

Book Review

Richard Ovenden, *Burning the Books: A History of Knowledge Under Attack*. London: John Murray (2020)

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The title of Richard Ovenden’s book presupposes a relationship between “books” and “knowledge”: burning the former is equated to attack of the latter. While this is true, Ovenden does not explicitly define the relationship implied, nor does he fully articulate the ways in which books have “meaning,” either singly or as a collection. The signifying power of writing operates along multiple dimensions. Writing’s meaning is semantic, located in the information or insight it contains in words. Writing’s meaning is performative, a function of the way those words are made public through proclamation or other depiction. Writing’s meaning is iconic, rooted in particular material form: words written on a scroll or printed on pages bound. These multiple dimensions of meaning have operated since antiquity (Watts 2013a, 15–16; 2013b, 408–410). They persist still. Then-President Trump’s posing in front of St John’s Lafayette Square Episcopal Church on 1 June 2020 in response to protests associated with the police killing of George Floyd appears to have been an attempt to identify the administration with the authority of the black-bound Bible held in the President’s hand. The tension some perceived between the interiority of the one holding the book and the interiority of the book held led to public outcry (Chappell 2020) that itself testified to the power of “scriptures’ indexical touch” (Watts 2012, 175).

As the meanings of books still function along multiple axes, so too do the meanings of collections of books, of archives and of libraries. The “knowledge,” the vulnerability of which Ovenden explores, signifies more than the materials’ semantic value.

Ovenden's book is tagged with two epigraphs: Heinrich Heine's insight that "Wherever they burn books, they will also, in the end, burn human beings" (1823) and George Santayana's "Those who do not remember the past are doomed to repeat it" (1905). The vulnerability of bodies and the vulnerability of memory are two themes at issue in Ovenden's exploration of the "destruction of the storehouses of knowledge" (Ovenden 2020, 8). In many ways, Ovenden's book is about the embodiment of memory – in persons, texts and institutions – and the ways in which the preservation of those varied bodies preserves society itself.

Initial chapters present the library of Ashurbanipal (seventh century BCE) and the library in Alexandria (founded in the third century BCE) as ancient examples of what became ideal expressions of library. Subsequent chapters explore individual episodes of library history, focused primarily on library or archive destruction, from the depredations of the European Reformation ("one of the worst periods in the history of knowledge" [Ovenden, 62]) through to the devastation caused in war and the displacements associated with the dissolution of empire. Episodes and sites of destruction explored include Washington, DC in 1814; Louvain in 1914; Vilna and New York City in 1941 and after; Sarajevo in 1992; and Baghdad in 2003. Interspersed with these are chapters focused on the dispositions of the writings of individuals after the authors' deaths. These chapters sit somewhat oddly within the larger sweep of the book, focused as it is on communal or public collections, but anticipate some of the points explored in the final chapters dealing with the issues of ownership, access and preservation raised by electronic media.

Bodies abound in Ovenden's tour, although not all are explicitly named, nor are all named exclusively material. Some of the named bodies are individual texts, such as St Dunstan's Classbook (Ovenden, 52, 58) or the Sarajevo Haggadah, the illuminated fourteenth-century manuscript hidden from the Nazis and saved also from the Serbs (Ovenden, 163). The value of these "relic" texts lies in "being the *specific* objects that they are" (Watts 2013a, 28). Some of the named bodies are individual actors in library history. John Leland, commissioned by Henry VIII to search for textual evidence of England's independence from Rome, scoured collections held by religious orders throughout the kingdom. Henry's dissolution of the monasteries led also to the destruction of their libraries as volumes were dispersed (some transferred to the royal libraries) or destroyed. Ovenden speculates that Leland's horror at this destruction, and his own role in it, may have contributed to his eventual madness (Ovenden, 59–60). A generation later, Thomas Bodley (born in 1547, the

year Leland went mad) founded and endowed the library at Oxford University which still bears his name and of which Ovenden is the twenty-fifth Bodley's Librarian (Ovenden, 68).

The bodies at issue in Ovenden's book are not just individual but communal, including libraries and archives themselves, identified as "bodies that exist to 'cling to the truth'" (Ovenden, 4). While Ovenden references physical forms of these library bodies, such as the relative fragilities of papyrus and parchment (Ovenden, 34–35) or different arrangements of collections (Ovenden, 65–66), he also discusses the practices associated with those physical forms. The ancient library at Pergamon recopied texts from papyrus onto more durable parchment; Alexandria's neglect of this curation led to a degradation ultimately as entire as deliberate destruction (Ovenden, 35–36). Thomas Bodley not only funded the library collection but published the library's catalogue, an innovative and critical step in making the holdings accessible (Ovenden, 71–72). Thus, the "body of knowledge" as Ovenden analyses it is not limited to its physical form but includes the ways in which other bodies, individual and social, interact with the collection. Ovenden's exploration shows that, like the individual books and writings they hold, libraries and archives themselves have semantic, performative and iconic dimensions.

The semantic dimension of a curated collection, the information it contains, is perhaps the dimension most overtly engaged with in Ovenden's book. The perhaps-routine destruction of the landing cards that showed the legal entry of the "Windrush generation" into the UK after the Second World War (Ovenden, 5), the violent destruction of archives which recorded generations of Muslim lives in Bosnia (Ovenden, 158–159) and the disputes over the disposition of archives relating to formerly colonized regions (Ovenden, 169–181) are described as loss of knowledge, which Ovenden's analysis construes in terms of loss of information.

This significant focus on the semantic aspects of archives' meaning seems rooted in the ancient history of archives themselves. Complex societies' need to manage information, both administrative and cultural, underlies the development of writing and its storehouses. Small clay tablets found in Ashurbanipal's library in Nineveh record trade, tax and other administrative transactions necessary to the Assyrian Empire's functioning (Ovenden, 21–23). Larger clay tablets record literary texts, such as the Epic of Gilgamesh, copied and transmitted over generations (Ovenden, 23–24). Ashurbanipal's library even included texts that recorded the collection and the copying of other texts, the scribal colophons Ovenden refers to as "the earliest form of metadata" (Ovenden, 22).

Ashurbanipal's library seems also to have had performative and iconic dimensions, although Ovenden does not analyse it in these terms. Ashurbanipal's deliberate seeking and seizure of other (conquered) regions' text collections for the benefit of his own was an exercise of power (Ovenden, 24–25, 27) that may be considered as a performance of archive. The act of collection and curation was an expression of the totalizing identity of empire (du Toit 2011, 131–139). Similarly, the destruction of the library seems to have been, at least in part, a deliberately iconoclastic act rather than solely a happenstance of war. Amid the “widespread fire and looting” there is evidence that specific tablets were smashed (Ovenden, 25–26). These tablets appear to have been smashed because they were “the physical image of [the treaty] covenant,” (Scurlock 2012, 178); smashing the tablets in the throne room of the temple was an attempt to break the covenant curses which otherwise would fall on the treaty violator (Scurlock 2012, 182). Destruction of the particular physical text in the particular spatial context was understood (or hoped!) to have a particular performative outcome.

Performative and iconic dimensions are implicated in other episodes of library and archive history reviewed by Ovenden. Both the act of collecting information in material form and the practices which make the collection accessible may be construed as performance of the idea of library. The organization of the collection, the publication of a catalogue and the processes by which others come into contact with the material are all examples of library practice, or performance. Some performances even are ritualized, to again borrow the language of sacrality: “All new users of the Bodleian, for example, are still required to formally swear ‘not to bring into the Library, or kindle therein, any fire or flame’, as they have done for over four hundred years” (Ovenden, 10).

The destruction and rebuilding of the library at the University of Louvain is another example of the performative and iconic dimensions of library. The central library of the University of Louvain had been founded in the seventeenth century and after the Napoleonic wars “became a symbol of national renewal, an engine for intellectual and social power and a crucial element in cementing the university's new role in the Belgian national consciousness” (Ovenden, 107–108). Its buildings were grand; its collections, comprising printed books, incunabula and manuscripts, were vast. In August 1914, German troops set fire to the library and destroyed it. The international response was a testament to the library's iconic value. The destruction was called an “atrocious,” a “crime against the world,” against culture, intellect and civilization (Ovenden,

107, 109–111). Descriptions connected the destruction at Louvain with the fabled destruction of the library of Alexandria and characterized the Germans as “barbarian,” “more savage than the Arabs of the Caliph Omar” historically blamed for burning Alexandria (Ovenden, 107). (Ovenden follows Gibbon in absolving the Caliph of blame for Alexandria’s entire destruction: “the institution of the library disappeared more gradually both through organisational neglect and through the gradual obsolescence of the papyrus scrolls themselves” [Ovenden, 34]. Nonetheless, the racist trope persisted and was reused in 1914.)

Events at Louvain also led to a new performance of archive in support of rebuilding. Libraries from the UK and the US donated duplicates to Louvain. Americans raised funds for the new building, which was designed to be a physical expression not just of the latest in library design but of the new relationship between Belgium and the United States (Ovenden, 112–114). As the library’s destruction had been described in terms that suggest desecration (Watts 2009), its rededication was ceremonial performance suggestive of resacralization: the process included the collection of texts, the laying of the foundation stone, the choice of inscription, and the formal inauguration of the building with speeches, statues and heraldry, as well as the presence of princes and prelates (Ovenden, 112–113). In 1940, the library was again destroyed by bombardment and fire. The double destruction did not just affect the semantic dimension (the “intellectual value” of the destroyed texts) but also “the national and civic pride embodied in the library,” the iconic value of the collection as the “bibliothèque de famille” (Ovenden, 116).

In 1992, the National and University Library of Bosnia and Herzegovina in Sarajevo was “deliberately targeted by Serbian forces that sought not only military domination but annihilation of the Muslim population” of the region (Ovenden, 154). Library collections “reflected the multicultural nature of Bosnia” and the building itself had been the seat of the 1910–15 Bosnian parliament (Ovenden, 156–157). The particular iconic value of the central library accounts for its being the focus of such entire destruction, yet it was not the only collection targeted. Ovenden catalogues the destruction of collections across Bosnia: “the ethnic cleansing of individuals was matched by the destruction of documents in land registries,” as well as records of births, marriages and deaths, all of which served to “root a community in their environment” (Ovenden, 158). The destruction of the libraries and archives was part of the “cultural genocide in Bosnia,” and war crimes charges were successfully prosecuted (Ovenden, 161).

The events in Bosnia showed the relationship of community bodies, those human and those inscribed, and the ways in which both sorts were vulnerable to others' destructive intent and action. While Ovenden is careful to distinguish between the burning of books and the burning of bodies (Ovenden, 117), the theme of interleaved identities occurs in other episodes described. The collection of oral histories (whether the surveillance reports created for the East German Stasi [Ovenden, 183–184] or those gathered by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa [Ovenden, 13–14, 221–222, 229]) creates from the memory embodied in persons a new form of embodiment, that of the archive. The urge to create and to preserve this secondary embodiment is significantly demonstrated in the history of the Nazi attempts to destroy Jews and Judaism in Europe. Again, issues of performance and iconicity are implicated in this history. The book burnings of 1933 and after resulted in the performative “counterblast” of new collections of resistance that included books banned by the Nazis as well as “key Nazi texts, in order to help understand the emerging regime”: the *Deutsche Freiheitsbibliothek* (also called the “German Library of Burnt Books”) in Paris and the “American Library of Nazi-Banned Books” in New York (Ovenden, 120–121). The Nazis themselves not only destroyed but confiscated Jewish archives, collecting material in support of investigation of Judaism’s history and impact (Ovenden, 122–123).

Ovenden focuses closely on the story of YIVO (*Yidisher Visnshaftlekher Institut*) and its work to preserve Jewish history and culture in the face of threats from the Nazis and from the Soviets. YIVO was established in Vilna, Lithuania. Through the 1920s and 1930s, volunteer *zamlers* collected both documents and oral testimonies, memorializing in writing the memories of those then living (Ovenden, 125–127). In 1941, Hitler invaded eastern Europe and ended Jewish life as it had been; Jews were herded into ghettos, concentration camps and mass graves. When the Germans captured Vilna, they took over the YIVO archive and demanded Jewish specialists from the Vilna ghetto sort the materials, selecting those which would be transported to Frankfurt and those which would be pulped (Ovenden, 127–128). The “Paper Brigade,” as the guards named the group, did not just sort materials for confiscation or destruction but also smuggled books and manuscripts out of Nazi control and into the ghetto to be hidden (Ovenden, 128–130). As the creation of the archive had been to preserve Jewish culture, so its preservation was a similar effort: “Whatever part we can rescue will be saved, with God’s help,” one Brigade member wrote. “We will find it when we return as free human beings”

(Ovenden, 131). Most of the members of the Brigade were murdered by the Nazis (Ovenden, 131). Much of the material hidden was destroyed as well. But not all. What had been saved from the Nazis – “with God’s help” – had to be saved yet again when communist authorities “declared all forms of Jewish culture anti-Soviet” (Ovenden, 135). Hidden until glasnost allowed their rediscovery, among the materials preserved were those collected by the *zamlers* those decades before (Ovenden, 135).

Their rediscovery led to a new question: to whom did, or should, the collection belong? Was it Jewish or Lithuanian? Should it be housed in New York, where a YIVO office had been established in 1939, or remain in Lithuania as a national treasure? The resolution required the collaboration of YIVO and the National Library of Lithuania: the collection was catalogued and copied by YIVO; the physical objects were then returned to Lithuania (Ovenden, 136).

This seemingly Solomonic resolution uses the transition to new media (digitization an analogue of Pergamon’s copying papyrus onto parchment) to preserve and make more broadly accessible the underlying text. The analogy is imperfect. Solomon proposed dividing a baby (1 Kings 3:16–28); YIVO and the National Library doubled the collection. Yet, unlike Pergamon’s copying, their collaboration did not duplicate the archive’s materiality but transformed it. What had been a physically embodied collection became a collection accessible digitally as well as physically. How does this transformation of form affect the meaning(s) of the collection?

Ovenden does not explicitly engage with this question. He recognizes that the shift in text expression from material to virtual is associated with massive expansion in the creation of information, including that which has been digitized (as with the YIVO collection) and that which was “born-digital” (Ovenden, 197). He argues that both the scale of this “digital deluge” and the extent to which it is controlled by a “relatively small number of very large companies” creates a “new existential challenge” for libraries, archives and indeed “the whole of society” (Ovenden, 198–200). Ovenden discusses recent events such as Flickr’s decision to limit free storage and the resulting loss of previously uploaded user content, and YouTube’s deletion of videos documenting the Syrian civil war (Ovenden, 199), as well as controversies surrounding the preservation or loss of governmental records (Ovenden, 204–209), the Equifax data breach and access to individuals’ social media data by firms such as Cambridge Analytica (Ovenden, 210).

Ovenden’s identification of the challenge is persuasive: the current situation creates uncertainty over ownership of digital information and

leaves decisions about preservation, organization and accessibility in the hands of private companies which have “no public benefit mission” (Ovenden, 200). Yet the force of Ovenden’s analysis is limited in that it hinges on analogy to history but does not more fully explore the different forms of the collections and the implications for differences in meaning and meaningful interaction with them. Ovenden’s discussion of the need to archive the mass of material continually created is phrased primarily in terms of the need to preserve information, particularly that necessary for public accountability, thus critical to “the health of an open society” (Ovenden, 199–200, 210).

Information matters. Yet in prior chapters, Ovenden’s analysis has made clear that the meanings of archives and libraries are multidimensional. He reflects on having had the privilege of handling some of the clay tablets from Ashurbanipal’s library and realizing the practicality of their size and shape “designed to fit easily in the palm of the hand” (Ovenden, 21). He describes a 2019 exhibit of Ethiopian and Eritrean texts and other treasures held by the Bodleian but curated by members of those communities, and the ways in which the curatorial framing focused on “the personal responses to the manuscripts, often very sensory responses” that reflected “the engagement between the communities and the manuscripts” (Ovenden, 180–181). In discussing the various parties who determined whether or how to preserve the effects of individual authors (Byron, Kafka, Larkin, Plath), Ovenden mentions not just the various informational interests involved – the authors’ (or their intimates’) interests in privacy (Ovenden, 97–100, 147–150) or the world’s interest in writers’ work (Ovenden, 105) – but also physical particulars of the material destroyed.

Notebook covers are all that remained after the pages of Philip Larkin’s diary had been pulled out, shredded and burned as he had ordered before his death (Ovenden, 143). The covers, the physical remains, continued to be the focus of comment by Betty Makereth, Larkin’s secretary, who had carried out the destruction, by Larkin’s biographer, who quoted her reflections, and by Ovenden as necessary to telling the whole story. Larkin himself recognized the signifying power of manuscript remains as lying not only in what he called their “meaningful value,” “the degree to which a manuscript helps to enlarge our knowledge and understanding of a writer’s life and work,” but their “magical value”: “this is the paper he wrote on, these are the words as he wrote them, emerging for the first time in this particular combination” (Ovenden, 141–142). What Larkin called the “magical” might also be termed the “emotion” of an

archive, which draws on the embodied encounter between person and paper “stored separately, carefully rolled ... dirty with smudges and fingerprints” of prior persons’ handling; the experience of scale – documents large enough to overlap a table (Yee 2007, 34) or small enough to fit in the palm of one’s hand (Ovenden, 21).

Ovenden’s overall analysis is bracketed by references to emotion. His own anger at societal failures to preserve knowledge drove him to write this book (Ovenden, 5). High “public trust in libraries and archives” suggests to him that libraries and archives have a role to play in rectifying those failures (Ovenden, 213, 223). To what extent does that latter emotion, trust in archives and libraries as organized bodies of knowledge, draw on the institutions’ literal embodiment in the persons and contents and buildings and the ways in which interaction is ritualized?

Ovenden quotes Derrida’s maxim, “There is no political power without power over the archive.” *Burning the Books* draws the attention to issues of archive vulnerability as demonstrated in the destructions of libraries throughout time, yet attention is also paid to the decision to archive – or not. Decisions relating even to a private, personal archive are “political” as “concerned with the exercise of power – power over the public reputation, and over what becomes public and what remains private” (Ovenden, 95). Preservation of and access to material is an exercise of power and Ovenden asserts that too much of that power is currently invested in unaccountable entities, risking public trust and thereby social fabric. Ovenden’s argument is persuasive but incomplete in not clearly addressing the extent to which the form of the material (or the materiality of the form) is part of its meaning.

Ovenden’s book was published in 2020, a year in which a global pandemic closed myriad institutions, including libraries, worldwide. In the perfect storm of COVID-19 and its associated dislocations, work and school and politicking and the mass of social interactions were driven online. That development revealed (anew) that some aspects of signification cannot be virtually expressed. The experiences of the past year also showed the prescience of Ovenden’s warnings about the proliferation of “fake news” and the need for “public” or “activist archiving” of information posted online (Ovenden, 202–204). Expanding Ovenden’s analysis to explicitly account for the signifying power of an archive’s material form is not meant to ignore or reject the power and possibilities of the virtual but to more explicitly recognize that meaning operates in multiple dimensions, and the transformation of one might, or should, occasion the transformation of others.

On 2 June 2021, White House science advisor Eric Lander was sworn into office using a portion of the Mishnah printed in 1492 (Jenkins 2021). Lander chose that text because it contained a saying that expressed his values and because it was printed in 1492, the year that Jews were expelled from Spain, by a printer in Naples, whose king “accepted Jewish refugees” (Jenkins 2021). This particular volume signified Lander’s commitment to *Tikkun olam* (“repair the world”) through the words printed in it as well as that printing’s connection to a historical moment when “the world experimented ... with tolerance – with the idea that we would have a diversity of people and perspectives” (Jenkins 2021). The story was reported not only for the distinctness of the chosen volume but for its unexpected rediscovery among the collections of the Library of Congress. Librarian Ann Brener was in the process of examining a trove of uncatalogued Jewish texts, most dating from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when she realized that notwithstanding its flimsy, seemingly Victorian-era binding, the pages were older. “When I touched this paper, I knew immediately ... that I was touching something very ancient – none of this 19th century stuff” (Jenkins 2021).

The 500-year-old, nearly uncatalogued, excerpt from the Mishnah demonstrates the possibilities when archives work. The words, the page, the library staff – and, yes, the equipment associated with creating and placing a record of the record online – interacted to allow a new interaction of bodies not for the sake of what had been said centuries before but for what was being said now: “I think the lessons of the 1492 era are lessons for today: coming together and making our diversity an incredible asset for this country going forward” (Jenkins 2021).

As Ovenden himself writes, “The preservation of knowledge is fundamentally not about the past but the future” (Ovenden, 209).

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