

# Helen Keller and Anne Sullivan: Writing Otherwise

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To my father, in memory, for teaching me the meanings of “outside” and “otherwise.”

Italics indicate Helen Keller’s writings

## *The Idea of Light*

“I turn on the light in a dark room: naturally the lit room is no longer the dark room: I have lost it forever. Yet isn’t it the same room? Isn’t the dark room only the content of the lit room? That which I can no longer have, that which infinitely flees backward, and likewise thrusts me forward is only a representation of language: the dark which light presupposes. But if I give up the attempt to grasp this presupposition, if I turn my attention to the light itself, if I receive it—what the light gives me is then the *same* room, the non-hypothetical dark. That which is veiled, that which is closed in itself is the only content of the revelation—light is only the coming to itself of the dark.” –Giorgio Agamben

“What we call the day prevents me from seeing. Solar daylight blinds me to the visionary day.... I write by the other light.” –Hélène Cixous



fig. 1: *Follower of Rembrandt, A Man Seated Reading at a Table in a Lofty Room (detail), c. 1631-50.*

*Textual Scholarship: The Dark Room*

"We work in the dark." –Henry James

Look, but don't touch! Aren't those the watchwords and passwords of the archive? Lay the manuscript flat on the table. Hold it in place with a velvet book snake. Wear white linen gloves to turn the leaves, and only do so when it is absolutely necessary. Read with your eyes only, never, never, never with your dirty fingers....

And so, the ocularcentrism at the heart of archival work, of textual scholarship, domain of the sighted, albeit often the very near-sighted.

When I look at Keller's manuscripts, I see what she never saw: I see pages covered in black type, accidental overstrikes, the occasionally misspelled word, smudges of ink, the emendations and interlineations of collaborators and editors. Even the Braille manuscripts, I *see*, though I cannot easily translate the pin holes or raised points into a recognizable grammar and syntax. The pages look like strange white constellations. I might go blind if I looked at them too long.

But what if there is something not to see?

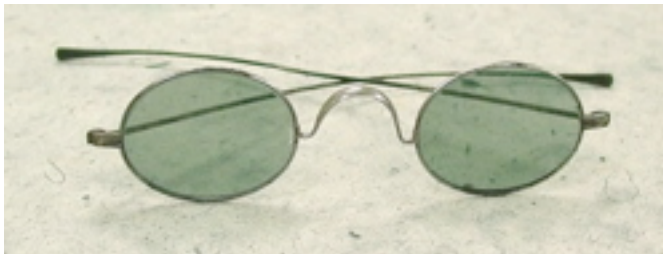


fig. 2: Saddle bridge spectacles with dark grey lenses such as these were typical of the kind of eyeglasses that Anne Sullivan would have worn. Photograph circa 1890. Gift of L. Katzen. Courtesy of the Museum of Vision, San Francisco, California.

Perhaps only by disrupting our obsession with sight and its representation will we come at last to touch and to a way of figuring the relations of reading, writing, and touching. Perhaps in the reversal of the mythic command, *Noli me tangere*, the manuscript under our fingers will tell us something we have not yet imagined. *Sometimes it seems as if the very substance of my flesh were so many eyes looking out at will upon a world newly created every day* (World 41).

Let us begin by groping our way towards it.

*Autobiography*

*A tangible white darkness* (Story 25). That is the way Helen Keller described the world of the blind. The world she wrote her way across. Like a page. Almost

reaching the world of the sighted. And once she came to writing, she could not stop. Across the tangible white darkness she wrote eight books, beginning with *The Story of My Life* and ending with *Teacher*.

In his essay "The Style of Autobiography," Jean Starobinski remarks, "One would hardly have sufficient motive to write an autobiography had not some radical change occurred in his life—conversion, entry into a new life, the operations of Grace" (78). Keller may have tried to resist Starobinski's insight, yet the events of her early life—her traumatic loss of sight and hearing around the age of two—marked her not only as an "outsider" and "other" but also as an "autobiographer" even before she acquired language. It may be that she turned to the autobiographical mode because she was afraid of being lost to the white darkness. *I can show so little visible proof of living* (*Midstream* 243). It may be that she came as a witness from the other side of blindness to tell us it was no more night there than here. It may be she wrote to move from *no-world...that conscious yet unconscious time of nothingness* ("Sense" 778-79) into world, to restore her sight through the submission to words.

"Invisible is a term I've imported from the sighted world. It's but one of the many tales told to me, into me, that I might form—for the sake of my forming—as if I could—an abiding picture of the world." —Madeline Gins, *Helen Keller or Arakawa*

### *Hand-writing*

In the beginning, Keller did not write neatly across lines of paper but deeply into the living tissue of the hand. She wrote between and against life lines and fate lines. There's no pen, only a finger, spelling. A writing invisible except to memory. When the sighted write, words travel away from them. They move left to right, they encounter edges and turn back, then begin again to mark out the space of the world. The words fill up with distance and abstraction. When the blind finger-spell, words rush into them or into their interlocutors. They drive downward, into flesh-memory. The only text is an embodied one.



fig. 3: Helen Keller and Anne Sullivan, finger-spelling, c. 1893. Courtesy of the American Foundation for the Blind, Helen Keller Archives.

"Thus all of body can be inscribed into for the purposes of remembering. Records get slipped in anywhere along any inlet. Nothing is not inscribed somewhere. All retrieval is a light excavating. If the stored away set of coded sounds being searched for happens to be tucked somewhere in the bowels of the organism, it will take hours or even days for memory to come up with it..." (Gins 85).

Keller's access to her world was channeled almost entirely through the sensuous and intimate medium of touch. *In all my experiences and thoughts I am conscious of a hand. Whatever moves me, whatever thrills me, is as a hand that touches me in the dark...*(*World* 41). For almost fifty years, Keller and Sullivan spelled into each other's hands hour upon hour of every day. Their model of private, esoteric communication resembled that advocated in Plato's *Phaedrus*. Dialogue, not dissemination, was their watchword. The erotic, reciprocal flow of finger-spelling was between two hands only; outsiders were kept outside the circle linking teacher and pupil, lover and beloved. Finally, blindness, "death in the eyes," made possible the transgression of the limits of the self: *I feel that her being is inseparable from my own* (*Story* 47).

More than twenty years after Sullivan's death Keller could not stop remembering the *flames of Teacher's finger spelling...the quasi electric touch of [her] fingers on my palm...wantoning...flowing...with the utmost sense of joy and pain that touch can embody* (*Teacher* 45, 47). When she encountered the cast of Sullivan's hand made by the sculptor Bonnie MacLeary, she *traced each line in the palm, startlingly distinct and true* (*Journal* 243). The thumb and index finger formed the letter "L," for Love.

In his "Notes on Automatic Writing," William James describes a case of "hand consciousness" or "automatic consciousness" in Anna Winsor, a 19-year old girl suffering from, among other things, blindness. In this case, the subject's right hand does not belong to her. The unruly hand "draws in the dark as well as in the light; is clairvoyant.... When she sleeps, it writes or converses by signs. It never sleeps; watches over her when she sleeps; endeavors to prevent her from injuring herself...when she is raving. It seems to possess an independent life and, to some extent, foreknowledge" (42, 43).

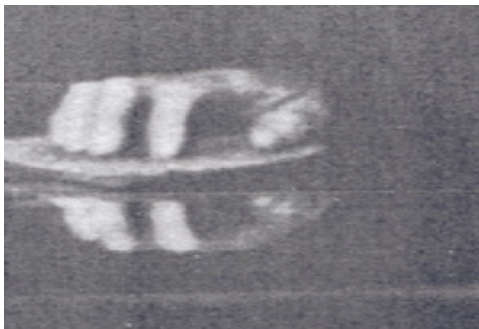


fig. 4: The hand of an automatic writer/medium. *Frontispiece to Far Horizon: A Biography of Hester Dowden*, by Eric Bentley. London: Rider, 1951; the image has been cropped to focus on the hand.

When Sullivan's hand was withdrawn, Keller spelled to herself. When the right hand spells into the left it's a way of being self and other at the same time. This double practice of transmission and reception, a dangerous version of auto-eroticism, was also a temptation to solipsism. Enough to make her write in the third person. *This reminds me of how Helen sinned in another way by spelling constantly to herself, even after she had learned to speak with her mouth.... I determined to stop spelling to myself before it became a habit I could not break, and so I asked her to tie my fingers up in paper.... For many hours, day and night, I ached to form the words...* (Teacher 50). The punishment was partially successful, but all her life Keller still returned guiltily to the pleasure. *Even now, in moments of excitement or when I wake from sleep, I occasionally catch myself spelling with my fingers* (Teacher 50).

### *The Body/ies of Autobiography*

"Before my initiation there were no separate things, for I was without any cut off points for these. How, even while keeping a unified world together, to know these substances and objects as separable. In learning to abstract, I had to learn to open up that significant yet barely perceptible bit of spacetime between mug and the liquid it contained" –Madeline Gins

In "Professions for Women," Virginia Woolf writes of the "two adventures of my professional life. The first—killing the angel in the house—I think I solved. She died. But the second, telling the truth about my own experiences as a body, I do not think I solved" (284-289).

In her unfinished "Sketch," Woolf, however, comes near to writing the truth about the early experience of her seeing-hearing-body through the recollection of two pre-linguistic moments of sensual pleasure and receptivity, two moments of pre-individualized being that she associates with pure sensation and wholeness. First, she remembers sitting on her mother's lap enveloped by the flowers—passion flowers—of her dress; next, she recalls lying in her crib at St. Ives listening to the sounds of water, wind, and window covering, and seeing the light play through space. In these moments, Woolf experiences her body as continuous with the world and undifferentiated from it. As Sidonie Smith observes, Woolf's experience, common to children, is that of a "pre-Oedipal bondedness and boundlessness in which her mother's body is the source of ecstasy" (274).

So Keller's experience of her deaf-blind body involved a similar sense of bondedness and boundlessness. In *The World I Live In*, a collection of Keller's essays on sensory experience, she writes, *There are tactual vibrations which do not belong to skin-touch. They penetrate the skin, the nerves, the bones, like pain, heat, and cold....* (34), and, later, *My face feels only a tiny portion of atmosphere, but I go through continuous space and feel the air at every point, every instant.... Move me along constantly over water, water, nothing but water, and you give me the solitude, the vastness of ocean which fills the eye* (65).

For Woolf, the mirror-stage interrupted—disrupted forever—her rapturous sense of fluidity, openness, permeability. In the mirror she sees body and background dramatically separated from one another; she sees identity as singular, hard-edged, confined. For Keller, on the other hand, whose mirror-stage is the acquisition of language, the separation is not between figure and background but, rather, between “no world” and “world.” In the tangible white darkness, the “mind realizes itself in a world unstructured by the hierarchy of visual perspective, *in and as* [emphasis added] a body unstructured by the hierarchy of sight” (Swan 323). In the tangible white darkness, identity is only a point of departure. “I know for certain it is not a part of my face, I think” (Gins 7)

As a young child, Keller was reported to have boundary problems: “Her lifelong experience of *touching* the world in order to ‘see’ it makes it difficult for her to sustain a sense of the boundaries routinely respected by people with hearing and sight” (Swan 323). And while on the one hand Sullivan repeatedly taught Keller to keep her hands to herself, on the other hand, her habit of spelling to her hour after hour encouraged the transgression of limits, eliding at last the boundary between them. In finger-spelling, in touch-writing, there is a closing of the “spacetime” forced open by the act of abstraction, and, later, by the act of typing, whereby each letter, each word, each thought is marked as separate.

In might be argued that in typing Keller discovered the singular self. The space between her “self” and Sullivan’s, the space between her “self” and the world. Typing makes possible autobiography—the story of the subjected body of the autobiographer, the story of how the textualization of Keller’s exterior body produces her interiority as subject. Yet it is the body that is the “blindspot” at the heart of each of Keller’s autobiographies, even the most adventurous one, *The World I Live In*. For while the body betrayed by blindness and deafness is the occasion for and ground of Keller’s autobiographies, the body cannot appear except as it is always already transformed via a Platonic tradition from corporeal matter into spiritual “self”: *Philosophy is the history of a deaf-blind person writ large*, Keller types, *A deaf-blind person ought to find special meaning in Plato’s Ideal World* (World 134).

The other story of the deaf-blind body, its “bondedness and boundlessness,” can not be read cover to cover, but only skin to skin. Does touch have an author? Or only authors?

The compositional process of Keller’s “autobiographies” attests to the violence done to a writing-touching body that does not see separations in spacetime. To become a book, this body must be brailled, typed, cut apart, pasted, and cut apart again, before being set and bound. It must become, to cite Sidonie Smith once again, “identity’s body.”

### *Braille, the Between*

"The time that one of Miss Keller's friends realizes most strongly that she is blind, is when he comes on her suddenly in the dark and hears the rustle of her fingers across the page...." –John Macy



fig. 5: Helen Keller reading, 1902. Courtesy of the American Foundation for the Blind, Helen Keller Archives.

In his work on tactile reading modes, Gary Frost writes of the "deep learning pathway" between the hands and the mind, of the way "fingers tend to start the lift of a leaf during the page read and tend to concluding motions at the page turn," and of the way "paper grain, paper thickness and other tactile features... are continually mapped against an emergent meaning..." (*Future of the Book*). Sighted readers, however, rarely have a fully developed haptic relationship to the words they read—they (we) do not "find our way feelingly" across pages. A space always exists, even for the most severely near-sighted of us, between text and gaze. Indeed, as Yves Bonnefoy implies in his essay "Lifting Our Eyes from the Page," sight reading almost requires loss of contact with the text before us: at the moment of greatest engagement with the text, we look away from it and back to ourselves.

In the 1980s, video recordings of the hands of twenty-four blind adults reading Braille were produced and analyzed by Paul Bertelson, Philippe Moustym and Graziella D'Alimonte with the hope of revealing the characteristics of tactile reading. They begin with the following observations: first, the evidence strongly suggested that their blind subjects used only the index finger (or fingers) for reading, while all the other fingers remained in the air; second, that the reading finger or fingers were never seen to lose contact with the page and that exploration of the text was always exhaustive; and third, that three repeating gestures are observed during text exploration: forward scanning of the line, from left to right; return movement of the hand to the next line; and regression of the hand to

a part of the text that has already been explored (4). One further discovery was offered: while some Braille readers practice one-handed reading, other, more proficient readers practice two-handed reading, where, moreover, two different modes of hand cooperation can be observed. In the mode termed “conjoint exploration,” “both indexes proceed along the line side by side, generally touching each other,” while in the mode identified as “disjoint exploration,” “the two hands, simultaneously or successively, explore different passages: while one hand explores one passage, the other hand returns to the line or explores a different passage” (5).

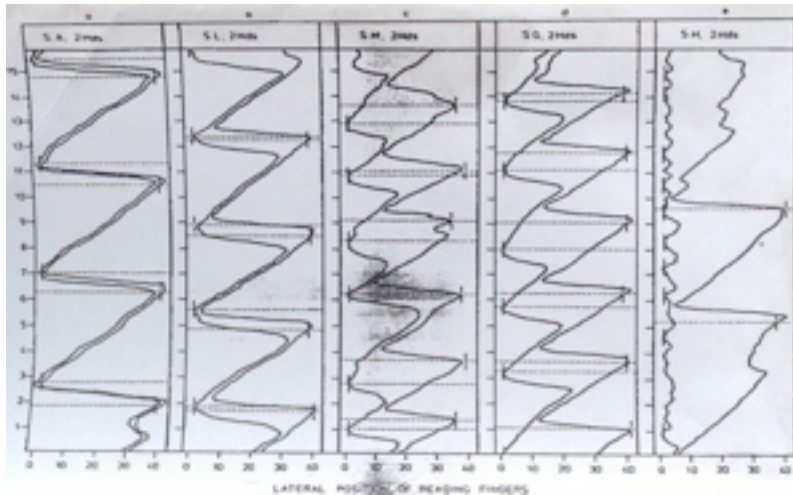


fig. 6: Examples of two-handed exploration patterns during reading of prose. (a) complete conjoint pattern; (b) conjoint pattern with separate return movements; (c) and (d) disjoint pattern; (e) assisted one-handed reading.

The experiment yields interesting data. But it's too bad the researchers didn't imagine a different experiment; it's too bad they were studying the fluency of reading blind rather than the poetics of this practice. The video leaves us with questions. What happens when the blind reader pauses in his or her reading? Do the fingers remain still on the page, or do they trouble the Braille surface, pressing deeper into the words, wearing them away? Can we say for sure—just by watching!—that the finger or fingers exploring passages in the text are not sometimes skimming, underscoring, or even crossing it out? And if the index finger of blind reader never leaves the page, do the other fingers—those that remain “in the air”—act as conductors for stray thoughts? “When a passage interests her, or she needs to remember it for some future use,” John Macy wrote of Keller, “she flutters it off swiftly on the fingers of her right hand.... [H]er hands go flying along beside her like a confusion of birds' wings” (*Story* 226). The position of the fingers of those reading blind is an image of engagement and flight at once.

In touch-reading what we seem to move towards is a notion of reading as an act of inscription rather than simply consumption, towards a breaking down of the distances between reading and writing. Macy heard the “rustle of Keller's fingers across the page” in a dark room (*Story* 224). She was reading-writing. “Night,”

writes Helen Cixous, “becomes a verb. I night. I write at night. I write: the night” (17).

To the untrained eye, a page of Braille looks like a page of stars. There is something lovely about this since Braille was originally adapted from codes designed to be deciphered in the black of night. *If Teacher’s eyes had been normal I’m sure she would have reveled in contemplating space, the stars, and planets....* (Teacher 73).

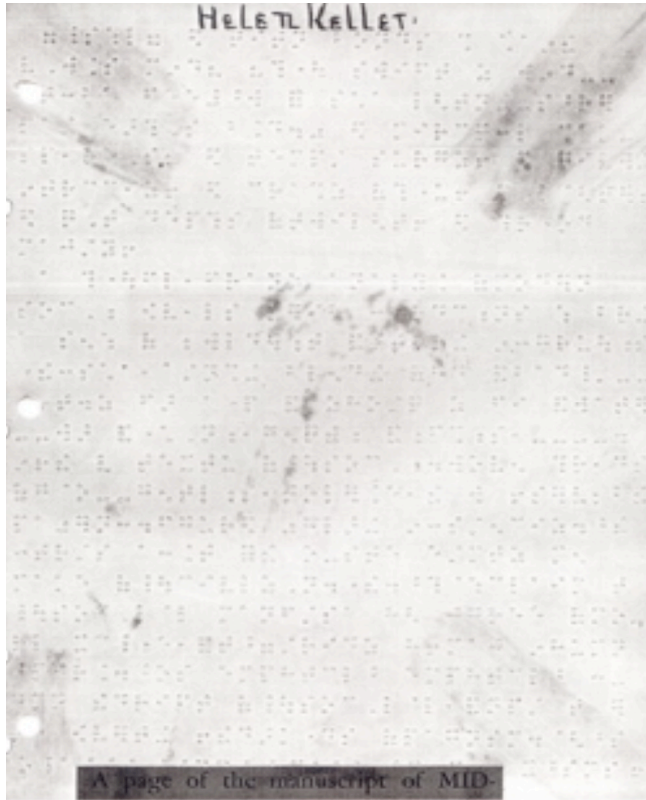


fig. 7: A Braille MSS page from *Midstream: My Later Life*. Courtesy of the American Foundation for the Blind, Helen Keller Archives.

Braille is created by small pins that push the dots up from the back of the special heavy paper. The process creates raised dots—or, when the pins penetrate the paper, tiny holes. On Keller’s typed manuscripts we often find a few Braille notations at the tops of typewritten pages. These messages to self at the tops of pages are mnemonic devices, keys to the contents of pages Keller might not remember fully because she could not read them. These notations are another, less familiar, form of marginalia—not a gloss on her writing, but the writing radically compressed into a few hieratic symbols.

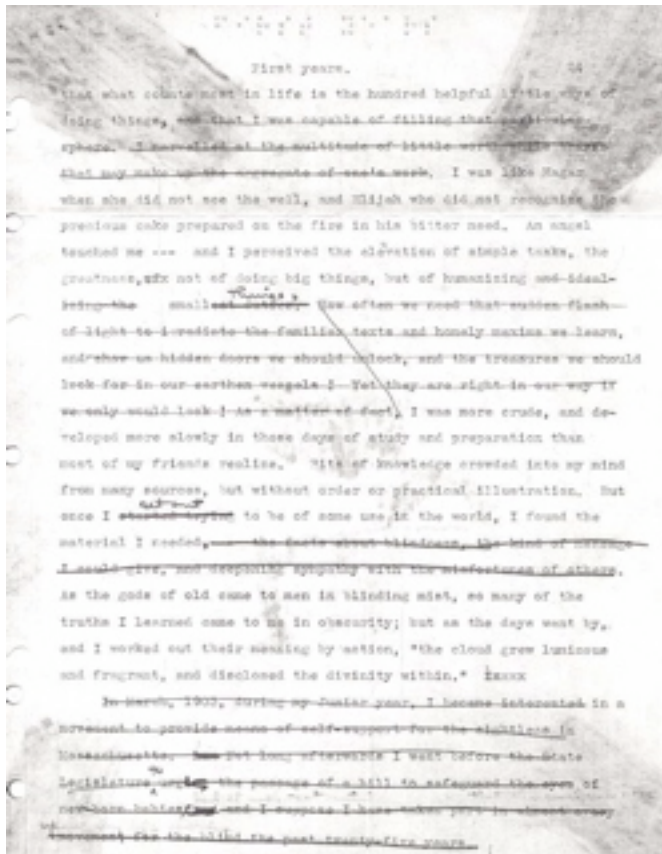


fig. 8: A typed page from *Midstream: My Later Life*, with Keller's Braille notations at the top. Courtesy of the American Foundation for the Blind, Helen Keller Archives.

The aura of (Keller's) Braille pages is difficult to describe. Their initially anarchic appearance is an illusion, for Braille is a fiercely precise system of embossed dots evenly arranged in quadrangular letter spaces or cells. In each cell, it is possible to place six dots, three high and two wide; by selecting one or several dots in characteristic position or combination, sixty-three different characters can be formed. Braille is read dynamically, from left to right, and the different patterns of dots create variable intensities, render the page a force-field of energy, a constellation of vitalized geometries. Yet there is also a hypnotic stillness within and between each Braille cell and in the Braille page as a whole. A poetics of Braille may be closely related to a poetics of the grid. In the curious space activated by the Braille page, the eyes oscillate between a matrixial gazing and a floating attention. Long exploration of the optical effects of the Braille scape might lead one to the work of Agnes Martin's mysterious paintings of the 1960s—perhaps, even, to Martin's painting *Starlight* (1963), finished just a few years before Keller's death, and full of "negative capability."

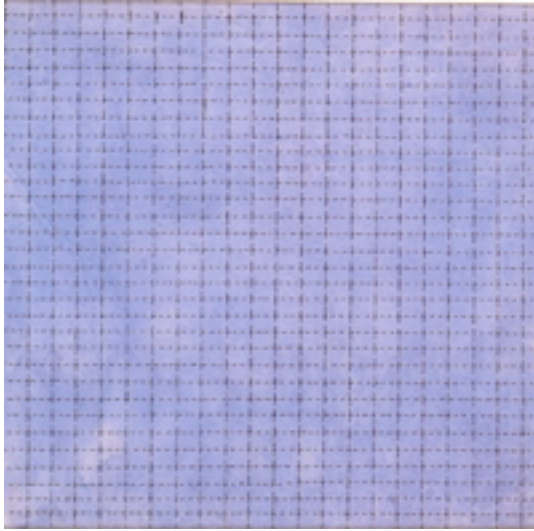


fig. 9: Agnes Martin, *Starlight*, 1963. Watercolor and ink on paper, 8 x 8".

What if the archive only opened at night? What if the library were a planetarium?

The material and phenomenological aspects of the Braille page have yet to be fully explored. Paper, even the heavy paper used in Braille books, is fragile and tends to warp under the weight of the embossing. It is highly vulnerable to wear and destruction because the indentations are fragile. Indeed, it is a system of writing constantly threatened by erasure. The very act of reading is simultaneously an act of rubbing out, a passage from the seen to the unseen: *I have read and re-read it*, wrote Keller of her Bible, *until in many parts the pages have faded out—I mean, my fingers have rubbed off the dots, and I must supply whole verses from memory....* (Midstream 313).

It is perhaps not surprising that Keller's dreams reflect her anxiety that despite—or because of—its materiality, Braille is subject to disappearance. Night after night, the books in her library go blind, fusing again with the "white darkness": *In sleep I cannot sleep.... I decide to get up and read.... I know the shelf in my library where I keep the book I want. The book has no name, but I find it without difficulty. I settle myself...the great book open on my knee. Not a word can I make out, the pages are utterly blank. I am not surprised, but keenly disappointed. I finger the pages, I bend over them lovingly, the tears fall on my hands. I shut the book quickly as the thought passes through my mind, "The print will all be rubbed out if I get it wet." Yet there is no print tangible on the page!* (World 89).

### *Typing*

After touch-writing, came touch-typing. By age eleven, Keller had learned to type, and soon afterwards, she was able to type on virtually any machine. By means of the typewriter, Keller was able to translate the private, tactile language of finger spelling into the public, visual code of print. Moreover, even as the

typewriter produced a perfectly legible text, it erased Keller's difference, her otherness, long enough for her to establish contact with us.



*fig. 10: Helen Keller using a manual typewriter. Courtesy of the American Foundation for the Blind, Helen Keller Archives.*

Perhaps Keller's expert performances in this medium can be partially explained by the fact that the typewriter had always been an important object-muse for the blind. As Friedrich Kittler writes, "Blindness and deafness, precisely when they affect either speech or writing, yield what would otherwise be beyond reach: information on the human information machine. Whereupon its replacement by mechanics can begin. Knie, Beach, Thurber, Malling Hansen, Ravizza: they all constructed their early typewriters for the blind and/or the deaf" (189). The designs of the early typewriters differed in interesting ways—the Malling Hansen, for instance, perforated the paper by needle pins—but all offered a common promise: a writing instrument with no dependence on the eyes: "In writing by hand," writes Angelo Beyerlen, the royal stenographer of Wurttemberg, "the eye must constantly watch the written line and only that. It must attend to the creation of each sign, must measure, direct, and, in short, guide the hand through every movement.... By contrast, after one briefly presses down on a key, the typewriter creates in the proper position on the paper a complete letter, which is not only untouched by the writer's hand but also located in a place entirely apart from where the hands work" (qtd. in Kittler 203).

Unlike touch-writing, which eradicates distance, touch-typing instantiates distance. The text produced is not only "untouched by the writer's hand," but "located in place apart from where the hands work." Unlike the "electric" exchange of signals integral to finger-spelling, typing is a one-way discourse that

begins only when reciprocity is either impossible or undesirable. In typing, Keller must always go forward, striking into the future. She does not re-read—how can she?—she only writes, remembering only the last word of the page she wrote the day before in order to continue. Dissemination, not dialogue, is now her aim. Directed to someone who is not here, the typed text is addressed, if at all, “To Whom It May Concern.” While it seems impossible that Keller would not have become a writer, without the typewriter, it seems entirely possible that she would not have become an autobiographer.

Typing performed the release of Keller’s voice from the material confines of her body; it appeared to make the private public. But even as she attempts to trace a line between origin and destination, the white spaces surrounding words point to aporias in memory. *My autobiography is not a great work* (*Midstream* 343). The striking of the keys across white paper strikes out the other story, the story of the body, existing in time, with its own memories, the story she could not translate, the one touched—caressed—into the hand. And so, the paradox. Typing creates a record of Keller’s life that can be transmitted and preserved. But typing makes Keller lose touch. It effects a self-estrangement that compels Keller to write (if not to see) herself in the third person. Only in type and in that odd autobiography titled *Journal* (but which never enjoyed a private life at all), would she confess *Of course I know that outwardly I am a “deaf and blind” Helen Keller* (303). Only in type does she *know* what she does not *feel*: *My deep-rooted feeling [is] that I am not deaf or blind...* (*Journal* 303).

Keller’s touch-writing was executed at the antipodes of automatism. Wed to the proximate and the contingent, its beauty lies in its transience and in its writer’s impossible longing for unmediated presence. Like the most fragile and fragmentary of avant-textes—but then how can the text spelled into the hand, erased at the moment of its inscription, compare with any text we have ever read?—all traces of Keller’s touch-writing have disappeared. Not even a miraculous technology can recover this marginalia of the moment.

Touch-typing, by contrast, is mechanical; it is linked to labor but also to permanence. Typing accrues, stockpiles, resists time through the institution of a place and proliferates its production through the promise of reproduction. Keller’s Remington typewriter was, after all, as Lisa Gitelman writes of the Remington in general, “a black box: work entered, product emerged. What happened in between was not...a human matter, [but] only a...technological one” (206). In the Keller collection at the AFB, typed pages greatly outnumber all other types of texts, even Braille texts, which it was Keller’s habit to destroy once the materials on them had been incorporated into completed works. Unlike touch-writing, belonging to the order of the ephemeral, scattered in an infinity of singular acts, these typescripts belong, inherently, to the archive, to that repository of official records and historical documents where time remains frozen. In turning over Keller’s typescripts, one is struck, finally, by how little they reveal about their subject—their author. How blank they are.

At the end of *Midstream: My Later Life*, Keller underscored the effort involved in composing this public narrative of her life. *I have written the last line of the last*

*autobiography I shall write.... I lift my tired hands from the typewriter. I am free* (342). The freedom she desires is not a release from writing per se, but, rather, a liberation from what she took to be the conditions of autobiography, the linear tracking of the self in type across the space of the century. In lifting her hands from the typewriter, Keller signals her return to the grammar and syntax of finger spelling—to an immediate and unmediated way of making contact with herself and the world.

*Écriture Automatique (or, a chance meeting between Helen Keller and Friedrich Nietzsche)*

It may be, though, that this analysis, with its emphasis on the distance between touch-writing and touch-typing, fails to recognize a more fundamental relation between them.

One year before Helen Keller's birth in 1880, Friedrich Nietzsche experienced his so-called "year of blindness." In this year, the deterioration of Nietzsche's vision made it difficult for him to read and write: letters (as well as musical notes) were distorted beyond recognition after only a brief period of concentration. In the year after Keller's birth, and one year before she herself would go completely blind, Nietzsche purchased his first typewriter—a Malling Hansen. "After a week of practice," he claimed, "the eyes no longer had to do their work" (qtd. Kittler 202-3). And in this moment, Kittler claims, "écriture automatique [was] invented" (203). Nietzsche's myopia and subsequent reliance on the typewriter had effected a radical change in his writing style: in place of arguments he offered aphorisms, in place of rhetoric, he developed his "telegram style." "Our writing tools are also working on our thoughts," Nietzsche wrote on his typewriter. Blindness—and blind machines—had at last "delivered" him from the "book" (Kittler 203).

Although a bibliography of Keller's works suggests that her preferred mode was autobiography, in fact, Keller worked most often in fragments—a practice negatively associated in her editor's mind with her blindness: "Partly from temperament, partly from the conditions of her work," wrote John Macy in his "Preface" to *The Story of My Life*, "she has written rather a series of brilliant passages than a unified narrative" (11) and, again later, he noted, "[she] has not yet learned to conceive as a whole large quantities of material.... [She cannot] construct the whole work before her eye" (Herrmann 133; *Story* 10). Yet in *Midstream: My Later Life*, Keller defends her compositional process on philosophical grounds: *Into the tray of one's consciousness are tumbled thousands of scraps of experience. That tray holds you dismembered, so to speak. Your problem is to synthesize yourself into something like a coherent whole.... I put together my pieces this way and that; but they will not dovetail properly. When I succeed in making a fairly complete picture, I discover countless fragments in the tray, and I do not know what to do with them. The longer I work, the more important these fragments seem; so I pull the picture apart and start it all over again. I trace the irregular lines of experience through the design, and wonder at the queer conjunctions of facts and imaginings. My sense of the fitness of things demands that there be*

some degree of beauty in the composition; but alas, I am driven finally to the realization that the elements which went into the shaping of my life were not...carefully tinted and shaped.... Perhaps, to the eye of the Creator, there may be symmetry and purpose and fulfillment; but the individual perceives only fragments incongruously mingled together, and blank spaces... (3).

In the folders containing the materials related to *Midstream*, hundreds of typed scraps appear—material witnesses to metaphoric description Keller offers of the act of writing. Unlike the contents of the folders for *The Story of My Life*, *The World I Live In*, *Journal*, and even *Teacher*, all of which shelter smooth, quiet, dead typescripts, the contents of the *Midstream* folder are disorderly, noisy, alive. Covered with crossings-out and additions, difficult to decipher, they seem to be the prize sought by the textual geneticist, that devotee of process, forever returning to a writer's manuscripts with the hope of surprising her in the act of writing: midstream in *Midstream*.

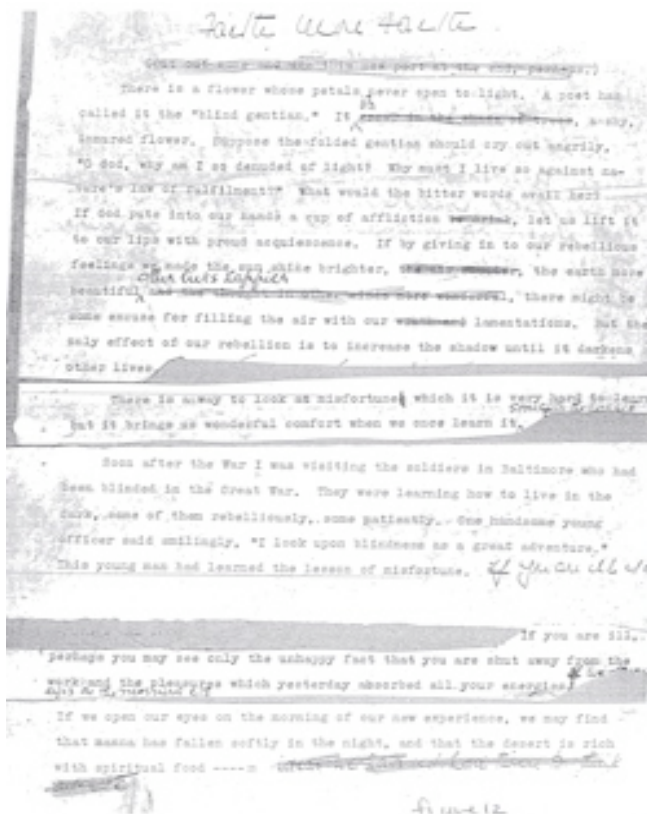


fig. 11: Typescript fragments from the *Midstream* folder. Courtesy of the American Foundation for the Blind, Helen Keller Archives.

But in this instance, the textual geneticist has been misled. By her eyes. For the fragments in the *Midstream* folder do not belong to an early, exploratory moment in Keller's compositional process; they do not even belong, strictly speaking, to Keller. Rather, they belong to a much later moment in the genetic itinerary—to the moment when composition fuses with collaboration. The fragments were created—composed—by Anne Sullivan and Nella Braddy, who cut Keller's orig-

inal typescripts into pieces in order to restructure them into a proper linear narrative, a narrative for consumption by readers from the seeing world, readers who will have the “whole” text “under their eyes.” The fragments in the *Midstream* folder are only fragments in a material sense—never in an ontological one. After cutting the *Midstream* manuscript apart, Sullivan spelled it back to Keller, who seems to have acted in collusion with her editors by composing transitions to eradicate the discontinuity and elliptical character of the original text. But the laborious act of suturing the fissures had disappointing results: *My autobiography is not a great work* (*Midstream* 343).

Keller’s initial typescript of *Midstream* has long since been destroyed. It is not part of the universe of *Midstream* materials at the American Foundation for the Blind, nor is it part of literary history. Yet this missing typescript may, paradoxically, be the fragment the textual geneticist is searching for. To be sure, Keller’s various descriptions of the *Midstream* project—a *thing of shreds and patches, detached notes on whatever interested me, a desultory way of writing*—seem at odds with the published text, the text Keller longed to finish and be “free” of. *I lift my tired hands from the typewriter...* (*Midstream* 342). And the very title, *Midstream*, suggests a text that cannot be finished, a between of movement, a traverse where there can be no fixed point of beginning, no final point of end. Perhaps *Midstream*, published in 1929 by the Crowel Publishing Company is a *not a great work* precisely because it resists—remains blind to—the wandering, fragmentary itinerary of the lost typescript. And blind, also, to the itinerary of autobiography in the twentieth century. For finally, to write/speak in fragments was not Keller’s fate alone, but all of ours: “To meet the abysses of communication at every hand,” writes John Durham Peters, “is part of what it means to be modern” (227).

Although we cannot recover the lost typescript of *Midstream*, we can perhaps in part reconstruct it from the one still extant. Or at least we can run our fingers over this post-text in search of the seams where the fragments were stitched into the narrative, sealed into a seeming continuity. And perhaps, by so revealing *Midstream*’s “disability,” we can restore its modernity, its status as *écriture automatique*.

**Collaboration: “I’ll problematize you, if you’ll problematize me!” –Madeline Gins**

“The twin personality which lives in Forest Hills is nearly always called Helen Keller (which Mrs. Macy thinks is fitting), but everyone who comes near knows that there are two entities, separate and inseparable, like Damon and Pythias, Heloise and Abelard, Beaumont and Fletcher, Plato and Socrates.” –Nella Braddy

“Love is and ever has been one of the great scenes of textuality.” –Jerome McGann

The act of collaboration between Helen Keller and Anne Sullivan can be understood as a trajectory in which several moments succeed one another. What John

Macy called the “unanalyzeable kinship” Keller and Sullivan begins with the latter’s desire to make contact with an other—a “deaf blind”—whose ability to enter into community with her (us) is obscure. At its apex, this collaboration, began under such inauspicious circumstances, asserts a denial of separateness so radical that teacher and student exist as a “collaborative consciousness” (Cressman 110). In this phase, they are *pursued by misunderstanding* (*Midstream* 85) and pierced by accusations of projection and plagiarism. Then, after almost fifty years of living and writing together, Keller and Sullivan’s collaboration ends with the reassertion of separateness and a twinned act of abandonment. “I never heard of Helen Keller” (qtd. in Herrmann 318), Sullivan allegedly said on her deathbed, and *Teacher*, Keller’s tribute to Sullivan and her final work, is as a much testimony of estrangement as a chronicle of love. *I still wonder why she stayed with me for half a century* (*Teacher* 53).

“What a blind person needs is not a teacher but another self.” –Anne Sullivan

### *Telepathy; or, Dreaming Communication*

All her life Keller was pursued by the dream of perfect communication. *I still have an impression of words fluttering along wires so far, far down under the ocean, East and West, annihilating time* (*Midstream* 118) was the way she remembered Alexander Graham Bell’s story of the laying of the Atlantic cable. And, at times, the dream of perfect communication between disembodied souls extended to a dream of contacting the non-human realm. Bell’s story of the Atlantic cable reminded her of *another time when we were walking in the rain and he asked me if I had ever felt a tree when it was raining. He put my hand on the trunk of a small oak, and I was astonished to feel a delicate murmur—a silvery whisper, as if the leaves were telling each other a lot of little things* (*Midstream* 120).



fig. 12: Alexander Graham Bell with Helen Keller, “listening” to the tree. Courtesy of the American Foundation for the Blind, Helen Keller Archives.

The most striking—and repeated—image of Keller and Sullivan before *The Story of My Life* evokes their seemingly telepathic relationship. “By means of a dot and dash system,” Sullivan informed Michael Anagnos, director of the Perkins Institute for the Blind and her former teacher, “I can stand at one end of a large room and Helen on the other and by simply tapping my foot on the floor I can transfer to her any information which I may desire to convey” (qtd. Herrmann 65). And after witnessing Keller and Sullivan’s performance during the commencement exercises at the Perkins Institute in June 1888, a performance in which Keller read a poem in raised print with the fingers of one hand and spelled it into the air with the other while Sullivan interpreted the movements and translated them aloud to the audience, Anagnos himself reported, “So rapid were the movements of [Keller’s] little fingers, that the three processes of reception, transmission and expression of ideas became simultaneous...an electric play of gestures and of features, an *unconscious* [my emphasis] eloquence of the whole body” (qtd. Herrmann 72). And Keller herself frequently described finger-spelling in terms very similar to those used by operators to describe acts of automatic writing: *Every hour I long for the thousand bright signals from her vital, beautiful hand* (*Journal* 74-75).

Although it is clear in these cases that one person is the dictator and one the amanuensis, in such a “writing” “I” and “you” are not easily marked. The writing styles of dictator and amanuensis, moreover, are also effectively rendered indistinguishable. Even if a transcript of Keller-Sullivan’s writing-speaking into thin air (or, at other times, on each other’s bodies) existed, it would be impossible to tell whose words ended up on the paper. Thus it is not so much “Keller” or “Sullivan” but the very idea of “authorship” itself that is submerged in their act of collaboration. As Bette London wonders in her work, *Writing Double: Women’s Literary Partnerships*, a study of collaboration that strangely doesn’t include Keller and Sullivan, “if collaboration cannot secure authorship in the hand that writes, it raises far-reaching questions about how and where authorship can be located: Is there an author even before the pen makes a mark? How does one assign authorship to what is figured as *talk*?” (26).

As Keller and Sullivan enacted the dream of perfect, unmediated communication through a kind of telepathy, their century dreamed with them. But in the century’s dream, an uncanny substitution takes place: instead of imagining the fusion of two minds, the mind of Keller and her teacher, the century dreamed of the melding of mind and machine: “Helen Keller” could become the “chief cipher for the new sight and sound technologies of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries” (Fuss 134). Thus while in the early years of Keller and Sullivan’s relationship they were almost always photographed together, as time wore on, Keller was less frequently paired with Sullivan and more often coupled with the various tele-phenomena of her day. John Macy observed, “One half the world believes Annie Sullivan is just a governess and interpreter, riding to fame on Helen’s genius, while the other half believes Helen is only Annie’s puppet, speaking and writing lines that are fed to her by Annie’s genius” (qtd. Swan 356). The questions of projection, ventriloquism, and otherness that had begun to haunt Keller and Sullivan’s collaboration were at once displaced and literalized in a series of new and still stranger doublings:



*fig. 13: Helen Keller "listening" to the radio at her home in Forest Hills, New York. Courtesy of the American Foundation for the Blind, Helen Keller Archives.*



*fig. 14: Helen Keller standing by a phonograph cabinet. Courtesy of the American Foundation for the Blind, Helen Keller Archives.*



fig 15: Helen Keller and Anne Sullivan recording into a dictaphone in their home in Forest Hills, New York. Courtesy of American Foundation for the Blind, Helen Keller Archives.

In Keller's later life, the dead returned in her actual dreams to foretell more wonderful inventions to come: *Teacher gave me an instrument covered with soft polished leather and containing coils of wire varying in thickness and sensitivity. "Observe this carefully, Helen," she said, "and it will...bring you different sounds from a distance just as we get them through the ear."* I placed my hands on the instrument. To my astonishment, each wire coil vibrated with a sound easily distinguishable from the rest—cars and teams going by, passing footsteps, birds singing, running water. I received all these impressions simultaneously.... I have yet to find out whether the instrument she showed me is an encouragement or a prophecy of new victories over limitations... (Journal 77-78).

In the end, however, what Keller most desired was not a technology that allowed an apparently miraculous overcoming of distance but *an instrument....which will show what takes place in the mind when we think* (Midstream 259-60). She dreamed, that is, of the beautiful confusion of "I" and "you" she had once enjoyed with Sullivan, of the simultaneity of reception, transmission, and expression of a speaking/writing into thin air.



fig. 16: "WIRELESS=MESSENGER," WM. W. Wheeler Company, Design on paper-wood, 1898. Courtesy of the Museum of Talking Boards, <http://www.museumoftalkingboards.com/gal1.html>.

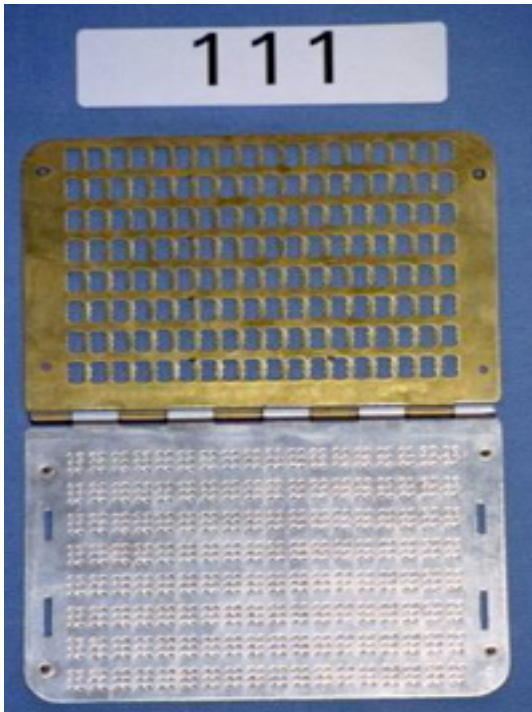


fig. 17: A Braille slate from France manufactured by Association Valentin Haüy, Paris. Courtesy of Judy Dixon, Collection of Braille and Tactile Writing Devices, <http://www.brailleslates.org>.

### *The Story of [My?] Life*

"The first consideration which the critical editor must face is to distinguish textual versions" –Jerome McGann

"Speaking; only in a whisper, moving only at night, keeping the child quiet, clamping my hand over the child's mouth, in the belly of a fly, in between two pieces of paper, slipped into a drinking straw, suspended in a denervated larynx, crouched inside a violin, camouflaged in blood, in light, in tissue, in water, this is how I have survived." –Karen Bermann

Although most critical accounts of the composition of *The Story of My Life* underscore the collaborative nature of the venture, the composition and publication of *Story* marks the end, not the beginning, of the most radical phase of the Keller-Sullivan partnership. Indeed, this initial autobiography is at once a far-reaching experiment in multiple authorship and a profound disruption of Keller and Sullivan's prior conception and presentation of themselves as a symbiotic being.

In the 1903 edition of *The Story of My Life*, the story of Keller's life is recounted three times in three versions: even before Keller's opening words, *It is with a kind of fear that I begin to write the history of my life* (12), Macy's preface outlines the structure of the text and the collaborative nature of both text and life: "This book is in three parts. The first two, Miss Keller's story and the extracts from her letters, form a complete account of her life *as far as she can give it* [my emphasis]. Much of her education she cannot explain herself, and since a knowledge of that is necessary to an understanding of what she has written, it was thought best to supplement her autobiography with the reports and letters of her teacher, Miss Anne Mansfield Sullivan. The addition of a further account of Miss Keller's personality and achievements may be unnecessary; yet it will help make clear some of the traits of her character and the nature of the work which she and her teacher have done. For the third part of the book the Editor is responsible, though all that is valid in it he owes to authentic records and to the advice of Miss Sullivan" (389). In part II of this edition, Keller's letters are again introduced and annotated by Macy; and, in part III, Sullivan's letters take up almost eighty pages of the almost two hundred supplied by Macy. In "My Life," an essential connection between collaboration and contingency is revealed: it is always already understood that Keller's life is the "story" of a life, a "version" immediately subject to revision by Macy and Sullivan whose voices continually traverse and transgress it. Their stories are not only "supplements" but new stories, possibly with new referents for "my life."

Yet if at several points the multiple authorial logics informing *My Life* threaten to overthrow the very idea of "autobiography," and if, moreover, the composite arrangement of the text hints at collaboration's deeper indeterminacies with regard to textual boundaries, it is nonetheless true that the structure of the text promotes Keller's visibility at the expense of Sullivan's. In what now seems like an uncannily prescient observation, John Macy, Keller's editor and Sullivan's lover, divined in the latter a special ability to make her body an uninvolved conduit through which knowledge passed directly into Keller. "Sullivan's skill," he wrote in 1902, when the work on *Story* was well underway, "is in presenting material, some of which she does not try to retain herself, but allows to pass through her to the busy fingers of her pupil..." (qtd. Swan 357). Of all the voices in the original printing of *My Life*, it is Sullivan's that is most buried "between"

the voices of Keller and Macy. In more recent editions of the text—Roger Shattuck's, for example—Sullivan's letters and reports are extracted—resurrected—from part III and printed on their own as part II (Keller's own letters and notebooks having been absorbed into part I). In offering a rationale for his restructuring of the text, Shattuck writes, "John Macy was the welcome associate, who saved the project [*My Life*] from sheer chaos. But he also laid out his third part in such a way as to give little prominence to the seventy pages of Anne Sullivan's weekly letters to Mrs. Hopkins and reports to Anagnos.... Macy... cannot have intended to have bury her crucial contributions.... But from the original 1903 edition, the reader receives that impression" (xvii).

This burial would become deeper in each of Keller's successive autobiographies.

### *Midstream: A Lover's Discourse*

"No words can tell how the two women dreaded this book." —Braddy on the composition of *Midstream*

*Midstream: My Later Life* signals yet another turn in the Keller-Sullivan collaboration. While according to Sullivan *Midstream* is meant to be "a record of the work we have done together the past twenty years—not as a record of ourselves except as instruments in the ultimate deliverance of the blind" (qtd. in *Teacher* 180), it is also the site of a fierce struggle on the part of both collaborators to assert their separate selves. When the manuscript was complete, Keller announced, *There will be no more books* (qtd. in Braddy 319); Anne Sullivan, who had for more than forty years served as Keller's prosthetic eyes, had her own right eye removed.

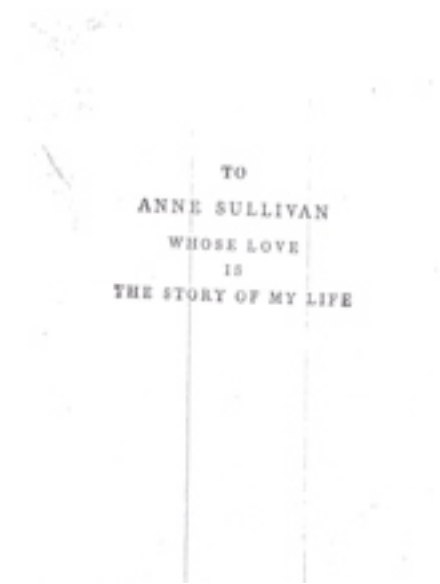


fig. 18: Dedication page of *Midstream: My Later Life*. New York: Crowell Publishing Co., 1929. Courtesy of the Crowell Publishing Company.

"TO/ ANNE SULLIVAN/ WHOSE LOVE/ IS/ THE STORY OF MY LIFE." In *A Lover's Discourse* Roland Barthes clarifies and complicates our understanding of the dedication: "And once the amorous subject creates or puts together any kind of work at all, he is seized with a desire to dedicate it" (70). Yet the "beloved," far from experiencing the dedication as a gift, "reads there instead an assertion of mastery, of power, of pleasure, of solitude" (78-9).

What is *Midstream*? According to the logic of Keller's dedication, *Midstream* is not so much her autobiography, but her biography of Sullivan's love. The dedication, moreover, offers a repetition of the title of Keller's first autobiography, *The Story of My Life*, underscoring that the later story is a continuation of the earlier one, and that "autobiography" was always "biography." Anne Sullivan is the source of Keller's life, a life that is in some sense continuous with her text. Yet while Sullivan is a vital presence in the earlier work—Keller's telling of her fall into language is followed by Sullivan's tale of Keller's education—the later work erases the decisive role of the plural author in the adventure of writing. Sullivan is silent in *Midstream*, failing to speak even within the narrow confines of a para-text. The brief foreword, the place we might expect to hear from Sullivan, is composed by someone else, by Nella Braddy, the editor assigned by Doubleday, Doran & Company to assist in the production of the text. This outsider to the Keller-Sullivan circle confidently declares, "The book is Miss Keller's," and later, in reference to Sullivan's relationship to the book, "No one can be more surprised at some of the revelations in this book than the woman who has lived in daily contact with Miss Keller for the last forty years" (xvi).

In *Midstream*, unlike in *Story*, the labor of collaboration no longer manifests itself on the surface of the text, now as smooth glass—the looking glass of autobiography. Braddy's few prefatory remarks alluding to the compositional process—"Under Miss Keller's direction, oral and written, the typed manuscript was rewritten with scissors and paste" (xiv)—make Keller at once author and editor and obscure Sullivan's literally blinding labor during every phase of the composition and revision of the text.

In her biography *Anne Sullivan Macy: The Story Behind Helen Keller*, first published in 1934, Nella Braddy uses the word "submerged" when speaking of Sullivan's relationship to Keller: "It is sometimes asked whether it was worth while for one person so to submerge herself in another, and the question is sometimes answered in the negative. Could not Annie Sullivan have done better by the world and in the world if she had scattered her abilities? She does not think so" (351). Yet in a crucial sense, Sullivan is submerged in *Midstream*. She is drowned in it; she is its subtext. In speaking further of the dedication, Barthes observes that the "amorous dedication is impossible.... The other is inscribed, he inscribes himself within the text, he leaves there his (multiple) traces. If you were only the dedicatee of this book you would not escape your harsh condition as (loved) *object*—as god; but your presence within the text, whereby you are unrecognizable there, is not that of an analogical figure, of a fetish, but that of a force which is not, thereby, absolutely reliable. Hence it doesn't matter that you feel continuously reduced to silence, that your own discourse seems to you to be smothered beneath

the monstrous discourse of the amorous subject: in *Teorema*, the ‘other’ does not speak, but he inscribes something within each of those who desire him—he performs what the mathematicians call a catastrophe (the disturbance of one system by another): it is true that this mute figure is an angel” (79). In the final chapter of *Midstream*, titled “My Guardian Angel,” Sullivan appears as such a mute angel—*She delights in the silence that wraps her life in mine, and says that the story of her teaching is the story of her life, her work is her biography*—but the “angel” has also effected a catastrophe. Despite the insistent use of the first-person narrator, *Midstream* is a system disturbed by another system, a text written by two people though only one “I” appears throughout.

The abundant textual evidence in the *Midstream* folders confirms that Sullivan was not only the inspiration for the text—as the dedication implies—but also the source and composer of the avant-text. It is Sullivan who single-handedly sorted through the thousands of papers in their joint cabinets that would make up *Midstream*, sorting and selecting with the aid of her telescopic glasses what was to be remembered in the text. And it was Sullivan who, along with Braddy, worked Keller’s textual fragments into a completed manuscript by means of a laborious cutting and pasting process. And, finally, it was Sullivan who spelled successive versions of the text into Keller’s hand in a transmission process as precarious as any in the history of textual transmission.

Yet it was also Sullivan who seems to have effected her own vanishing, her own disappearance. The real question is not why her name was suppressed on the title page of *Midstream*, but, rather, why she insisted on its suppression/submersion? Why did Sullivan wish to speak from under the text?

### ***“A Bird Was In the Room”***

*Forest Hills, March 20<sup>th</sup> “[The bird] kept on singing in one of the evergreens, and somehow we were as excited as if we had found Teacher in the house. –Keller, Journal*

“Why, look at those three candle flames!” –The first words of a blind woman upon regaining her sight; the three flames were in three sparrows sitting on a windowsill.

In the midst of *Midstream* we find two coded parables of collaboration. The first appears early in the text, in a passage on Keller’s study, a room which in her Wrentham house bordered upon an enclosed garden of apple trees and wisteria. Here, in this archetypal garden, she “hears” the love song of two whippoorwills:

*I was standing under the wisteria vine with my thoughts far away when suddenly the rail began to vibrate unfamiliarly under my hands. The pulsations were rhythmical, and repeated over and over.... I guessed that a breeze or a bird was rocking the vine.... A queer beat came always before the rhythmical beats, like nothing I had ever felt before. I did not dare move or call, but Miss Sullivan had heard the sound and put her hand through the window and touched me very quietly.... She spelled, “That’s a whippoorwill. He is standing on the corner post so close to you I believe you could touch him; but you*

*must not—he would fly away and never come back.”... I could follow the intonations exactly. The singing seemed joyous to my touch, and I could feel the notes grow louder and louder, faster and faster. Miss Sullivan touched me again and spelled, “His lady-love is answering him from the apple trees. Apparently, she has been there all the time, hiding. Now they are singing a duet.” When the rail stopped vibrating she spelled, “They are both in the apple tree now singing under billows of pink and white blossom” (29-30).*

In the silent spaces between the birds’ songs to one another, Sullivan sings to Keller’s “inner ear” with her *wantoning...flowing* fingers, mending, as Keller elsewhere wrote, the *broken lyre* of her life by means of a strange and beautiful synesthesia. Here, writing is revealed as Roland Barthes said, as “the destruction of every voice, of every point of origin...[as a] neutral, composite, oblique space... the negative where all identity is lost, starting with the very identity of the body writing” (208). And so, in the midst of *Midstream*, in the midst of Keller’s assertion of single authorship, she remembers—records—the submerged voice in the text. Not just Sullivan’s voice, not just the voice of her collaborator, but the (con)fusion of “voices” of the lyrical touch-writing, *the ever-springing flames of... finger-spelling* that preceded the text and always escaped it (*Teacher* 45).

A second bird flies into the text towards its end. This bird, though, is a harbinger of loss. Again, the scene is Keller’s study; the bird is beating its wings against her window screen. The second person referred to here is not Sullivan, but a blind friend of Keller’s, Elizabeth Garrett: *It was difficult in the rain to raise the screen; but we succeeded, and there, clinging to the vines which had clambered over the sill, was my little Robin Hood! He fluttered into my outstretched hand.... After he dried off a bit he began to fly around the room.... When the shower ceased, we took him to the window, but he did not want to seem to leave us.... I put him down on the sill and he flew back into the room. We managed to catch him, and again I put him outside the screen, and again he flew back into the study.... This time he hid under the couch. We had to get someone with eyes to dig him out. He hopped on the windowsill from side to side.... At last he slowly spread his wings and unwillingly sailed away on the freshly washed air. He has never returned to the dogwood tree or my hand (305-06).*

The progress of the birds through *Midstream* charts the long arc of Keller and Sullivan’s collaboration. The second bird is solitary, unmated. It twice enters the study through the screen, and it is twice caught and turned out again. In place of song—the whirring of the bird along the wire—there is silence. The message of this second, later, bird remains untranslated. *I have written the last line of the last autobiography I shall write.... I lift my tired hands from the typewriter. I am free....* Keller declared at the end of *Midstream* (342). Her final gesture—the lifting of the hands, the fluttering fingers—doubles the alighting motion of the bird. She was free. But she was also alone—“free” of the collaboration she had been engaged in for almost half a century. *There will be no more books* (qtd. in Braddy 319), Keller said in private to her collaborators. Although *Midstream* was not, in the end, Keller’s last book, it was her last collaboration with Anne Sullivan.

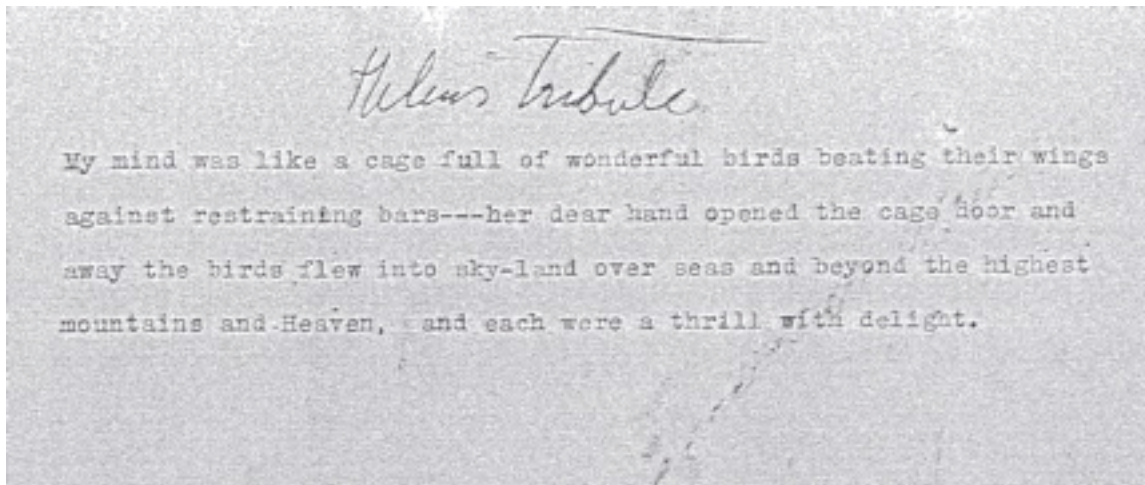


fig. 19: A MSS page from Keller's final work, *Teacher*. Courtesy of the American Foundation for the Blind, Helen Keller Archives.

### *An Exchange of Eyes*

Why? Why did *Midstream* mark an extreme limit of collaboration, after which some kind of breakdown was inevitable? Did the conditions of the collaboration—which seemed to require the vanishing of one speaker into the other—virtually ensure its ending? “I have never known,” Sullivan claimed, “the deep joy of surrender to my own...individual bent or powers. I have been compelled to pour myself into the spirit of another and to find satisfaction in the music of an instrument not my own.... We do not, I think choose our destiny. It chooses us” (qtd. in Braddy 293).

Yet long before the text Keller dedicated to Sullivan entered the world and escaped them both, Sullivan had intercepted it. According to Keller, as she approached the end of the *Midstream*, *Teacher* grew less reasonable.... She compelled me to use an unnatural constraint in the chapter I called “My Guardian Angel.” She did not permit any reference to her humble birth or the almshouse, her sufferings and disappointments. Actually I felt humiliated, as if I had almost lied to God himself, and I never spoke of *Midstream* to her after.... (180).

The dynamics of collaboration may manifest themselves in a struggle for control of representation. Or in the exchange of eyes. In the midst of *Midstream*, Sullivan—ill, threatened by blindness—wrested the text—whose text?—away from Keller. If Sullivan was Keller’s collaborator, was Keller Sullivan’s collaborator? Who is author and who is collaborator has to be continually negotiated. Writing is already so many collisions and separations.

Perhaps, Sullivan could only consent to her disappearance so long as she had her sight, so long as she was Keller’s second sight. Or, perhaps, after years of being the medium for the invisible, Sullivan was possessed by a sudden desire to be

visible. Whatever the case may have been, as Keller worked on the “Midstream” MSS, her “last” autobiography, Sullivan made preparations for another version of her life—their life?—to be written. Nella Braddy recalls, “Mrs. Macy and I used to spend long hours together in the little office on the second floor of their house in Forest Hills, New York, listening to Helen’s typewriter in the attic above us, and waiting for her to bring down what she had written so we could piece it into the manuscript which lay on the table before us.... On the days when I was adroit, we talked of Mrs. Macy, and it was on one of these that she told for the first time the story of her years in Tewksbury. *Even Helen had not known it* [emphasis added]” (xii). The triangulation of labor—Keller’s, Sullivan’s, Braddy’s—created new alliances and uncovered another story—the one that *even Helen had not known*. The untwining of “the twin personality” had begun. And yet there would continue to be confusions. In composing her biography of Sullivan, Braddy had to “remind myself a thousand times...[that it was] not a book about Helen” (Braddy xiii). More importantly, perhaps, once again Sullivan’s name would not appear on the title page of a work in which she was both source and collaborator; even the story of her life was “authored” by another. So far did she withdraw into collaboration, so completely did she inhabit the placeless place of collaboration, that Sullivan was not a privileged interlocutor for Keller, but the constant, hidden companion to her interiority, the principle of attraction whereby “Keller” spoke across blindness to join her in the outside. Nella Braddy’s biography, though it attempts to offer a Sullivan prior to Keller, ultimately fails. For the “Sullivan” before or apart from “Keller” is forgotten even in the pages of the biography itself: “And what became of Anne Sullivan?” Braddy asks in the final chapter, titled “Twilight,” though Sullivan was still alive at the time of its composition. “This question,” she continues, “has been asked in France, England, Scotland, Yugoslavia, and the United States with Mrs. Macy standing before the questioners” (336).

In the end, there are only versions of selves-texts. Moreover, Keller-Sullivan’s ceaseless production and circulation of auto/bio/graphies in which no “one” has the last word reveals the profound homelessness of the collaborative venture. For just as the early writing on the body that Keller and Sullivan engaged in disrupted the “too-easy stability of singular identities” (Smith 267), so the writing they tried to execute as separate selves only kept revealing a collaborative self stranger and more persistent than either “Sullivan” or “Keller.” Indeed, in the realm of collaboration, perhaps, each of the collaborators must be—at least for moments—exiled from their own image-repertoires. No wonder, then, that the ceaseless production of auto/bio/graphies is countered by the destruction of private records. Anne Sullivan’s deliberate burning of her diary—a document containing perhaps the richest account of her life and work with Keller—and, later, the accidental fire that destroyed Keller and Sullivan’s house and turned untold numbers of their papers into ash, are the visible signs collaboration’s destruction of the image-repertoire.

“She had hoped,” Braddy claimed of Sullivan, “that [her biography] would never...be...written” (xii). And despite the existence of Braddy’s *Anne Sullivan*

*Macy: The Story Behind Helen Keller* (Doubleday 1934) and *Keller's Teacher* (Doubleday 1956), it never was.

*Teacher: The Other Side of Collaboration*

"I write without seeing.... This is the first time I have ever written in the dark...not knowing whether I am indeed forming letters. Wherever there will be nothing, read that I love you." –Denis Diderot to Sophie Volland

"The future is dark to me.... I am content that death should be final." –Anne Sullivan

*Keller's Journal*, published in 1938, was largely written while she was crossing the sea to Japan, via Europe. Keller begins the journal almost immediately after she is *unworlded* by Sullivan's death, composing it without aid from any collaborator on a Braille machine and a typewriter. The first entry, dated midnight, November 4, 1936, speaks of a sorrow so great that it renders night *eternal* and Keller herself *deaf-blind a second time* (28). In the final entry, composed on April 14, the anniversary of Sullivan's birth, Keller seems to speak with unreasonable hope: *I am certain that Teacher is exceedingly with me on this voyage.... And as I stood on deck this morning in the mist of dawn, looking westward to the land where a great adventure awaits me, I thought I could feel her by my side* (308). Keller's alternating sense of Sullivan's closeness and distance to her structure both *Journal* and the much later work *Teacher*. In both texts, however, there is never any closure, never any resolution, but only an unceasing oscillation between presence and absence.

*Teacher* was first published in 1955-56, almost twenty years after Sullivan's death and thirteen before Keller's own passing at age eighty-seven. It bears a subtitle, which is also another dedication: "A Tribute by the Foster-Child of Her Mind." The last of Keller's books, it was also the least read. Perhaps the intimacy of the address discouraged readers; perhaps they turned away because they wanted—as they had always wanted—Keller's autobiography; perhaps they left the book on the shelves because they did know how to read this ghost story.

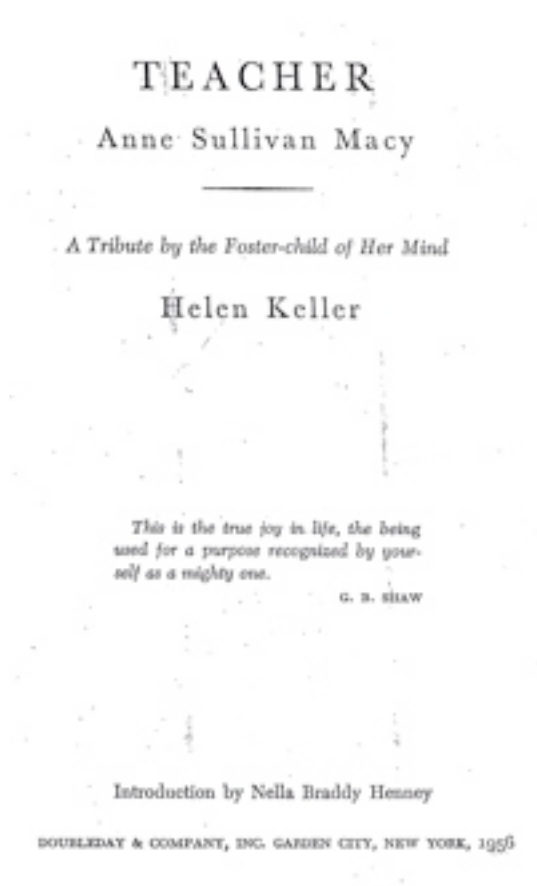


fig. 20: The title page of Keller's *Teacher*. New York: Doubleday & Company, 1956. Courtesy of Doubleday & Co., Inc.

The history of the *Teacher* manuscript is, like the text itself, marked by complications—by digressions, delays, changes of course. Keller had begun composing a memoir to Sullivan even before her teacher's death and under her strict supervision. After Sullivan's death she worked on the MSS intermittently until, in 1946, with three-quarters of the text finished, a fire destroyed Keller's home and turned the MSS and all of the avant-textes—Braille notes, typescripts, and almost all of Sullivan's letters to her—into ashes. *The loss of that manuscript seemed to me like mutilation*, Keller wrote in *Teacher* (31), *but a day came*, she noted on a stray MSS leaf associated with the *Teacher* materials, *when I realized that the book for which I grieved was after all not the kind of book I wished to dedicate to Teacher* (MSS titled, "after enumerating my losses"). The new version of the text is underway by 1953 and completed in 1954. This time, Keller works largely alone, typing the MSS from memory and a few Braille notes. She works on her Remington and on Braddy's Smith Corona Portable. Typing and typing, always going forward, the acts of writing (forward) and remembering (backward) in complete contradiction to one another.

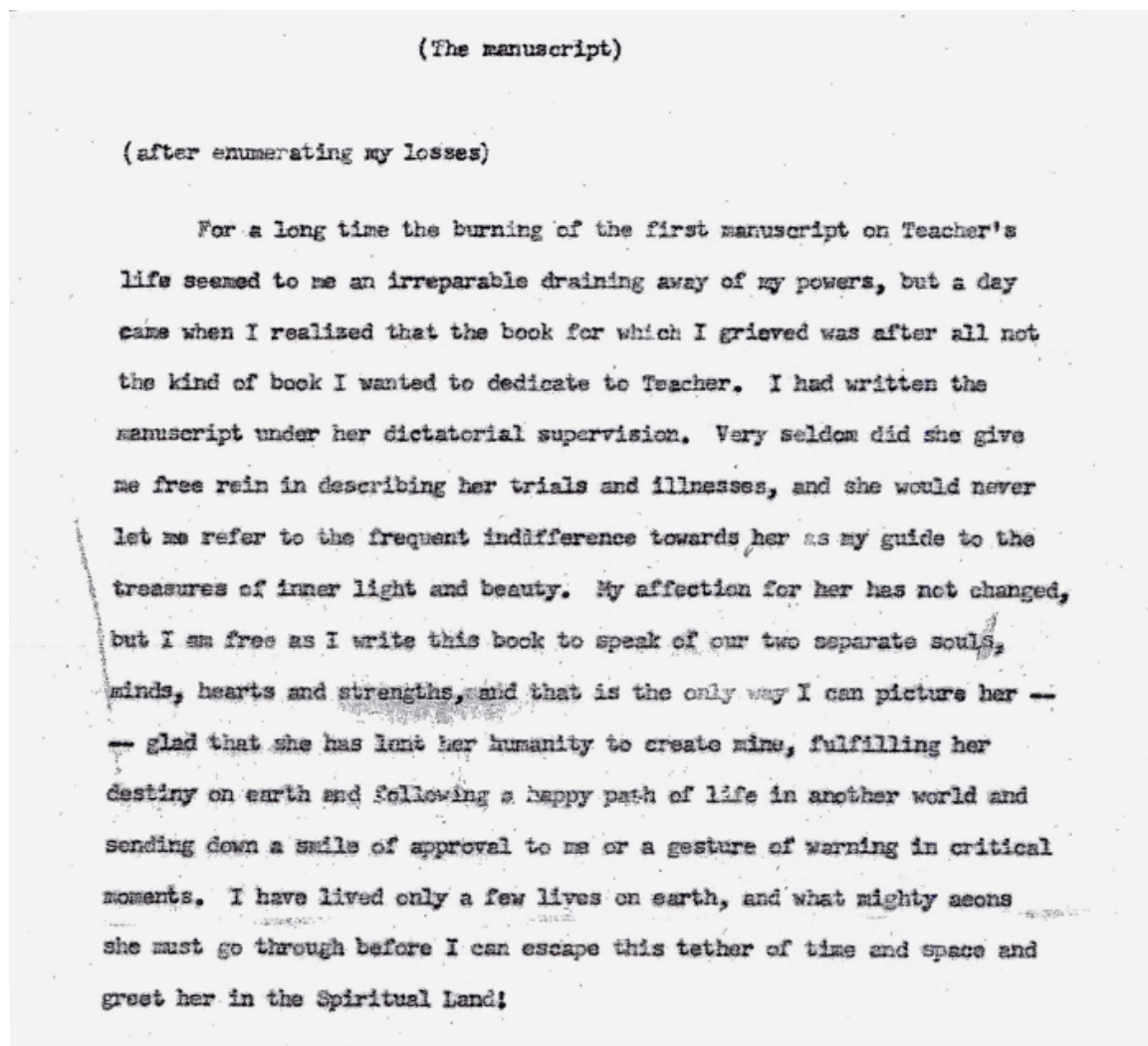


fig. 21: MSS leaf from the "Teacher" materials. Courtesy of the American Foundation for the Blind, Helen Keller Archives.

*Teacher* is both a love letter, a written wish to conjure Sullivan both as companion and collaborator, and a dead letter, an endless farewell written by Keller to her Teacher and to the self she was through her. *People think Teacher has left me, but she is with me all the time* (23), Keller maintained at the end of her tribute. But in the silence surrounding the writing and editing of *Teacher*, Sullivan often seems to have absconded into the infinite. On a MSS page containing several trials for a passage, Keller compulsively returns to the same thought: *The road is long and terribly strange and I am blind and deaf in very truth, since thou art* [editorially altered to "are"] *gone away.... I am blind invery [sic] truth since she is gone away.... The way of life is terribly dark and strange: I realize now that I amm [sic] deaf and blind*" (MSS, "Teacher" folder). In the same MSS fragment, Keller addresses Sullivan in devotional terms, at times confusing her with God: *"Hope's face is veiled. I lift a tremulous prayer to Thee* [editorially amended to "to God"] *for the road is terribly long and strange and I am blind and deaf in very truth, since thou art* [editorially altered to

"are"] *gone away*" (MSS, "Teacher" folder). Keller's disorientation is registered in the zigzagging of pronominal forms—*she, thee*—and in her shifting perception of Sullivan as near and far, present and absent, alive and dead. Indeed, Keller's use of "she" is frequently followed by a direct address to "thee," as if she might make the dead come alive merely through a change in grammar. The language of exclamation—of idolatry—is also the language of prosopopoeia.

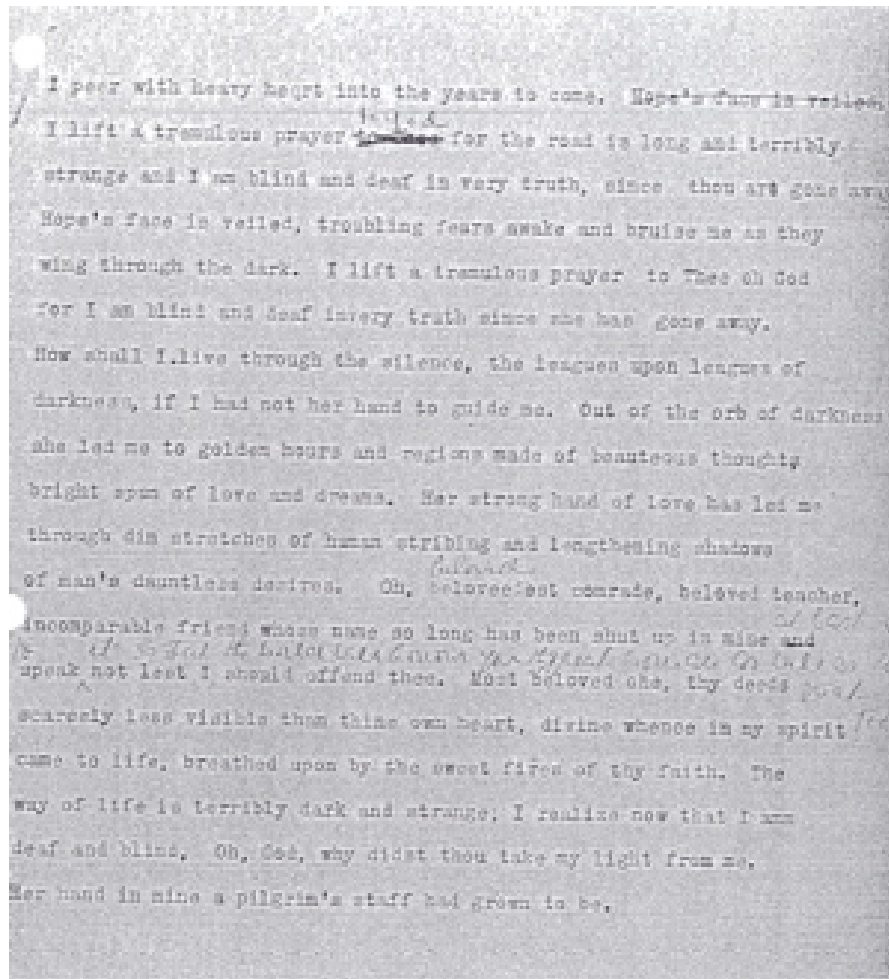


fig. 22: MSS leaf from the "Teacher" materials. Courtesy of the American Foundation for the Blind, Helen Keller Archives.

Years earlier, Sullivan and Keller had communicated by means of a modified telegraphy, a "dot and dash system." In composing *Teacher*, Keller's solitary typing—the tap, tap-tapping of the typewriter keys—may be heard as evidence of her work in progress and as a sign of Keller's last attempt to contact the dead, a séance in writing. Her many allusions throughout *Teacher* to their finger-spelling point to her desire to recover the private language lost with Sullivan's death: *To this day I cannot "command the uses of my soul" or stir my mind to action without the memory of the quasi-electric touch of Teacher's fingers upon my palm...* (51-52).

*Midstream* had been subject to interception. At any moment, Sullivan might confiscate the text and alter or even destroy it. *Teacher*, conversely, far from being subject to interception, was threatened by the problem that it might not be received by Sullivan at all. Diana Fuss reports that by the time Keller turned to the "Teacher" manuscript, she had lost much of the feeling in her hands and needed to warm them continually before reading or writing (145). From the deep distance of death, Sullivan might not pick up the impossibly faint signals; she might not be en rapport. Again and again, *Teacher* documents a situation of hermeneutic rupture. *I was checked by an indefinable fear of breaking open the door she had closed* (*Teacher* 224). In composing the text, Keller rediscovers in writing what Emerson called "the condition of infinite remoteness" between people: *There was still the wonder of language which she had left in my hand, but the mysterious battery from which it had been kindled was withdrawn* (*Teacher* 228). Even the address of the book is in the end unclear. Dedicated to Sullivan, it nonetheless circulates beyond her control; as such, it is no longer an act of dialogue but one of dissemination. In *Teacher*, to cite Paul Ricoeur, "the narrowness of the dialogical relation explodes. Instead of being addressed to just you, the second person discourse is revealed as discourse in the universality of its address.... An unknown, invisible reader has once again become the unprivileged addressee of the discourse" (202-203).

In the same moment, perhaps, biography turns back into autobiography: *I write this to speak of our two separate souls* (*Teacher* 170). Rejection after rejection is inscribed in *Teacher*: first, Keller's abrupt rejection of Nella Braddy as editor/collaborator and her figurative erasure of Braddy's own biography of Sullivan through her composition of *Teacher*; second, and most importantly, her rejection of Sullivan herself. The memoir to Keller's collaborator is also an attempt to exorcise her "collaborative consciousness"—to sue at last for her own autonomy. And so, *Teacher* is, paradoxically, Keller's only "solo" autobiography, the story of her self in the aftermath. Yet the loss of the private language coincident with Anne Sullivan's death could not be compensated for. The text of *Teacher* begins and ends as public discourse. It is an outside narrative that reveals almost nothing about Keller at all.

### **"Helen Keller" as Black Box**

At the end of the nineteenth century, the blind and the deaf-blind often aroused fear in the hearing-sighted, who associated blindness with death, with a return to "the black limbo from which we came" (qtd. Herrmann 17). The habit of exhibiting the blind deepened these associations. In a photograph of Laura Bridgman taken c. 1845, she appears before us with a green ribbon tied over her eyes. Blindfolded, Bridgman is beautiful and strange and utterly contained; she is an exemplary figure of the uncanny. The ribbon (a copy of which, incidentally, she made for her doll) might hide her infinity or her emptiness. After her death, Bridgman's body, which had already been the subject/object of "every conceivable type of study," was autopsied, but with disappointing results: no significant differences between Bridgman's brain and the brains of "normal" subjects were

detected by the doctors, and her “unfathomable inner world...remained a mystery” (Herrmann 23).

By the time Bridgman sat for her photograph, the uncanny was already linked with technology: the spectral photograph of the blindfolded young woman clearly blurred the line between the frontiers of life and the frontiers of death. Yet by the time Keller appears before the public, technology’s encounter with the uncanny had produced apparatuses that not only “flattened out the line between the living and non-living,” but did so “with an endless loop of replayed discourse and information for which a human speaker would be only a contingent factor” (Gunning). The luminous sky-blue prosthetic glass eyes she wore to improve her appearance did not save Keller from the suspicion of automatism. In the numerous photographs of Keller beside transmitting devices, she appears as the uncanny doppelganger of technologies radically refashioning our experience of space, time, and being; she appears, that is, as a black box. Like the radio, the phonograph, and, especially, perhaps, the motion picture, “Helen Keller” was viewed primarily in terms of her input and output characteristics: her mind—its structure, mechanism, and inner workings—remained as obscure as Bridgman’s.

In the twentieth-century, the black box is also the name given to any of a number of systems designed to collect and preserve data for analysis after an accident. It is an instrument designed to survive a catastrophic event which records the last few moments of audio and instrument data from a complex system. Perhaps “Helen Keller” was such a system, collecting and recording data following the accident of deaf-blindness. Ultimately, however, like the data from black boxes discovered after fatal airplane crashes, the language at the site of the catastrophe is, if not lost, unintelligible.

“Expecting the blind to tell the seeing what blindness is, or the seeing to tell the blind what sight is, is like expecting the dead to tell the living what death is. It cannot be done. At least, it cannot be done with words.” –Nella Braddy, *Anne Sullivan Macy*

“We have been trying to interpret what she feels in terms of what we feel, and she, whose greatest desire has always been, like that of most of the handicapped, to be like other people, has been trying to meet us halfway. So it is that we find ourselves in the end where we were in the beginning, on opposite sides of a wall. Little bits have crumbled away, but the wall is still there, and there is no way to break it down.” –Nella Braddy, “Preface,” *Midstream*

“Her voice was to me the loneliest sound I had ever heard, like waves breaking on the coast of some desert island.” –Samuel Gridley Howe’s daughter on Keller’s voice

### *Return to the Dark Room: Helen Keller, Textual Scholarship, & Disability*

There is much that a close examination of the Keller archive might reveal to us, not least of all about how “language returns to its senses” (McGann 85). Yet it is not, finally, the haptic qualities of Keller’s papers that compel us; rather, it is the loneliness at the core of Keller’s work, of her voice as it is transmitted in her manuscripts, and, ultimately, in the printed copies of her work, that haunts us and fascinates us and from which we have so far turned away.

So far, only biographers seem perennially drawn to her, drawn, that is, to the phenomenon of “Helen Keller” as cultural icon. Scholars have more rarely, though with some important exceptions, confronted her. And textual scholars, especially, seem reticent. There have been only three new scholarly editions of Keller’s works in the last ten years, two editions of *The Story of My Life* (Shattuck, 2003; Berger, 2004) and one of *The World I Live In* (Shattuck, 2003). *Midstream* and *Teacher* are both currently out of print. What has kept textual scholars, who seem to cross disciplinary boundaries almost at will, away from Keller? What is it about her “textual condition” that we cannot define—or, rather, that we carefully avoid encountering? For while “Helen Keller” presents an obvious dilemma for the intentionalist textual editor, who might never discover the moment “when the artist was most in control” of “her” materials, she seems to offer a spectacular case for the social text editor.

*I am always intensely conscious of my audience. Before I say a word I feel its breath as it comes in little pulsations to my face (Midstream 214).*

Indeed, “Helen Keller” is the limit-case for theories of the social text. In an obvious sense, the number of agents involved in the production of her work renders the discovery of authorial intention impossible. When we say “Helen Keller,” we invariably mean some combination of Keller, Sullivan, Macy, Thompson, Braddy, etc. But we mean something more essential than this too. Keller’s works remind us not only that the “autobiographer’s specific body is the site of multiple solicitations, multiple markings, multiple invocations of subject positions,” and that “there are multiple bodies in the autobiographical text” (Smith 271), but that there may be no body—and nobody—prior to these constructed bodies. In the case of “Keller,” the black box records the catastrophe of subjectivity—not its loss, but its failure to appear at all prior to Sullivan’s “input.” Like the avant-texts among Keller’s papers that turn out to belong to Sullivan, Keller’s very interiority might be exclusively a product of Sullivan’s intervention. Writing in *Teacher*, the last of her autobiographies, Keller speaks of her self before Sullivan as a “phantom,” a being she only imagines in the third person: *With appalling suddenness she moved from light to darkness and became a phantom.... Phantom did not seek a solution for her chaos because she knew not what it was. Nor did she seek death because she had no conception of it. All she touched was a blur.... Nothing was a part of anything (41-2).*

Keller wrote her first autobiography, *The Story of My Life*, in response to the early charges of plagiarism made against her, and it is possible to see each act of autobiography as a new (however buried) response to the charge. A life, Sulli-

van assured her, could not be plagiarized; the production of autobiography would give Keller immunity from the charges, would free her from them. Yet Keller's obsessive and always ambivalent return to autobiography—a return both self-induced and induced by pressures from her readers—suggests that each act of self-assertion ultimately proved inadequate. Instead of countering the charges of plagiarism, she seemed to foreground them: *Perhaps it is true of everyone, but it seems to me that in a special way what I read becomes a part of me. What I am conscious of borrowing from my author friends I put in quotation marks, but I do not know how to indicate the wandering seeds that drop unperceived into my soul. I am not even extenuating my appropriation of fine thoughts. I prefer to put quotation marks at the beginning and the end of my book and leave it to those who have contributed to its charm or beauty to take what is theirs and accept my gratitude for the help they have been to me. I know that I am not original in either content or form. I have not opened new paths to thought or new vistas to truth, but I hope that my books have paid tribute in some small measure to the authors who have enriched my life* (Midstream 328).

How could a life be plagiarized? How could it not be? With each autobiography—including (most of all?) *Teacher*—Keller initiates the search for her own interiority; with each autobiography, she concludes that the search has failed: *I am not original* (Midstream 328). The wish to place quotation marks around the entire text is also an image self-imprisonment: the self exists in a locked-in condition. And so Keller gives us the dark side of the social text, the social text without the promise of a private text, without the promise, that is, of an unclaimed “Helen Keller” at its core. Under these conditions, autobiography is the ultimate site of homelessness.

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