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The muse of displacement: Edmund de Waal's 'library of exile'

A migratory installation explores how the loss of homeland has inspired and encumbered writers

William Atkins 5 HOURS AGO



Edmund de Waal's installation 'library of exile' at the British Museum in London © Greg Funnell

“Books brought from Odessa and Vienna, sent from dealers in London and Zurich, his lifetime of reading, are taken off the library’s shelves and sorted and packed into wooden crates.” Thus Edmund de Waal’s elegiac account of the “confiscation” of his Jewish great-grandfather Viktor’s library. Its theft by the Nazis in 1938 foreshadowed a new era of displacement, including that of Viktor himself, who fled Vienna for England with his family.

[De Waal](#) describes himself as “an artist who writes”, though when we meet at the British Museum a week before the opening of his

new installation, *library of exile*, he tells me he finds it increasingly difficult to separate the two activities. Today he is equally well known for his books, especially the bestselling 2010 memoir [The Hare with Amber Eyes](#), which includes the account of the fate of his great-grandfather's library, and his work in porcelain. *Library of exile*, which he has described as the most significant sculpture of his career, consolidates the themes of diaspora, memory and memorial he has returned to throughout his art and writing; but it also serves to reconcile those twin practices.

A roofless pavilion about the size of a shipping container, it is lined with shelves holding some 2,000 books by exiled writers. On the walls are also four of de Waal's vitrine works filled with porcelain pots. The library represents a kind of communal autobiography of the displaced person through history, from Cicero and Dante to the European émigrés of the 20th century and present-day author-exiles such as [Elif Shafak](#) and [Aleksandar Hemon](#).

The installation is itself migratory, having arrived in London following sojourns in Venice and Dresden. From here it will travel to Mosul, Iraq, where it will remain. Readers are invited to write their own name inside volumes that are meaningful to them (each book has an *ex libris* plate for this purpose). The most-read volume is the children's book *The Tiger Who Came to Tea*, whose author, [Judith Kerr](#), arrived in Britain from Germany in 1933. Visitors are also encouraged to suggest further books, which de Waal will add to the collection. "We're here for six months, so God knows how big the library will be at the end."

The scope of "exile" is certainly wide. The World Health Organisation estimates that 1bn people — almost one in eight of the global population — are living as migrants, of whom 68m have been forcibly displaced. From Syria and South Sudan to Russia and Colombia, exile is a defining condition of our time; but it is also as old as humankind itself. De Waal picks out a leather-bound edition of Ovid's *Tristia*, written in around AD8. In the opening pages of this archetypal exile text, the poet describes a stroll in the warmth of his beloved native Rome: "Now the public squares, now the temples, and now the marble theatres — ". Suddenly the tone darkens, the skies turn ashen; he acknowledges that what he has written is only a memory, for he is writing from Tomis on the Black Sea, 900 miles away from Rome, where he has been banished for an unnamed crime. The violence of that transition, from the comforts of the metropolis to windswept barbarian misery, is one committed by Ovid's own memory.

It's a predicament that the late Edward Said understood: "The exile exists in a median state, neither completely at one with the new setting, nor fully disencumbered of the old." It's as if a thread has

been unspooled from the homeland to the land of exile, continually tugging the expatriated person out of time and place.

Said, arguably the most eloquent modern voice of political displacement, recognised that something shifted in our understanding of the meaning of exile following the second world war. “The difference between [earlier exiles and those of our own time](#) is, it bears stressing, scale,” he wrote, echoing his near-contemporary Hannah Arendt, who witnessed a transformation in attitudes to the exiled person in the 20th century: “Everywhere,” she wrote, “the word ‘exile’, which once had an undertone of almost sacred awe, now provokes the idea of something simultaneously suspicious and unfortunate.”

Exile in five books

Tristia and the Black Sea Letters by Ovid: the poet's reflections on exile, and his plea to Augustus that he be allowed to return. Ovid died in about AD17, having never seen his beloved Rome again.

Red Virgin, by French anarchist and feminist Louise Michel, is the story of her deportation to the South Pacific penal colony of New Caledonia after the 1871 suppression of the Paris Commune.

Lost in Translation is Eva Hoffman's classic account of her family's emigration from postwar Poland and her bid to overcome one of exile's most abiding wounds, the loss of language.

The Book of My Lives by Bosnian-American Aleksandar Hemon is an unsentimental memoir about losing Sarajevo and making a home in the US. A reminder that war and displacement go hand in hand.

Travellers, Helon Habila's kaleidoscopic novel about migrants in Europe, is a polyphony of stories assembled into a meditation on the conflicting meanings of exile.

For others, exile has been a spur to creativity. “Sometimes a gentle wind ex ponto blows,” wrote Vladimir Nabokov in his 1951 memoir *Speak, Memory* (Pontus Euxinus was the classical name for Ovid's Black Sea). Self-exiled in America, Nabokov was unsentimental about his plight and suspicious of the valorisation of “home”. “The break in my own destiny,” he wrote in *Speak, Memory*, “afforded me in retrospect a syncopal kick I would not have missed for worlds.” Nevertheless he understood the psychic rupture the condition can cause. The protagonist of his 1957 novel *Pnin*, a Russian professor exiled to East Coast America, is not only infantilised by the loss of homeland and language, but almost obliterated by it.

Said was suspicious of the tendency to romanticise the artistic advantages of forced expatriation. To think of exile as “beneficially humanistic is to banalise its mutilations”. He urged that we set aside Nabokov and James Joyce, who fled the stifling confines of his native Ireland for Trieste and Paris, “and think instead of the uncountable masses for whom UN agencies have been created”.

He would have applauded Kurdish journalist Behrouz Boochani, whose 2018 memoir, *No Friend but the Mountains* is one of the more recent items in de Waal's library. It was written piecemeal, by WhatsApp message, from the Australian "immigration detention centre" on Manus Island where he was held for nearly five years, in a "prison of filth and heat", having been apprehended while trying to enter Australia by boat, after fleeing persecution in Iran. *No Friend but the Mountains* is a shattered mirror of a book, and not only because of the fragmentary manner of its writing, the journal of a man realising hell is real, while furiously resisting his heart's cauterisation. It's also a plea for justice on behalf of Said's "uncountable masses". De Waal selects another recent volume, a French edition of *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, itself a reflection on the liberating power of books, by the Iranian-American Azar Nafisi, and notes that seven people have written their names in it in Venice or Dresden. The library's polyphony of languages, across time and space, is part of its *raison d'être*. It is intended as an act of solidarity — with its authors, living and dead; with those suffering and dying at the world's proliferating borders; and perhaps most poignantly, with the people of the city where the library will end up, Mosul, where the university's great library was burnt by Islamic State in 2015 and is now in the process of being reconstructed.

Listed on the outside walls of *library of exile* are the names of other destroyed libraries, from Antioch to Alexandria to Timbuktu, a 2,000-year history of book-burning. Above them, scratched into the porcelain surface, are two lines that serve as an epigraph and a dedication. First the words of the 19th-century German poet, and exile, Heinrich Heine: *Dort wo man Bücher verbrennt, verbrennt man auch am Ende Menschen* — "Where books are burnt, in the end people will be burnt." (It was a warning that would be chillingly realised in 1933 in an early act of Nazi terror when "un-German" books were publicly burnt by Berlin university students.) The second is a frank declaration, again in de Waal's hand, returning us to the work's genesis: "I'm making this for my great-grandfather Viktor, who saw his library stolen."

"It does go back to a central loss," he adds, "of a library in Vienna in 1938, and to my father, sitting, as a child in England, with his grandfather; and his grandfather reciting Virgil to him. He didn't have his books, but he'd brought, in his head, poetry — he'd held that."

Library of exile is an act of restitution, then. But it also represents a conviction that books might heal the wound of exile and discourage its reopening; and in both their writing and their reading vouchsafe a homeland that cannot be destroyed, even by fire.

William Atkins, author of "The Immeasurable World: Journeys in

Desert Places' (Faber), is working on a book about places of political exile

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