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Illustration de couverture :
Prior to the advent of her capacity to use language meaningfully, Helen Keller, who had been stricken by an illness at age 19 months that left her deaf and blind, had lived in a most desolate world. "I did not know that I am," she writes. "I lived in a world that was a no-world. I cannot hope to describe adequately that unconscious yet conscious time of nothingness. I did not know that I knew aught, or that I lived or acted or desired. I had neither will nor intellect... My inner life, then, was a blank without past, present, or future, without hope or anticipation, without wonder or joy or faith."1

All of this changed suddenly and dramatically at the famous scene by the well, when, with the help of her teacher, Annie Sullivan, Helen discovered that "w-a-t-e-r" meant that wonderful cool something that was flowing over my hand2 and that everything else had a name as well. "With the first word I used intelligently," she writes, "I learned to live, to think, to hope."3 "That living word...awakened my soul." As she returned to her house, everything she touched suddenly "seemed to quiver with life."4

In addition to creating a world, language, by Keller's own account, created her very self. She too had a name, and it was exactly this name that allowed for the possibility of self-consciousness and, by extension, self-representation. For the first time, she could experience herself as a continuous being, which could henceforth serve as an object of autobiographical reflection.

For a time, all went well; "the more I handled things and learned their names and uses," Keller recalls, "the more joyous and confident grew my sense of kinship with the rest of the world."5 Much of her progress, she goes on to explain, was of course due to her teacher, Annie Sullivan. "When she came, everything about me breathed of love and joy and was full of meaning. She has never since let pass an opportunity to point out the beauty that is in everything, nor has she ceased trying in thought and action and example to make my life sweet and useful."6 Alongside her kinship with the rest of the world, there grew to be a remarkable kinship with Annie as well. Indeed, they were more than close, she suggests: "My teacher is so near that I scarcely think of myself apart from her. How much of my delight in all beautiful things is innate, and how much is due to her influence, I can never tell. I feel that her being is inseparable from my own, and that the footsteps of my life are in hers. All the best of me belongs to her."7

It is exactly this condition of belonging that came to occupy center stage, in a most disturbing and painful way, several years later. What happened, in brief, is that Keller's own account in her autobiography, *The Story of My Life* (1888), is the following: In a burst of what had appeared to be creative energy, she had written a story, called "The Frost King," which had been inspired by Annie's vivid description of the fall foliage. "I thought then that I was 'making up a story,' as children say, and I eagerly sat down to write it before the ideas should slip from me. My thoughts flowed easily," she notes; "I felt a sense of joy in the composition. Words and images came tripping to my finger ends."8 She was tremendously proud of the story, as were members of her family, who had been surprised at the magnitude of her accomplishment. It was too good, in fact, that someone had even asked whether she had read it in a book. "Oh, no," she answered. "(It is my story.)"9 As it turned out, however, this wasn't quite right. There existed another story, called "The Frost Fairies," on which much of her own had been based. Keller's

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5 ibid., p. 19.
6 ibid., p. 29.
7 ibid., p. 30.
8 ibid., pp. 47-48.
9 ibid., p. 48.
“creation,” therefore, had been plagiarized -- even if unwittingly. Her initial response to this discovery was confusion. At first, in fact, she thought that it was wonderful that two people should come up with stories so strikingly similar: “I thought everybody had the same thought about the leaves,” she had written in her diary shortly after the incident. Later, however, after she learned more about the gravity of what she had done — and particularly after the possibility was raised that she had stolen the story intentionally — her wonder turned to horror and shame.

According to Keller, Annie’s vivid descriptions of the fall foliage had revived a memory of the original story, which had been read to her earlier and which she must have “unconsciously retained.” Interestingly enough, she notes, stories had little meaning for her back then, but “the mere spelling of the strange words was sufficient to amuse a little girl who could do almost nothing to amuse herself.” In any case, “One thing is certain,” Keller came to believe: “the language was ineffaceably stamped upon my brain, though for a long time no one knew it, least of all myself.” The lesson proved to be a terribly painful one. “Now,” she writes, “if words and images come to me without any effort, it is a pretty sure sign that they are not the offspring of my own mind, but stay waifs that I regretfully dismiss.” More problematically still, there was the startling realization that she could never really know for sure which of her ideas truly deserved to be called her own: “(E)ven now,” some ten years after the incident had occurred, “I cannot be quite sure of the boundary line between my ideas and those I find in books. I suppose that is because so many of my impressions come to me through the medium of others’ eyes and ears.” She thus grew to be suspicious of her own knowledge of things, her fear being that it was somehow second-hand; because nearly everything she learned came to her either through Annie Sullivan or through the numerous books she read, it was difficult to escape the possibility that some of the very ideas that felt so much like her own were in fact others.

But there was yet another problem that surfaced through the plagiarism incident, one that brings us closer to the issue of self-representation. “It is certain,” Keller writes, “that I cannot always distinguish my own thoughts from those I read, because what I read becomes the very substance and texture of my mind.” Consequently, she admits, “in nearly all that I write, I produce something which very much resembles the crazy patchwork I used to make when I first learned to sew.” Her only hope was that she would one day “outgrow” these “artificial, periwigged compositions. Then, perhaps, my own thoughts and experiences will come to the surface.” The problem, in other words — and it was much more her critics’ than her own — was that it seemed that she herself was something of a “crazy patchwork,” an “artificial composition,” and that, consequently, she herself was in some sense secondhand. In true poststructuralist fashion, what had been cast into question by her skeptical critics was her own authorship, not only of her writing but of her thoughts and of her very self — the supposition being that both she and her experiential world could not help but be derivative, borrowed. The only difference, some had argued in response, was that these critics fancied themselves to be exempt from the very same charges.

Mark Twain, for instance, was outraged that Keller had been subjected to such an ordeal by her accusers. “Oh, dear me,” he had written, “how unspeakably funny and owlishly idiotic and grotesque was the ‘plagiarism’ farce! As if there was much of anything in any human utterance, oral or written, except plagiarism! . . . For substantially all ideas are second-hand, consciously or unconsciously drawn from a million outside sources, and daily used by the garnerer with pride and satisfaction borne of the superstition that he originated them.” Twain also referred to Keller’s accusers as a “collection of decayed human turnips.”

Alexander Graham Bell had added that “our most original compositions are composed exclusively of expressions derived from others.” Our forms of expression are copied too, he emphasized. The

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12 Ibid., p. 51.
13 Ibid., p. 48.
14 Ibid., p. 53.
16 Ibid., p. 147.
17 Ibid., p. 290.
main difference is that the sources are more difficult to trace since they are mainly word of mouth. What's more, books don't affect our language to the same degree that they affected people like Helen Keller because our habits of language have already been formed before we come to read books. "We are all of us, however, nevertheless," he writes, "unconscious plagiarists, especially in childhood." 18

It is uncertain whether Keller would have derived much solace from these statements. But she no doubt appreciated the sentiments behind them.

It was nonetheless strange to some people, even relatively open-minded ones, that Keller should be as impressed by the wonders of nature or art, for instance, as she said she was. "They are always asking: 'What does this beauty or that music mean to you? You cannot see the waves rolling up the beach or hear their roar. What do they mean to you?"" 19 "I also enjoy canoeing," she adds, "and I suppose you will smile when I say I especially like it on moonlit nights. I cannot, it is true, see the moon climb up the sky behind the pines and steal softly across the beaver's, making a shining path for us to follow; but I know she is there, and as I lie back among the pillows and put my hand in the water, I fancy that I feel the shimmering of her garments as she passes." 20 Now Keller's critics, of course, might simply argue here that because Helen knows that these sorts of scenes are conventionally considered beautiful she in turn "experiences" them as such. How else could it be?

"She talks bookishly," an interviewer for the New Yorker had said. "Never having heard a voice, she has never learned the easy vocabulary of ordinary discourse. To express her ideas, she falls back on the phrases she has learned from books, and uses words that sound stilted, poetical metaphors. . . . It is perhaps because of this habit of phraseology that many people attribute to her a sentimentality of outlook which neither [her] life nor her writings would justify." 21

A bit more severely, Keller was "a dupe of words," as another critic had put it, "and her aesthetic enjoyment of most of the arts," among other things, he had argued, "is a matter of auto-suggestion rather than perception." 22 As this critic also suggested, "Wordiness, unreal emotion and, in the worst sense of the term, literature occupy a disconcerting place in her writing." 23

Yet another critic, writing for The Nation, had moved even farther in his complaints. "(If she could only realize that it is better to be one's self, however limited and afflicted, than the best imitation of somebody else that could be achieved! . . . One resents the pages of second-hand description of nature objects, when what one wants is a sincere account of the attitude, the natural attitude towards life of one whose eyes and ears are sealed." 24 Her problem, for each of these critics, was one of "word-mindedness" or "verbalism," as it was called, which was due to the blind being taught to communicate with others about the world not as they themselves experience it but as sighted people know it and speak about it.

As some suggested, much of the problem was due to Annie Sullivan's teaching methods, "which stressed literary expression and visual respectability at the expense of Helen's own unique experiences." 25 In fairness to Annie, there is in fact evidence to suggest that she had encouraged Keller to handle everything in order "to irradiate a word with its correlatives in the senses, limited though the latter were." 26 In line with this idea, Helen had apparently come to possess a "veritable tactile sight," 27 which yielded images of a sort that, although obviously different from visual images, were not on that account to be deemed invalid or artificial. (They were referred to as "word pictures." Keller had also used the phrase "touch-look" in this context.) Nevertheless, finally, word and image were, in the eyes of many, thoroughly bound together and, hence, too close for comfort.

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18 Ibid., p. 291.
20 Ibid., p. 90.
22 Ibid., p. 571.
24 Ibid., pp. 136-137.
25 Ibid., p. 137.
27 This phrase was coined by Pierre Veyde-Demessy, as cited in J.P. Lash, Helen and Teacher: The Story of Helen Keller and Anne Sullivan Macy (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1980), p. 572.
Perhaps most severe were the criticisms of one Thomas Cutsforth, a psychologist who had been blind since age 11. What happened at the water pump was not a miracle, he believed, but a tragedy: “... the capitulation took place on an infantile level,” he maintained, “when the personal affection and confidence of the child Helen were given completely to her teacher. From that time on, Helen’s world became contracted by expanding into that of her teacher. Her teacher’s ideals became her ideals, her teacher’s likes became her likes, and whatever emotional activity her teacher experienced she experienced. ... It is a birthright sold for a mess of pottage.” As one of her former supporters had succinctly put the matter, “Helen Keller is a living lie.”

What then, was Keller to do in the face of these criticisms? How did she — and how might we — make sense of her situation? And to what extent, we should of course ask, is it our own as well? More to the point still, to what extent, or in what sense, is self-representation — in this case autobiography — even possible? And what exactly does it mean? What can it mean?

Despite her acute awareness of their accusations, Keller refused to bend to her critics. She did experience the world directly, she insisted, and her powers of self-representation were every bit as valid and legitimate as those of her detractors. “Critics delight to tell us what we cannot do,” she complains in her book _The World I Live In_ (1908). “They assume that blindness and deafness sever us completely from the things which the seeing and hearing enjoy, and hence they assert that we have no moral right to talk about beauty, the skies, mountains, the song of birds, and colors. They declare that the very sensations we have from the sense of touch are ‘vicious,’ as though our friends felt the sun for us! They deny a priori what they have not seen and I have felt. Some brave doubters have gone so far even as to deny my existence. In order, therefore, that I might know I exist, I resort to Descartes’ method: ‘I think, therefore I am.’ Thus I am metaphysically established, and I throw upon the doubters the burden of proving my non-existence. When we consider how little has been found out about the mind,” Keller continues, “is it not amazing that any one should presume to define what one can know or cannot know? I admit that there are innumerable marvels in the visible universe unguessed by me. Likewise, O confident critic, there are a myriad sensations perceived by me of which you do not dream.”

Keller was not at all inclined to see in her own case something wonderful or special. “The lack of one sense — or two — never helped a human being. We should be glad of the sixth or sixteenth senses with which our friends and the newspaper reporters, more generous than nature, are wont to endow us.” But as far as she could tell, they were quite wrong. She herself entertained a number of other interesting possibilities. Despite rejecting the existence of an extra sense, especially bestowed on those like herself, it could be, she ventured, that “there is in each of us a capacity to comprehend the impressions and emotions which have been experienced by mankind from the beginning ... a soul sense which sees, hears, feels, all in one.” She also raises the possibility that deaf-blind persons have had the mind of seeing and hearing ancestors passed on to them — “a mind measured to five senses.” As such, she writes, the “deaf-blind must be influenced, even if it be unknown to [them], by the light, color, song which have been transmitted through the language [they are] taught, for the chambers of the mind are ready to receive that language. The brain of the race is so permeated with color that it dyes even the speech of the blind.”

The idea here is basically that our brains and minds have distinct sensory compartments preattuned to specific features of language, which is what allows the deaf-blind naturally and spontaneously to think, reason, and use language as if they had all five senses. She may be right about this; but given the speculative nature of her explanation here, it is difficult to say.

The question is: what is it that actually happened in the course of her perceiving the world? In some way or other, she suggests, there must be an “equivalent” supplied for missing sensations. And the way this seems to happen is that the mind perceives a “likeliness between things outward and things inward, a correspondence,” as she puts it.

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28 Ibid., pp. 246-247.
“between the seen and the unseen. . . . The flash of thought and its swiftness,” for instance, “explain the lightning flash and the sweep of the comet through the heavens. . . . I recognize truth by the clearness and guidance that it gives my thought, and knowing what that clearness is, I can imagine what light is to the eye.” If she were to omit all words pertaining to vision and hearing, Keller goes on to say, she would “suffer a great diminution of the wonder and delight of attaining knowledge.” Fortunately, however, these words do exist and are precisely the vehicles through which the world, including her inner world, come into being. “I tread the solid earth; I breathe the scented air. Out of these two experiences I form numberless associations and correspondences. I observe, I feel, I think, I imagine. I associate the countless varied impressions, experiences, concepts. Out of these materials Fancy, the cunning artisan of the brain, weaves an image which the skeptic would deny me.”

Because of Fancy, therefore — which is to say, because of the metaphorically-based imagining of the unseen and the unheard — Keller claims to be able to experience first-hand a world that is every bit as obdurately there as anyone else’s.

“If I heeded [the skeptic],” Keller insists, “the sweet visaged earth would vanish into nothing. . . . Without the shy, fugitive, often unobserved sensations, and the certainties which taste, smell, and touch give me, I should,” she admits, “be obliged to take my conception of the world wholly from others. . . . The sensuous reality which interthreads and supports all the gropings of my imagination would be shattered. The solid earth would melt from under my feet and disperse itself into space. The objects dear to my hands would become formless, dead things, and I should walk among them as among invisible ghosts.”

It is the very interpenetration of word and image that allows for the possibility of there emerging a “forcible feeling of the reality,” as Keller puts it, of both the outer and inner world. Without language, there had been little more than meaningless sensations, without connection or continuity. Without the capacity to “imagine,” however — to build a world through language, in conjunction, of course, with sensory experience — there would have been little basis for rejecting her critics’ charges that she had simply been recycling the conventional wisdom of the day. “Without imagination,” Keller herself proclaims, “what a poor thing my world would be!”

Keller, again, had little desire to make a claim for the uniqueness of her situation. “The bulk of the world’s knowledge is an imaginary construction,” she reminds us. “History,” for instance, “is but a mode of imagining, of making us see civilizations that no longer appear on the earth.” Moreover, “some of the most significant discoveries in modern science owe their origin to the imagination of men who had neither accurate knowledge nor exact instruments to demonstrate their beliefs.” And so it is with her. “In other people’s houses,” she explains, “I can only touch what is shown me — the chief objects of interest, carvings on the wall, or a curious architectural feature, exhibited like the family album.” As such, she continues, “a house with which I am not familiar has for me, at first, no general effect or harmony of detail. It is not a complete conception, but a collection of object impressions which, as they come to me, are disconnected and isolated.” Fortunately, however, “my mind is full of associations, sensations, theories, and with them it constructs the house.” It is like the building of Solomon’s temple, she writes, “where was neither saw, nor hammer, nor any tool heard while the stones were being laid upon one another. The silent worker is imagination which decrees reality out of chaos.”

Notice what is being said here. In a distinct sense, the world becomes real precisely to the extent that it issues from the imaginary. To refer back to Keller’s own words, we construct a kind of “house,” as it were, within which we thereafter live, experiencing it with just that “forcible feeling of the reality” of which she had spoken.

What I wish to suggest is that the self may in fact be understood in much the same way. It too is a construction and its sources lie in the imaginary. This is emphatically not to say, however, that the self is on this account a mere fiction, as it is often called. Indeed, one of the mistakes that often gets made when considering the self is that the imagined or constructed becomes equated with the illusory or unreal — the merely

34 Ibid., pp. 125-127.
35 Ibid., p. 128.
36 Ibid., pp. 124-129.
37 Ibid., pp. 76-77.
38 Ibid., p. 13.
39 Ibid., pp. 89-90.
imagined, the phantasmic. With this in mind, perhaps we would do better to speak of poesis and of a poetics of self-representation, which would somehow try to hold in balance the dialectic not only of word and image but of the imaginary and the real.

There is a further dialectical movement at work as well. On the one hand, it can plausibly be said that the self, in the context of autobiographical writing, gives rise to narrative and that, as such, the narrative serves as a self-representation. On the other hand, however, it can also be said that it is the narrative — or, more specifically, the narrative imagination — that gives rise to the self.

Octavio Paz explores some related ideas in his own reflections on the poetic. What he calls "the poetic experience" is to be understood as "a revelation of our original condition." This revelation "is always resolved into a creation: the creation of our selves. The revelation does not uncover something external, which was there, alien, but rather the act of uncovering involves the creation of that which is going to be uncovered: our own being."41 The poetic experience "is thus given as a naming of that which, until it is named, properly lacks existence."42

This idea brings us right back to Helen Keller and the scene by the well. Along the lines being drawn, one quite tentative way of thinking about self-representation is to say that the self, in its being named and re-named, rewritten, is a kind of work, an unfinished and unfinishable work that, despite its multiple and heterogeneous sources, bears its own signature within it. Taking this idea one step farther, Helen Keller might be regarded as a self in search of a signature, one that would somehow serve to finalize or complete the open work she was. Perhaps if she had known the process was an endless one, she would have rested easier with some of the painful challenges she had faced.

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42 Ibid., p. 140.
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Bibliography

Le film a changé la nature de l'image. En la faisant bouger sur son support, il l'a glissée dans le temps. Comme le langage. Avec lui, relayé par la télévision et la vidéo, le flux Image/Langage a envahi la communication. Son pouvoir nous questionne sur sa nature et ses fonctions. Il renouvelle notre approche critique des arts, de la langue littéraire, et de la relation immémoriale mais vivace du langage à l'image fixe.

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D'où notre titre pluriel : interface Image/Langage et interface Anglophonie/Françophonie.

With the advent of motion pictures, images were first made to move. Time became their medium, and they mirrored the stream of time. The Image/Language flux has been further broadened by TV and video, and now covers all areas of communication. The power of this medium raises questions as to its nature and its functions. It is transforming our critical approach to literature and the arts. It is also transforming our approach to the timeless relation of language to static images.

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Hence our plural title covering both the French/English and the Image/Language interfaces.

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