From Signs to Symbols: Walker Percy on the Story of Helen Keller’s Discovery of Language

When Miss Sullivan, Helen Keller's companion, tried to teach her pupil words by spelling them into her hand, she encountered a characteristic difficulty. Helen "learned" the word d-o-l-l quickly enough, but as a trick to show off to her mother – “I didn't know that I was spelling a word or even that words existed" (Keller 1928, 22). Also she *understood* the word "water" as having something to do with the mug or fetching water or drinking water, and so on. She understood *signs* *perfectly well*: when Miss Sullivan brought Helen her hat, she knew she was going for a walk. But what she did not know and could not seem to learn was that the word "water" was the *name* of the liquid, that this is water. And the more we reflect on it, the more extraordinary the simplest act of naming becomes. Giving a thing a name is an extremely mysterious business.

But the great moment did at last come. As the water flowed over one hand, Miss Sullivan spelled w-a-t-e-r into the other, first slowly, then rapidly.

"I [Helen] stood still, my whole attention fixed upon the motions of her fingers. Suddenly I felt a misty consciousness as of something forgotten-a thrill of returning thought, and somehow the mystery of language was revealed to me. I knew then that 'w-a-t-e-r' *meant* [emphasis added] the wonderful cool something that was flowing over my hand. That living word awakened my soul, gave it light, set it free!" (23).[[1]](#footnote-0)

**Sources:**

* Keller, Helen. 1928. *The Story of My Life*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, Company.
* Percy, Walker, Ketner, Kenneth Laine, Perkins, Karey Lea, McDonnell, Rhonda Reneé, and Cunningham, Scott Ross. *Symbol and Existence : a Study in Meaning : Explorations of Human Nature*. Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 2019.

1. Percy, *Symbol*, 55. [↑](#footnote-ref-0)