Philosophical Provocation: Erasure

"Our faithlessness to our language repeats our faithlessness to all our shared commitments"

- Stanley Cavell

Imagine a secret book stored in the cavernous underbelly of the British Library. It is the most powerful book in the world and for that reason there is no one in the world able to access it.

Years ago the government considered using it for what they believed to be the greater public good, but they prudently decided that the effects of doing so were too unpredictable: they could not calculate the potential consequences of their potential actions. Since destroying the book was not an option, the government arranged for it to be locked away in perpetuity. Enclosed in a safe that set its own code, inaccessible to everyone, the book has been banished ever since.

The book is a dictionary that sits at the centre of the mystical nexus of language, connected to every book and all dictionaries, both physical and mental. Every entry is written in pencil. Rubbing one out has the effect of erasing the word from every book, every dictionary and everyone - the word is deleted from humanity's collective memory, which explains why destroying the entire book was not an option.

When the book was last read gaps could be seen, the faint trace of lead, the frayed snow of rubber, a conspicuous emptiness. It had been used before. What the missing words were, of course, we'll never know.

Imagine you held this book in your possession. You fancy erasing the word 'true'. *Poof*.

QUESTION I   What other words would disappear with it?

FURTHER QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER
- How many other words only make sense in relation to the word 'true'?
- Does every word connect to every other?

QUESTION II   Would the world be better without this word and its companions?

FURTHER QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER
- Would the world change without it?
- Do words influence the way we think?
- Do words influence the way we act?
- What *can't* words do? Is there a limit to their power?
- Could 'true' be expressed through other words?

After decimating truth you continue flicking through the book. Your eye falls on 'love'. *Poof*.

QUESTION III   What other words would disappear with it?

FURTHER QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER
- How many other words only make sense in relation to the word 'love'?

QUESTION IV   Would the world be better without this word and its companions?

FURTHER QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER
- Can we be enslaved by words? Can we become trapped in them?
- Does language describe our experience or shape it?
- Could 'love' be expressed through other words?
- Would people still fall in love even if they had never heard of it?
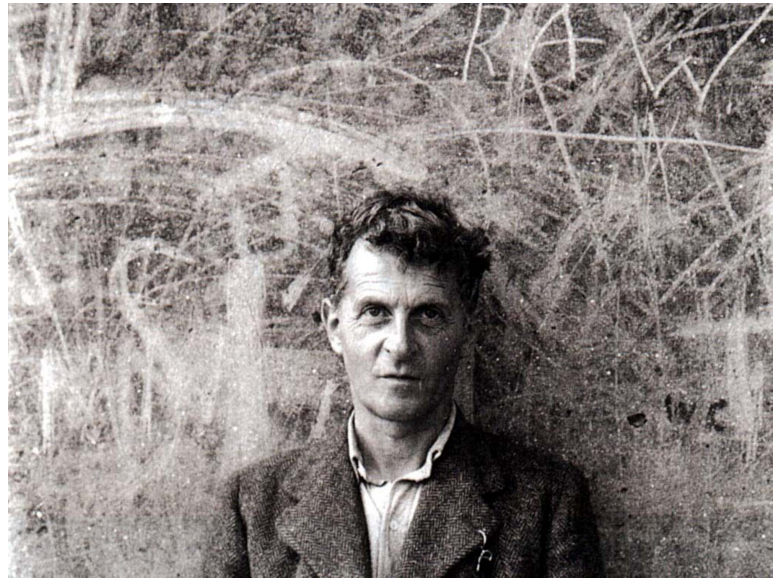
QUESTION V   What words would you erase from the book? What words would disappear with it?

FURTHER QUESTION TO CONSIDER

- Are there other words you could erase that would wipe out all others?

QUESTION VI   Would the world be better without this word and its companions?

You might also want to think of examples of things we lack words for, of the absences in our language, the possible victims of erasure. When we are struggling to find the right word, is this the result of a kind of erasure? Do you imagine the book to be more populated by existing words or erased ones? You could also reflect upon Wittgenstein's famous sentence, 'What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence', and consider whether this has any connection to this particular provocation?

Ludwig Wittgenstein
[1889 ~ 1951]

QUESTION VII What would happen if the whole book was burnt to ash?

FURTHER QUESTION TO CONSIDER

- Would we be able to think?
- Would we know anything?
- Would we still have relationships?
- Would our experience of the world change?

Source: *Provocations* by David Birch