

Sympathy and the Concept of Face in Frances Browne's *My Share of the World*

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Introduction

By reading the nineteenth-century blind writer Frances Browne's *My Share of the World: An Autobiography* (1861), this article examines how representations of blindness in the novel explore the relationship between the self and Other, and in Browne's case, how the narrative offers an antithesis to alterity. Two key notions, the face and vision, anchor her work. They are interrelated, as the former forms, informs, and transforms the latter. These notions together provide the foundations for Browne's fictional narrative, which I argue is built around the concept of sympathy; her narrative is sympathetic towards Others in the pre-twentieth-century manner and her ethical standing is embodied by the face of a sighted Other in the story. 'Face' for Browne is the sign for an encounter with the living presence of another person, which entails a moral responsibility of each individual for the Other within a necessarily social context.

The so-called 'ethical turn' in literary studies over the past few decades testifies to our natural fascination with knowing and evaluating the lives of Others, and many critics have drawn upon an ethics of alterity to theorise the dynamics of narration as an encounter between reader and text (Hollander 7). Rebecca N. Mitchell, for instance, claims that Victorian realistic novels (and paintings) are engrossed with the distance between self and Others, elucidating how the plots foreground the Other's incomprehensibility and the claim to ethical attention (xi).

What scholarship there is on Browne, however, tends not to be extensive or thorough, and largely takes the form of a "bio-critical exercise" (McLean, "Arms and the Circassian" 298–99; Brown 184). And especially what Browne accomplishes by telling her fictional story from the point of view of an I-narrator who is *sighted* has not yet been fully appreciated. Her contemporary readers assumed that the blind author would hope to express herself to sighted readers, written as "vision's other" (Tilley, "Frances Browne" 148), and there are few studies of the novel that fully respond to the ethical challenges posed by disability studies. What if a person cannot 'see', literally or figuratively, the suffering faces of Others? Would the person's act correspond with the model of the ethical encounter, or not? And would face-to-face encounters potentially be sites of violence—if not literal, an often unadmitted exploitation and privilege—creating a dangerous binary between visuality and ethics?

The debate about mind-body duration has been one of the most discussed of all topics in Western philosophy since Descartes. For instance, Sir Charles Bell's 1806 treatise *Anatomy and Philosophy of Expression as Connected with the Fine Arts* that continued to

be influential into the Victorian period claims that the human body is divinely designed. For Bell, expressiveness of face in particular serves a special role for a human to be a human, with its “very nature...to excite sympathy”: “it radiates, and is understood by all...it is the bond of human family” (145).

As for the ethical nature of the blind in particular, discussions of the relationship between perception and morality in nineteenth-century Britain were often shaped by earlier philosophical arguments in Europe epitomised by Denis Diderot’s essay, “Letter on the Blind for the Use of Those Who Can See” (1749). Diderot sees the relationship between visual perception, knowledge, and sympathetic emotions as necessary and integral. Therefore, because moral action can only be an abstract idea for blind people, their sense of sympathy is feeble, if it exists at all.

Given these convictions, and with a trope of no other part of the body but the ‘face’, Browne’s writing can thus be seen as an argument for the humanity of the blind. Contrary to the expectations of her many readers who knew that she had no visual memory, when she speaks of the face’s incomprehensibility, she expresses the sighted protagonist, Frederick Favoursham’s, blindness rather than her own, to show that blindness is what we all share. With a *sighted* person as narrator, Browne shows him up as *incapable of seeing*. He cannot see the two most important people in his life; he fails to perceive or understand even when they are right in front of him. Thus, I argue, Browne debunks the idea that sighted people are *inherently* better. To put it differently, by encircling her protagonist’s life with images of the face, and by showing how much he fails to ‘see’ the meaning embedded therein, Browne exposes the ableist assumptions that prioritise vision and the social norms that depend upon it.

I will first outline how the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries used the term ‘sympathy’, followed by a close reading of Browne’s novel in respect of the uses and expectations of a conventional I-narrator in life writing and Browne’s exploration of that convention. Finally, by placing Browne’s work within the larger context of disability narrative, I analyse the meaning of being ‘blind/disabled’ in the novel and demonstrate how Browne undoes the supposed opposites of sighted versus blind.

Sympathetic Imagination and Ethics

Up to the early twentieth century to be ‘sympathetic’ is nothing more than being ethical, — to act on moral reasons and judgements. This notion is at the core of my analysis of Browne’s text, dealing with topics of ‘face’ and vision, in a literal sense or otherwise. I argue that Browne wants us to imagine what Others’ lives are like, especially when supposedly less fortunate than our own, either because of fewer sensory phenomena or a total lack of vision. Since these states are often entangled with poverty and illness, imagination here necessarily invokes sympathy on several levels. Awakening its powers, and extending them towards Others, is a rudimentary step toward leading an ethical life, preceding ‘learning about’ or ‘understanding’ these lives. To imagine is, to borrow Adam Smith’s words, to “feel with” (Smith 170; pt. II, sec. I, ch. 2), to think of Others with

sympathy. The powers and limits of what I call, although it is not my own term, “sympathetic imagination”¹ is another thread running through this study, often entwining with the concept of a face.

I will take my direction from earlier understandings of sympathy which at the very least we know resonated with writers and readers in the nineteenth century. In common modern usage, ‘sympathy’ and ‘empathy’ indicate roughly the same thing: congruence of the observer and the observed. But only roughly, because empathy is generally considered to be a preferable attitude to take towards Others. This evaluation surfaced shortly after the term’s appearance in English-speaking countries in the early twentieth century.

Nineteenth-century people with disabilities confronted multiple hurdles to achieving full acknowledgment as fellow-beings. Reading and writing, and a wide range of physical, intellectual, and social activities, were either considered irrelevant to the blind, or were actively denied them, in keeping with widespread abled perceptions of disability. The first educational institution for blind children was founded in 1784 in Paris (Bonner 14–16), and the first English school for blind students opened in 1791. Although the momentum of policy reforms regarding the welfare of persons with disabilities kept growing in the nineteenth century (Braddock and Parish 28), the scarcity of assistive technology and institutions, which still confronted a philosophical and psychological problem posed by blindness (Olsen 75–76), prevented people with visual impairment from expressing themselves in their own voice (Newman 275; Mitchel and Snyder 65–66). As Iain Hutchinson points out, their stories were predominantly written by “experts and professionals”—who were “always” men—as they assumed themselves authorities (93). Critics express concern over such scenarios where sighted authors, including writers of fiction, took an exclusive role in representing blindness (Paterson 160; Bolt 93–96), and rightly so. No matter how sympathetic the person was, he might still make misjudgements about the subjects. Literary representations of blindness, or other physical, and thus visible, afflictions for that matter, could make sympathy a “tricky business” (Greiner 9).

Taken overall, such historical context underscores why sympathetic imagination, the faculty that enables us to place ourselves in the situation of the suffering of others, is called for. Despite those impediments, some—though not many—pre-twentieth-century people with differently-functioning bodies managed to record and publish their life stories. And some blind writers preceding Browne pointed out the lack of sympathetic imagination.

For instance, the eighteenth-century poet Thomas Blacklock conveyed in candid language his anger and exasperation in response to the slights of the seeing world,

¹ Emphasising empathy’s “expressive force”, David Depew argues that its prominence was the necessary consequence of a previous “deflation/descent” of sympathy from “the sense of universal attunement and resonance in romanticism to the smarmy sense of pity and superiority” that the term now suggests (105). Researchers therefore came to distinguish the terms by claiming that while sympathy is motivated by a self-absorbed interest, empathy involves a deep engagement with and understanding of the experience of the other person (Sinclair et al. 440–43).

protesting that displaying one's tears in the presence of others could originate from self-righteousness, pretentiousness, egotism, and hypocrisy. Similarly, the nineteenth-century biographer James Wilson created a collective biography of blind people to demonstrate their ability to accomplish a series of unaccompanied travels. In so doing, Wilson corroborated Blacklock's statement that, for visually impaired children, charitable or benevolent protection would be more harmful than helpful (Nagado 40–41, 76–78).

These earlier narratives help us to grasp the representation of sympathy in the novel and to situate Browne's work within a long, but often underrepresented, tradition of disability life writing. Such narratives, I argue, can provide examples of how, and under what circumstances, sympathetic imagination works differently (or not) for those lacking a sense.

The Concept of “Face” and Self in relation to Others: Browne's Brief Biography

Frances Browne was born as a healthy child in the small village of Stranorlar, Ireland, in 1816. Despite losing her sight due to smallpox when she was eighteen months old, in her prime Browne was well known for her poems and children's stories. As she recollects, her quest for knowledge was nothing but laborious. Formal education was unavailable for her, just as for other children with disabilities in that period; her education only came as the fruit of a tireless effort and determination (*Star of Attéghéi* ix–x). With her first verse having appeared in an unnamed provincial paper, Browne entered the literary marketplace by publishing a few verses in the *Irish Penny Journal* (Easley 105). Her first collected poems, *The Star of Attéghéi; The Vision of Schwartz; and Other Poems*, was published in 1844.

In 1847, as one of the nineteenth-century Irish immigrants who departed their home for somewhere more promising, Browne, accompanied by her younger sister, left her village—where manual labour was a predominant way of living—for Edinburgh, to join celebrated literary circles, and then went to London in 1852. With the assistance of her sister, and later her secretary, as an amanuensis, throughout her career Browne energetically published poems in journals such as the *Athenæum*, *Hood's Magazine*, and *Lady Blessington's Keepsake* (Easley 105; Preface ix); she also wrote children's stories, novels, and reviews, becoming celebrated as “the blind poetess of Ulster” (McLean, *Other East* 136; Blair 134). As suggested by the title poem “The Star of Attéghéi”, which dramatises the ongoing forced migration of Circassians and Turkic Caucasians, Browne's works called attention to socially, culturally, or politically disadvantaged people drawn from a personal to a national scale, always attempting “to give voice to the unheard” (McLean, *Other East* 153).

Browne lived and continued writing in London until her death at the age of 63. In the course of her life away from her home, Browne sent her earnings to her family, though her own life, as a woman immigrant writer with a disability, was not necessarily in easy circumstances. Although the name of Browne was almost forgotten, interest in her works

has surged since 2016, the bicentennial year of her birth,² and a new collection of her work was published by Raymond Blair in 2012.

The Contemporary Reception of Browne

In 1842, Marguerite Gardiner, Countess of Blessington, the editor of the journal *The Keepsake*, wrote regarding Frances Browne's poem: "It is impossible for the Editor to permit these beautiful verses to pass from under her hand, without adding a word or two, which must give them yet additional interest" (111). She was referring to Browne's visual impairment—a very typical comment that Browne, or any other visually impaired writer for that matter, would commonly have attached to their work. The unusual aspects of her personal life were the major interest of nineteenth-century critics, reviewers, and readers. Browne was almost always identified, characterised, and evaluated as an authoress without a visual faculty (Nelson 19; Tilley, "Frances Browne" 150–52; Marchbanks 53).

Though it was and still is not uncommon for writers with disabilities to be labelled with regard to their differently-functioning body, in Browne's case, this characterisation would have been rather unjust; since, firstly, her works are often very visually detailed accounts of a wide range of historical, geographical, and contemporary settings, most of which she never could have visited; and secondly, rarely does she address her physical (in)capacity in her works.

Probably the most notable analytical assessment of Browne's writing appears in John Kitto's *The Lost Senses: Deafness and Blindness* (1845). Deaf himself, Kitto focuses on the special relation that blind people form with language, and in the section devoted to Browne's poetical works, Kitto's critical eyes are primarily on the "inaccuracy" of her use of language. His comment is worth quoting, since he not only addresses how a blind person ideally should be thought of by the sighted, but also whether or not the disability should affect an evaluation of her skill as a writer:

In any case, Miss Browne's effusions would be received with sympathy and respect; but no degree of sympathy and indulgence would induce people *to read* and take interest in that which is not in itself pleasing, or which does not meet the requirements of cultivated taste . . . (II: 302)

Should "sympathy" in Kitto's usage have aligned with that of the mid-nineteenth century, it would have referred to a shared feeling, rather than being confined to the more condescending emotions often identified as pity or benevolence. But in the passage above, by linking "indulgence" with "sympathy", Kitto seems to be suggesting that a

² A monument to her memory was erected in the Pound Stranolar Historical Garden (*Donegal Daily*, 16 January 2016), poetry competitions have taken place ("Frances Browne Bicentennial Competition". Mayo County Council newsletter, Arts Update, Spring 2013); and a play of her life entitled "Frances Browne: In My Mind's Eye" was performed twice in Ireland, and most recently at American Irish Historical Society in New York City in 2019.

blind woman would deserve to be pitied by “people” as someone disabled or different, although this would not entail extending the same tolerance to her writing if it did not please, or meet cultivated standards.

The same tone and rhetorical use of the term ‘sympathy’ were adopted by other reviewers of Browne’s work such as the editor of *Star of Attéghéi* and an unsigned *Dublin Review* article. How, then, could readers respond to the ‘poor’ blind heroine reproduced in Browne’s novel *My Share of the World*? Especially when the novel is subtitled “An Autobiography”? What complicates matters here is that Browne, writing from the ‘other’ side within an ocularcentric society, offers a heroine who has lost her vision and then all hope for life, but presented from the point of view of a sighted male narrator, the fictional autobiographical subject. As a result, although the novel possesses a simple dichotomous framework that moves between sighted and blind, male and female, dominant and subservient, the identity of the writer and the presented identity of the speaker add a further twist which reorientates the reader to the content of the story.

The Significance of Face in *My Share of the World*

Before the days of visual or aural virtual communication technology, interactions with other people took place through written correspondence, telegraph, or face-to-face. Lacking visual experience other than what can be imagined from the accounts of sighted writers and companions, the blind author’s discerning and delineating her world-making process is novel and interesting in itself. Though blind, Browne is clearly fascinated with the importance of faces. She knows that they seem to confirm the expectations set up by sight, and therefore, faces seem to tell a story about the world she lives in. Through the protagonist, Frederick Favoursham’s narrative, Browne addresses the question of what the human face signifies to us, whether sighted or blind, from a young age. Most of us would agree with Frederick that the “starting point of one’s memory” is one’s “true beginning of life” (I: 1). Given the blindness of his creator, however, it is striking that his first memory is a scene with several human faces:

The absorbed look of every face in that room, whether speakers or listeners, may have engraved the scene on my recollection—where it stands distinct and unattached, in the fashion of first remembered things. (I: 2)

One could argue that the mode and purpose of this “autobiography” are already captured in this moment, in which Frederick objectifies the memory of his childhood self, examining it as if it were a picture—or an engraving. The relationship between self-construction, visual self-reflection, and the narrator’s early conscience is demonstrated in the scene (Tilley, *Blindness and Writing* 187–88). Though too young to understand the situation, or to recognise later any of the faces, from this earliest of points onward, his memories are filled with human faces. The past and the present are linked by Frederick’s visual impressions of the faces of Others—and not always of the welcoming, positive kind, as he later concludes when he understands that the people in the room were agitatedly discussing wills and settlements after one of their relatives’ demise. In fact,

what lies behind his vivid memories of faces is only “a blank, broken by half memories of falls, frights, and great surprises” (I: 2).

As it turns out, although he eventually achieved high social status, living in an affluent milieu, Frederick has lived a secluded, solitary life. The son of a forsaken, poor mother, at fourteen he becomes an apprentice to a portrait artist—arguably the profession most focused upon and surrounded by faces. On his path towards manhood, he changes his careers frequently, looking for his right place in the world. Although he meets many different types of people over the years, Frederick, except for his mother, only attaches to and eventually truly connects with two individuals: his first love, Lucy Rose, and a dear and only friend, Constantine de Lavance.

Frederick meets Lucy when he is sixteen years old, and his account is filled with romantic imagery, poetic expressions, and a vivid account of her appearance: “her straw hat had fallen off, and a flow of curls like mingled gold and jet fell round the loveliest face that ever came between me and sunshine” (I: 102). Addressing us directly, Frederick stresses the overwhelmingly visual nature of the experience. “Reader, perhaps you are not a believer in love at first *sight*. . . but I *know* that there was then opened in my life a spring which never closed again, though it turned to bitter waters” (italics mine; I: 103–4). The scene’s visual impact is presented as a revelation. He *knows* that his life was profoundly affected by this sight, and that its memory, regardless of what later happened, remains vivid.

At a later date, Frederick encounters Lavance, who proves to be as significant as Lucy is for his life, and whose first appearance is equally memorable. Yet Frederick’s meetings with Lucy and Lavance stand in sharp contrast. He learns something about Lucy’s background in advance, and their introduction follows the formal convention of the day (I: 102–3). Lavance on the contrary enters Frederick’s life as a total stranger. A man with a somewhat foreign bearing, except that he is somehow related to Lucy’s deceased French mother, Lavance’s origins and past and present circumstances are unknown to Frederick until the very end. Their first encounter is casual and almost accidental, although the circumstances seem evasive and even suspicious. When Frederick chances one day to look outside, there is Lavance, “slowly pacing along with an eye to the doors and windows”. Although other people on the street come and go, Frederick recalls that “his appearance caught and kept my attention” (I: 59) as he is “like nobody I had ever seen”:

a foreign-looking gentleman, as I mentally styled him, in spite of his travel-soiled and careless dress. . . . In size he was neither large nor little, but his figure seemed particularly erect, slender, and finely moulded; his features too were fine, almost classical; he did not seem to have a beard, but his hair, which was longer than most men’s and hung straight without wave or curl, had an intense blackness, matching the clear brown of his complexion. Who could he be, and whom did he want in our street? (I: 59)

Frederick’s unmistakably approving manner in describing Lavance—“fine”, “classical”, and “clear”—is worth quoting at length, as it highlights the attachments he develops for

Lavance at first sight, something that does not usually happen to him, with the exception of Lucy's case.

The interesting stranger turns out to be an unexpected and long-lost guest of Frederick's master. Despite the lack of a formal introduction, the two converse over dinner, gleaning each other's names from their host. Although Lavance speaks to Frederick "as if he had been seven years acquainted" (I: 64), when they meet again sometime later, it is once again abruptly, and as if they were strangers:

I had seen the man before: in spite of the gipsy dress and foreign tongue his face was known to my memory, and when he smiled I knew it was Lavance. At me he never looked but once . . . it was like a perfect stranger, and I would have spoken, but it struck me that he might not wish to be known in that trim. (I: 118)

Like Lucy, Lavance becomes a crucial component of Frederick's life. Readers learn this from Frederick many years afterwards, when he is writing his "autobiography", and looking back at the important events of his past. Visual memory of such personal relationships directs his whole sense of his life and actions in ways that I argue epitomises Browne's proposition on Otherness, as an inseparable form of visual engagement, or lack thereof, with the face. Frederick presents his life as a series of attempts, struggles, and small successes to read the faces of Others. The two most significant Others in his life exert the resistant powers of the face upon him—they will not yield to being comprehended, and leave his world without becoming fixed through interpretation.

To Frederick's concealed grief, Lucy distances herself by marrying Frederick's relative: "Lucy Fenton was George's wife, and never could or would be more to me" (III: 228). Lavance also departs, leaving England due to a sudden, undisclosed "summons", despite Frederick's desperate pleas: "why will you leave me? There is nobody in the world cares for you as much as I do . . . give them up and stay at home, or let me go with you" (III: 43). Having lost these romantic and fraternal connections, Frederick devotes himself to his career and other responsibilities, eventually achieving a reasonably decent social state, given his disadvantaged background. But Lucy's eyesight starts to decline, further aggravated by the emotional distress caused by the domestic and social expectations imposed upon her by George and his extended family. With a certain amount of money now at his disposal, Frederick begins considering having Lucy's eyes looked at by an eye specialist in London; he also tries by every means possible to gather information about Lavance. But George dismisses Frederick's offer of help, insisting that "Lucy has had her share as well as the rest of us; we must all submit to the dispensations of Providence" (III: 178), and the search for Lavance proves to be fruitless.

At the climax of Frederick's narrative, Lucy and Lavance both depart from his world, a turn of plot that exemplifies Browne's take on and interpretation of Otherness. Serving now as Secretary of the Board of Trade, Frederick one day hears "a sound of angry contention" coming from his patron's office. Rushing into the room, he encounters "a man with his back to me", who "dashed out the two candles and darted to the side window". Grasping the man's intention to escape through a window under cover of

darkness, Frederick grabs him by the shoulder: “I could not see his face, nor he mine, I thought”, but after a brief struggle, the man “wrenched himself from me with a dexterous twist, saying, in the most familiar voice, ‘Good night, Frederick’” (III: 242). But before Frederick can understand, much less react to the greeting, the man loses his balance and falls through the window, as the pistol in his breast pocket goes off. A revelation occurs instantly after that fatal moment; under “the flickering gas light” of the street, Frederick sees “the fixed but still beautiful and fearless face of my long-lost friend, Lavance!” (III: 243).

Still in shock and disbelief that Lavance is gone forever, Frederick visits Lucy. Shortly before the above tragic event, a lawyer brings him important news about the recent death of his distant relative, who has bequeathed a massive fortune. Frederick is astonished to find his name listed as the third heir in order of succession to “inherit his entire property without condition or control” (III: 254). The first two are predictably Lavance and Lucy: “These three were to succeed each other according to the order in which they were named. Whichever of them survived the testator was sole legatee, with unlimited rights over his estates, real and personal” (ibid.). Carrying this news to Lucy, Frederick hopes that such financial security will relieve her sufferings to some extent, perhaps even cure her eyesight, and certainly gain her a stronger place in her household. But another tragedy awaits him. She too has left his world: suffering from deteriorating vision and the sense of being a “useless burden” to her family, Lucy chooses to end her life just before Frederick arrives.

During their last visit, Frederick had not recognised the signs of impending suicide present in her speech and behaviour. Despite her distressed circumstances, Lucy had seemed to him serene: “I thought she looked years older, but that must have been fancy, for her face was composed, and even cheerful, as if some great settlement had come to her mind.” “Had a hope of better days dawned upon her?” he asked himself, perhaps because her husband had done “penance” and received “absolution”. But he “could not guess” (III: 219). When Frederick again raises the idea that she could consult “some able oculist” in London, telling her that “Whether successful or not, it will make me imagine myself of some use in the world for the rest of my days” (III: 221), she replies that her situation “will never be improved in this world” with a “calmness and decision” that “startled” him (III: 220). When it comes time for the two men to leave—Frederick for his residence and George for a business trip in London - Lucy runs to George and throws her arms around his neck, saying, “a good and loving husband you have been to me, and I wish I had been a more useful wife to you, but I did my best” (III: 227). This moment strikes Frederick forcefully: “It was not usual for Lucy to make such demonstrations, and I knew she was above shamming. How was it then? . . . I—how did that parting tell on me?” (ibid.) The question is answered at her funeral, where Frederick cannot help seeing in her the face he first saw and longed for in life:

How wonderfully like my mother she looked when I saw her for the last time!
Does the soul leave its truest impress on the countenance when parting, and thus
make manifest resemblances never seen till then? (III: 268–69).

Lucy's blindness is arguably the most predictable content in a novel written by a blind author, and as Heather Tilley points out, it functions as a metaphor for the social and domestic subordination and confinement of women within the patriarchal and class system of Victorian England (*Blindness and Writing*, 182). Browne shows that becoming blind is devastating; also, more importantly, that the devastating aspects may not come from the blindness per se but from people's false assumptions that the blind woman becomes 'useless'. Blindness is an addition to the 'disabling attitude' imposed by patriarchy on women.

Yet, while blindness here serves as a literary trope, it is the 'I' narrator Frederick's vision, or lack of it, that can be read most profitably as an equivocal trope that illustrates the ethics of a face-to-face relationship with Others. Browne produces a first-person narrative from the perspective of a sighted male, who reflects on his own understanding of his life and others'. Even if readers might assume that actual autobiographical details appearing in the text would be associated with the blind characters, Browne's choice of narrator, and how she deploys him, undercuts such easy identifications.

Conclusion

Even as Frederick casts his eyes upon the blind character's delicate, vulnerable face with deep sympathy, readers come increasingly to recognize that Browne's sympathy is primarily extended towards the sighted narrator. Through 'reading' popular novels and poems Browne absorbs the common idea that sympathetic feeling originates in, and is reproduced by, visual experience. In a way, in line with Adam Smith's notion of sympathy she then repurposes the idea and "feels with" Frederick, understanding that all human beings are blind to some extent, and therefore deserving of our sympathy. She thus takes apart the binaries of sighted versus blind, which I contend is Browne's argument regarding the limitations of both sighted and blind, how we are all alike in our limitations and yet potentials.

Although the frame of Browne's text faithfully emulates the conventions of the nineteenth-century auto/biography, what we have here is a double-narrative effect, in which two different voices from two different perspectives tell one story of blindness. The male narrator's 'blindness' of knowledge about Others and himself is acutely depicted by means of Browne's invisible presence as the author.

For Frederick, visual perception, and particularly of human faces, dominates his memory, weaving moments and persons together as an important component of his identity. But at the same time, the face for Frederick is an indefinite and indeterminate sign that demands interpretation, but is highly vulnerable to misinterpretation. Explicating the trope of face, Browne thus demonstrates the fallacy that physical sight is necessary for superior insight, undermining the sighted person's claims to the clearest knowledge.

Browne's novel can therefore be read as a critique of ableism as exhibited through the sighted narrator's intellectual hubris, indolence, and naivete. To put it in Heidi James-

Dunbar's words about life writing, the "ungraspability" of Otherness causes a life-writer "to falter", as Frederick as an autobiographer did. And yet, while the novel calls into question the soundness of ableist indulgence in sight, by combining the structure and conventions of life writing with Adam Smith's fellow-feeling, Browne explores the dilemma, the ironies, and the complexities of even a sighted person's sympathising with Others. Drawing on her own experience of the sighted world's mistakes about her, Browne herself does not falter. She exposes the sighted characters' limited in/sight.

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