually but slowly very much as his collection becomes warmer to you, and you become closer to it, you warm to him.

EDMUND DE WAAL: I warm to him because I start to read him. I start to read this man, who—at the beginning, I can just feel that gaucherie, you know, that kind of—he's—

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Who is he?

EDMUND DE WAAL: What he does, in his early essays about art history, he puts in everything, he tells you everything. And you think, I know what's that like, that's being twenty-four, that's being twenty-four and you're really showing off, you really want to show off. And then there's this voice that starts coming through, and this voice is one of extraordinary poetic precision—where he looks at objects, he looks at paintings, and he's in conversation with this art, and he makes it alive, and so how can you not fall in love with someone who makes you alive in the presence of art? I mean, that's a great, great gift. I mean, he makes you feel you're in the same room as Berthe Morisot. Or that you actually want to go and look at Donatello again. I mean, that doesn't happen. I mean, that's tremendous, I start to love him because I can hear his voice, and then, and then, you know, and then I'm lost.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: You're lost and in part you're lost by what he ends up collecting and the relationship, to come back to Jews and collecting, a subject I'm really very interested in, in particular because the relationship between collecting and wandering is—benefits from the diminutive, from the small, from the fact that this is, if you don't mind my touching it. Actually, I think it's an important point, is that the book ends very much on the notion that your children, who you mentioned early on, are able to touch this at any given moment. So I'm curious what the relationship is between these

Japanese objects that are so small and so easy to lose and the relationship of being Jewish.

EDMUND DE WAAL: Two things. Well, actually one thing. Probably two. One. These things are completely sensuous. They're utterly, utterly beguiling and what they do is when you pick them up and you hand them to someone; as soon as you hand them to someone, you begin. So it's absolutely that synapse of storytelling. That's how all stories begin. You pick up an object, you put it down, you start the story. You hand someone a story, you look them in the eyes, and you're away. But there's another thing, and this is the Jewish thing, is these are foreign objects. These have an elsewhere, and that's the point. When you look at the things that people are collecting, there's this strange excitement about elsewhere. It's not exoticism. Exoticism is too cheap a word, and histories of Japonisme are dull, you know, because when Japanese art gets to Paris, it's intoxicatingly, it's genuinely exciting, because it brings a whole new area of sensuality and a different way of breathing, a different way of framing the world. So imagine being the first generation moved from Odessa and you're living in Paris, and you've got this new art. I mean, it has to be something that makes sense of elsewhere for you.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Tell us a little bit more, if you would, about this man who occupies the first chapter of your book, Charles. And he is not only someone who is collecting, but he is also the model for someone in a very, very great book.

EDMUND DE WAAL: You know what, I really—I said that in the preface, that this book would take me three or four months, tops, and I’m—after a year I’m in an archive in Paris, and I find letters by the Impressionists to Charles and a dinner menu at the Louvre. I must say Parisian archivists are shit, they are so horrible and unpleasant, they really are the most unpleasant people in the world, but I find these things and they’re wonderful, they’re wonderful, wonderful things and I’m lost.

And then there’s the story about Manet’s asparagus, you know. And there’s this beautiful bundle of asparagus, and it’s eight hundred francs. And Charles buys it, and he sends a thousand. And on Tuesday to the Rue Monseau, 81 Rue Monseau, a little canvas is delivered with a single asparagus. And “This one has slipped from the bundle,” is written on the back. And I remembered the story and of course it’s in Proust. And this is where my life gets really complicated, because then I realize that all those paintings I’ve tracked down—which are in the Met and in Chicago and in Cologne and everywhere—all of those paintings turn up in *À la recherche du temps perdu*. Proust is going up those staircases, he is working as a secretary for Charles. Charles is dedicating a book to him, Charles is encouraging him to write. And Swann, Swann, for God’s sake, is based partly on my Charles, and that’s another year gone. **(laughter)** I mean, that is another year gone. Because how the hell am I going to write this book which is antimemoir—

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: And which now has become—one of the main characters has become a character in the book and you are yourself writing your *Recherche*.

EDMUND DE WAAL: Exactly. So I'm in trouble. I mean, real, real trouble.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: So in order to alleviate the trouble you use this extraordinary quotation at the beginning of the book, which I will read. "Even when one is no longer attached to things, it's still something to have been attached to them; because it was always for reasons which other people didn't grasp... Well, now that I'm a little too weary to live with other people, these old feelings, so personal and individual that I had in the past, seemed to me—it's the mania of all collectors—very precious. I open my heart to myself like a sort of vitrine, and examine one by one all those love affairs of which the world can know nothing. And of this collection to which I'm now much more attached than to my others, I say to myself, rather as Mazarin said of his books, but in fact without the least distress, that it will be very tiresome to have to leave it all."

EDMUND DE WAAL: I think we should just go. **(laughter)** I mean, that's just the most—I mean, I—I—I, it's extraordinary, isn't it? I mean, how can we talk about it?

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: We can try.

EDMUND DE WAAL: Okay, we can try.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Tiresome.

EDMUND DE WAAL: I know.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Tiresome and vitrine. Talk about the—let's—the word, shall we, which one would you like to start with?

EDMUND DE WAAL: Vitrine.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Let's go for vitrine and we'll go for tiresome later, as people get so more and more.

EDMUND DE WAAL: As they leave, we're getting tiresome. Vitrines. Vitrines are really truly interesting. And my other really ambitious take is that this is a cultural history of vitrines—because you know, I did this whole boring polemic stuff about not having my work in glass cases, now I make all my work for glass cases. But vitrines are very, very interesting, because vitrines are absolutely for opening up. They are objects, objects are suspended in space in a vitrine, so they tantalize by not touching them and they offer the possibility of this transgression of opening them up.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Which you love—you love that, because in a way your book is also an attempt at getting closer and closer to these netsuke. And there's a lot of foreplay, one might say, as one slowly gets closer and closer to them. Describe that movement.

EDMUND DE WAAL: Yes. Yes. And I mean it's—the vitrines. The joy of the vitrine, the joy of this glass case in Charles's apartment in Rue Monseu—and then of course later in Vienna, and then even later in Tokyo, and now in my house—is that at every single point it has a different way of opening up. You know, you can imagine Charles opening it up as a host and the grandeur of that gesture.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: When would that have been?

EDMUND DE WAAL: 1880. You know, after dinner, you've got—you've got Renoir round for dinner or something, I don't know. He gave good parties. You've got, you know, Montesquieu, late, he's on the stairs, but whatever, you've got— It has that kind of life there and it's—it has a completely different life of course in Vienna. And that sense of different kinds of play so that—play works in all kinds of ways, so that's something that really interested me. You open it up and something happens. It's a threshold.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: The objects go—Charles has the objects. He buys them in one bundle. Two hundred and sixty-four netsuke. What attracted him to them?

EDMUND DE WAAL: I think he knew exactly what they'd do in his house. I think he knew exactly how they could work. I think I want to believe that he—Charles was delighted and intrigued by them. I think he was also showing off. It was an extraordinary purchase. I don't know if it was one in the eye for his brothers, you know, or showing off to his fabulous mistress, on which point, I've discovered that I have many more French

cousins than I thought. **(laughter)** Because the—we're allowed to talk about the afterlife of this ridiculous book—is that not only do my Parisian cousins, as well as obviously my Viennese family, have more expansive relationships than I make play with in this book, but out of the woodwork since the book has been published I have a wonderful set of newfound cousins.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: When you say he wants to show off—for whom?

EDMUND DE WAAL: I think there's an element of the grand chord here, you know, of saying, actually, I think it was an element of bling, of actually saying, "I've got all this. I've got all this. And now you can get your hands on it, too." Don't you see that? I think that's what's happening.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: My little idea in my head as I asked you that question, without wanting you to give me that answer but thinking that I might suggest it to you, is it has again something to do with the desire to be assimilated. So in one way, showing off is a way of making something exterior and a façade and showing the world how fabulous your taste is. On the other hand, I'm a Jew in France in a world that is writing about me, as Goncourt did, in a way that is anything but kind.

EDMUND DE WAAL: Yes, but I think that happens later. I think in the sense that, you know, I really—at the end of the century when Charles builds this newer, bigger house, vastly bigger house and he starts getting Empire furniture of course, you know, and

there's a lot of it in the Getty, and there's Gustave Moreaus like that, and there's Sevres, and there's Gobelin tapestries. And at that point, Paul, what he's doing, he's saying, "I am completely French." He is surrounding himself with French objects. He's channeling being French, in a completely, completely straightforward way. And it's the moment of the Dreyfus Affair. I look at this collection he puts together at the end of the century, and he's more French than French. He's absolutely saying, "I am French. I have the Légion d'honneur, I walk down to my club, and I'm French, I'm French, I'm French." And that's the same time that the bricks are coming through his window and there's daily broadsheets excoriating the family.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: There lies a danger. Is that true? The danger of considering that, as someone that doesn't have a home, you belong somewhere, because those objects then move from Paris to Vienna, into a family that also believes that, beyond anything, it is Austrian, it is Viennese.

EDMUND DE WAAL: I look at my great-grandfather and he is a Viennese. He's born in Odessa, and he's more Viennese than the Viennese. He loves the Emperor. He builds that house in the Ringstrasse. It's a block in the Ringstrasse. And that's a house which says you're not moving. **(laughter)** And what he's saying, what he's saying is that he believes that in this great imperial city, and this is where he is. And, you know, he loves that city. That's where he belongs, and that's where this vitrine goes.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: And at first that city loves him at certain moments. And then what happens? I mean, you're speaking of loss. You speak of a tremendous loss. He loses everything, and everybody loses everything after him.

EDMUND DE WAAL: 1938. I mean, you know, when I started—when I started this journey and made this sort of pact with myself to continue to the end—I always had this, this thing, this anxiety, this terror, really, about what—whether or not I would be able to write about the Anschluss. Everyone has written about the Anschluss, and it's everyone else's story, but it's my story, too. But how can I write about that period of time? I mean, it's such hubris to attempt to write that story. And so there was this huge problem for me about as a person, as a writer, how do I make—not how do I make sense of it, but how do I actually write it? How do I actually sit down and write about what happened? So that's where, that's where I have to do it through touch.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Because touch gives you—

EDMUND DE WAAL: That's my way of doing it. That's my way of doing it. So I wasn't going to write a history of what happened except through this taking apart of a family through the objects which gave them meaning. Because the Anschluss is the first attempt to take away from people their objects. And then you take away their homes, and then you take away their place, and then you take away their story—it all begins there. And so I start my story with them taking away the objects.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: (reading)

Yes, he says, in a post-war interview on his role at the bank, of course he bought them out. 'They needed cash for the "Reichsfluchtsteuer," the Reich flight tax . . . they offered me their shares urgently, because this was the fastest way to get cash. The price, Ephrussi and Wiener's price to get out, was "totally appropriate"... it was 508,000 Reichsmarks... plus the 40,000 Aryanisation tax of course.'

So, on the 12th of August 1938, Ephrussi and Co. is taken off the business register. In the records it says, singularly, ERASED. Three months later the name is changed to Bankhaus CA Steinhausser. Under its new name it is revalued, and under its new Gentile ownership it is worth six times as much as under Jewish ownership.

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 list 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.

And I mean, when I reach that moment.

EDMUND DE WAAL: I have to say, I think that's really unfair.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Unfair?

EDMUND DE WAAL: I mean, you know, here I am, it still makes me cry. I mean, you know, it's—Yes.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: But you wrote the book in some way to ward against that.

EDMUND DE WAAL: Yes, yes, yes, yes. Well, you know what? I don't know what I was doing with this book. **(laughter)** I write this book, I write this book because it's a real attempt in places and archives and museums to work out what is still humming there in the family story. It's trying to make sense of all those silences, all those erasures, all those things which are palimpsests, where things have been written over. It's the moment when you get to the file, and you've looked—it's the file you've called up from the archive, and it has—you know this is the file you need, and you get to the page and the page has been ripped out in 1938.

And that's all that story, all that story, which is a story that many, many, many people share is my story, too. But when I write the book, what I'm trying to do at every point is to do it with exactitude, to do it because you can't do this story vaguely. You can't make it general and melancholic, you can't—you've got to go back and do it properly.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: And what you're after is to find in some way—I mean, when you write in that introduction, “This is my question,” your question is to find what it felt like to, in particular with these objects, to be manipulating those objects in a particular context, be it Paris, be it Vienna, or be it Tokyo.

EDMUND DE WAAL: It's worth doing. You know, I mean, it's bloody hard work, but it was worth doing. It was worth doing, because it wasn't ultimately the story that I thought it was, you know, and that's always a more interesting story. When I set out my stall with the skeletal thing that I was given by Iggy of what had happened and the nonskeletal netsuke, I thought I knew what I was going to find. I thought I knew why I was doing it. But I didn't.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: What did you think?

EDMUND DE WAAL: I thought I was in control. I mean, I thought I was in control of the material. It's a classic screw-up. You know, I thought I genuinely could handle the material and accommodate it and walk through. I could stroll through this family history.

And what I find, what I find, what I find at all times, is—you know, and I'm in the book, is this exhilaration and this moment of complete, utter shock.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: What is strongest in the book to me is the feeling of utter responsibility you feel, and the subtitle in the American edition speaks to that notion of being an heir, of—with being an heir comes a deep responsibility.

EDMUND DE WAAL: Goethe says you earn your inheritance. You've probably got that written down, too. **(laughter)**

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: I do have that very—I have that quotation in some way.

EDMUND DE WAAL: I'm sure you would—he knows his Goethe.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: What from your fathers—no, no the Faust quotation is that, “What from your fathers you received as heir, acquire if you would possess it.” Is that the line you were—

EDMUND DE WAAL: You're better than me, you've got it exact. Yeah, absolutely, yes.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: I'm thinking of Lampedusa, who has this extraordinary line in *Le Guerre* where he says, "I hold old families in high regard. They possess a memory, minute, it's true, but anyway greater than that of others."

EDMUND DE WAAL: Again, you can't discount Lampedusa, I mean, certainly. But I mean the inheritance, the inheritance, well, the responsibility. I mean, again, that grows, you know, I mean it's sort of—it's that strange thing which is that I kind of—when I get given this collection, I think—well, I must make sure it's well looked after.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: When it was handed over to you.

EDMUND DE WAAL: Yes, so it's sort of, that sort of sense of being a custodian. And then there's the challenge, and then there was absolutely, damn it, that he knew what he was doing. It was a real loaded gun. And I'm—I've just been called a PK. A preacher's kid, is that right? I grew up in, you know, the most establishment Anglican family you can believe. I grew up next to Canterbury Cathedral in a deanery with, you know, Evensong and bells all the time **(laughter)** and pictures of deans on the wall. And you know, that's my inheritance, so that's what I think I inherit is this Philip Larkin world. **(laughter)** And I don't expect Joseph Roth. So, you know, go figure, it's bloody complicated. You know, I grew up knowing my way around the Anglican prayer book.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Then this collection was handed over to you. It was handed over to you in the most unexpected way.

EDMUND DE WAAL: Yes, and I mean—

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Is it a burden?

EDMUND DE WAAL: No, I've put the burden down. I mean, the burden. You know what, I've written this book. I think I've discharged my literary obligations to my family, I really do. I hope. You know.

(applause)

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: When you describe Vienna, at one particular moment you say there is something “sticky.” And that word struck me because in my own family history, with two Viennese parents—one a father who turned ninety-three yesterday and a mother who turned eighty-seven a month ago—having escaped Vienna, spending the war years in Haiti... And when I turned eighteen the one gift I wanted from my father was to go to his Vienna, and we went for a week to his Vienna. And with his index finger he indicated everything that he knew, and everything he showed us, he showed me, was a trip in absence because everything he showed was no longer there. And I was filled with these stories of Stefan Zweig and Peter Altenberg and Joseph Rode and all of those people, and I got more and more and more depressed as I went along because everything he showed me wasn't there. And I said to him, “but what you're showing me isn't there.

Isn't this very in some way depressing?" He said, "Not at all. I am here. It isn't at all that way for me, because I am here to tell you the story."

EDMUND DE WAAL: You see, that's fantastic. That's just fantastic. That's absolutely—and that nails restitution, you see. That nails restitution. Because this is it, okay, because, you know, we all want our pictures back and we're going to get them back. Restitution is about getting the things back we've lost. But you know what, Vienna—we restitute stories to Vienna. Vienna is a shadow of what it was. It's lost all its stories, and so writing our stories and taking them back is restitution in a really, really powerful way. And that is taking control, where we can take control. That's a really powerful thing. So your father is right.

(applause)

And sticky.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: And sticky—just because I never got to sticky. Sticky—the issue with sticky is that my mother abhors this stickiness. She finds it—I mean, she adores Thomas Bernhard because precisely he unsticks it all. And the stickiness, the heaviness, but the heaviness not in terms of the contrary of thinness, which you write against. You write against the thinness, the clichés of Vienna. You write, I mean, at one moment in the book you say, extraordinarily, that in some way the story you're telling

about Vienna is the story of other people; it isn't your Vienna. And so this stickiness, I want you to address it.

EDMUND DE WAAL: I think you've addressed it beautifully. I don't know if I can say anything about Vienna which has your kind of—the body language. I mean, look at you. **(laughter)** But you know, I mean, Vienna, goodness. And the Viennese, I mean, let's get personal here. But it's—it's so difficult, it is so difficult. Because that sentimentality and that ability to add another layer, just another layer, and to wash it with Strauss, you know, is something that—is something that is poisonous. The book has come out in Germany and Austria.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: I was going to ask you about that.

EDMUND DE WAAL: In three weeks' time, on the twentieth of October, I am, my father and my children and I are going to Vienna. And we are going to launch the book in Vienna. And I'm reading with my father in the Palais Ephrussi, which he hasn't been in since 1952, and then we're walking to the Jewish Museum and we're going to launch the book. And the next day my father is taking my children round Vienna. So ask me in a month.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: What do your children know at this point about Vienna? How old are they?

EDMUND DE WAAL: They're thirteen and twelve and nine. I mean, they know and they haven't read the book yet, and that's fine. They've got time. But I don't know how to prepare them. I don't think I can prepare them for going with their grandfather to Vienna. Enough's enough.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: The passage I had you read at the very beginning about, in a way the book, the subject beckoning you. You had to write this book in order to get the story out of you, and the story right, and the story told, and the collection safe. There's a relationship between telling the story and saving the collection.

EDMUND DE WAAL: Of course there is. I mean, that's why we write stories. Because the longevity of stories is comparable to the longevity of objects, and sometimes they intersect and sometimes they don't. And rare moments when the stories and the objects come together is amazing. You know, I'm a storyteller in the things I make as well as through words. I don't know. I don't want to seem grandiose.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: But there's a relationship between—precisely—and you talk about this again and again, between your craft and storytelling. The, as it were, the marks on the pots are not unlike the marks—I mean, in this sense, it's very close to the story, to Benjamin's storyteller. There is a way in which its traces left, and you were talking about these objects as highly, as things you manipulate, you touch.

EDMUND DE WAAL: It's also a series of bigger movements, because it's also a series of walks. And it's a series of walks around cities—rather deliberately and stupidly, using guidebooks from the time that I was trying to work out. And I keep getting lost because I keep using Baedeker's from 1870. **(laughter)** You know, stupid Englishman, you know, a kind of—but that was part of it. So it's a series of walks, which is a different kind of movement, and so there's a shape. I mean, the book is a series of shapes. And I'm on some kind of spectrum, because I kind of think about the work, that the book is an object, is sort of a made book.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: These objects now find themselves in your home.

EDMUND DE WAAL: They do. They're in a vitrine at home.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: And they have become more open than ever to manipulation.

EDMUND DE WAAL: It's unlocked. It's unlocked, so there's no—I tell my older son that he should think hard because there's a misery memory for him when he's older, about living with netsuke and not seeing his father **(laughter)** and having to—the afterlife of this book. But they do, the kids can—it's not policed, you know.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: It's not—

EDMUND DE WAAL: Policed. It's not policed. It's open, it's there.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: And the key to the vitrine is always there.

EDMUND DE WAAL: Why not? I mean, this is, this is. Someone, yeah. Sometimes things don't have to be in museums to have some kind of valency, some kind of value, some kind of life. And these ones aren't in museums.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Say something more about that because your work finds itself in many museums and here you are in some way doing something quite opposite.

EDMUND DE WAAL: Yes, I'm not consciously contrarian. It's rather nice to be collected by museums, it makes me feel rather grand. The things I make for museums are my conversation about collections. They are real interrogations of how objects get put together, where they get placed, the gaps between them, how glass cases work, what's touchable and not touchable. It's about desire. A lot of my things are out of reach. They beckon you, and you realize you can't move them around. A lot of my things are about diaspora. They are not—they don't fall apart, they stay together as groups. So a lot of the things I make at the moment—I'm making vitrines, for God's sake—at the moment are very much in conversation with my book.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: And, you know, one of the things that strikes me is this notion that the collection becomes interiorized, the notion of loss in that context. And

there's—since Rilke features quite prominently in the book—there's this line that I found where he says, “Now loss, however cruel, is powerless against possession, which it completes, or even, affirms: loss is, in fact, nothing else than a second acquisition—but now completely interiorized—and just as intense.”

EDMUND DE WAAL: That's fantastic. I mean, that's fantastic. That's absolutely beautiful.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: I'll give you another one.

EDMUND DE WAAL: May I have another?

(laughter)

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: This is from—

EDMUND DE WAAL: This is the most fun I've had in ten days in America, I have to say.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: I'm so glad.

EDMUND DE WAAL: This is better than Denver.

(laughter/applause)

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Well, among the lines we will remember is that “This is better than Denver.” But John Berger has this line which I adore where he says, “Poetry can repair no loss, but it defies the space which separates. And it does this by its continual labor of reassembling what has been scattered.”

EDMUND DE WAAL: Yes, yes. That makes complete sense. That makes complete sense to me. That makes complete sense of the people I loved. You know, my grandmother, who had nothing after the war and didn’t feel the need to put it all back together again because she had it. And out of that loss she becomes a letter writer. She becomes a person who makes connections across the world and keeps correspondence going and becomes this extraordinary person who’s able to not be possessed by loss. And I—the book is, the book is in honor of the people who managed, you know. Many didn’t. But who managed to make it, make a really creative life for themselves and weren’t destroyed by this loss.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: In closing I asked you, too, to come up with your seven words.

EDMUND DE WAAL: The amount of preparation I had to do for this was **(laughter)**—these are my seven words: “Actually, I still make pots, you know.”

(applause)

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Thank you very much!

(applause)