Call For Papers

Saying Nothing to Say: Sense, Silence, and Impossible Texts in the Twentieth Century

Keynote Speakers:
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What does it mean to read a book that cannot be written? Interestingly, one example is among the most widely read works of twentieth-century philosophy: Ludwig Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. By the *Tractatus*’s own admission, its propositions are self-effacing. Going beyond what it considers expressible in language, these propositions breach the text’s famous conclusion that ‘whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent’. How do we read such a contradiction? The penultimate proposition explains: the text will revoke itself once it has been read. It is the reader’s job, we are told, to disregard – to transcend – the *Tractatus* once we have read it: ‘Anyone who understands me eventually recognizes [my propositions] as nonsensical’, ‘[the reader] must, so to speak, throw away the ladder after he has climbed up on it’.

In this sense, the “*Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*” is a book that does not exist. Instead, it is revealed in the negative space of the published text: ‘[The *Tractatus*] exists in two parts’, wrote Wittgenstein, ‘the one presented here plus all that I have not written. And it is precisely this second part that is the important one. […] I’ve managed in my book to put everything firmly into place by being silent about it’. Here, silence is generative. While the printed text cannot say what cannot be said, it can show what cannot be said. This meaningful, but senseless, showing of that which transcends the limits of language – the ineffable – is, for Wittgenstein, the definition of art. Art that also shows these limits, shows running up against these limits, will be the focus of this project.

From Samuel Beckett’s declaration that ‘there is nothing to express […] together with the obligation to express’ to Susan Sontag’s characterization of modern art as the ‘pursuit of silence’, from Willa Cather’s emphasis on ‘the inexplicable presence of the thing not named’ to John Cage’s 4’33” and Le Corbusier’s Ineffable Space, we will trace the contexts, conflicts, and legacies of Wittgenstein’s claim: ‘In art it is difficult to say something as good as: nothing to say’.

Saying Nothing to Say: Sense, Silence, and Impossible Texts in the Twentieth Century is an interdisciplinary conference supported by the Humanities Research Centre. It will be hosted at the University of Warwick on the 13th of May 2023.

We welcome proposals from any discipline and are open to any interpretation of the theme. Topics may include, but are not limited to, the following:

- Silence and the limits of language: meaning, sense and nonsense, aporia, tautology
- Ineffability and transcendence, awe
- Ineffability and catastrophe
- Silence as lack, silence as generative
- Soundscape and silence-scapes
- Negative space
- Acts of silencing
- Shared silence
- Vows of silence
- Silent cinema
- Political resistance
- Gendered sound
- Secrecy
- The unspeakable, the concealed, taboo
It is hoped that the conference will lead to an edited publication on the theme with Routledge as part of the Warwick Series in the Humanities.

To apply, please submit an abstract of 250-300 words, along with a short biographical note (100 words), to sayingnothingtosay@gmail.com by the 30th of December 2022.

Please direct any questions to the conference organiser at: sayingnothingtosay@gmail.com.

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