

Blindness and the Sense of the World in Frances Browne's Autofiction

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Introduction

In 1861, Frances Browne published her first novel, *My Share of the World: An Autobiography*. The narrator of the novel, Frederick Favoursham, laments when his first love, Lucy Fenton, commits suicide after being agonized by her dwindling vision: “[W]hen the burden outgrows the strengths so far that moral as well as physical energies begin to fail, and there is no door but death’s that will welcome our weariness what remains but to creep into that quiet shelter?... Her days were threatened by a calamity, the most terrible in the list of human ills...” (III: 264).

As the literary conventions of book titles suggest, the novel is not necessarily the account of Browne’s life, but it is purported to be Frederick’s autobiography. However, readers cannot readily separate the story from the author, given that Browne was already fairly known as “the blind poetess of Ulster” (Tilley, *Blindness and Writing* 13) when the novel was published. The immediate questions raised are why Browne chose to share parts of her life story in a novel narrated by a male, sighted character, and what implications reading it as an autobiographical novel—what came to be called ‘autofiction’ in the twentieth century—might have for our understanding of writing about a ‘disabled’ life through a fictional form.

Browne was born in Stranorlar, County Donegal, in 1816, as the seventh child of the first Postmaster in the town. Although she lost sight when she was eighteen months old in consequence of smallpox, Browne threw herself into learning all she could, with help from friends and siblings (Browne, *Star* ix-x). Her first volume of poems, entitled *The Star of Attéghéi; The Vision of Schwartz; and Other Poems*, was published in 1844, and the second followed in 1847. After moving to Edinburgh, and then to London, Browne expanded her range to include reviews, children’s stories, and essays, and successfully made a career as a favourite writer at that time (McLean, *Other East* 136; Blair 134). And then, when she penned her first novel, Browne took the voice of a young Irish man to compose his memoir told by himself in his later years.

Although previously overlooked, in recent years, there has been a resurgence of scholarly and public interest in the works of Frances Browne, particularly following the bicentennial celebration of her birth in 2016.¹ For example, Heather Tilley’s analysis in *Blindness and Writing: from Wordsworth to Gissing* (2018) compares Browne’s blind heroine to Wilkie Collins’ *Poor Miss Finch*, highlighting the authors’ different approaches in presenting blindness. Similarly, in *New Media and the Rise of the Popular Woman Writer 1832-1860* (2021), Alexis

¹ For example, poetry competitions were launched in Browne’s honour, and a monument was erected in the Historical Park in the village. The commemoration of Browne’s life culminated with the play “In My Mind’s Eye” by playwright Shirley-Anne Godfrey. The play was performed twice in the anniversary year, and upon receiving positive responses, it was staged two more times: as part of the Belfast International Arts Festival in 2018, and at the First Irish Festival at Origin Theatre in New York in 2019.

Easley discusses how Browne strategically managed her public persona, revealing how she tailored different aspects of her identity to suit various audiences.²

However, criticism has been directed at Browne's portrayal of blindness in *My Share of the World* as it merely adheres to typical Victorian norms of disability representation in literature, both in works about and by people with disabilities (Tilley 183).³ I argue that Browne's treatment of blindness demonstrates a nuanced self-awareness and an adeptness in navigating contemporary literary trends. By intentionally repurposing a common literary trope, Browne depicts "a calamity, the most terrible in the list of human ills" from a third-person perspective, thereby subverting readers' preconceived notions and expectations.

Disability and Autofictional Writing

There has been comparatively limited critical writing regarding autofiction as a possible choice for placing disability in a broader literary context. What is lacking in the current literature is a cross-disciplinary approach that takes into account the sociopolitical construction of disabilities; because of unexamined preconceptions about representing disabilities in particular, the re-enforcing prejudice and dismissiveness towards the life writing of people with disabilities have not been fully acknowledged (Mitchell and Snyder 2; Davis, *Enforcing Normalcy* 29). Part of the difficulty here is the degree to which illness and disability narratives are either conflated or distinguished. Unlike illnesses, which presumably have their own life course, and can be imagined as ending, as Catherine Ruth McGowan points out, disability is generally considered to be a "self-evident condition of bodily inadequacy" and "private misfortune" (44).⁴ Despite common features in the experience of writers living with illness and with disabilities, there seems to be greater hesitation in discussing the lives and narratives of the latter. David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder point out that "critical parallels" between the social discourse of disability and that of other minority group rights "have been slow in coming" (2); more bluntly and vividly, Michael Bérubé declares that Disability Studies all together is "rendered the sideshow of a sideshow" (viii).⁵

Those critics who have delved into the disparities in discussions of the social dynamics of other marginal identities and disability agree that in both cases, the root of the problem lies in the tenacity of preconceived notions about disabilities (Garland-Thomson, "Re-Shaping" 6; Davis, *Enforcing Normalcy* 29). Addressing the continuous normalization process implicit within American myths of the relationship between the 'normative' body and independence, Lennard J. Davis criticizes "the race-class-gender triad" as often internally divisive, and exclusionary in relation to how disability fits into it. Davis argues that supposed alliances within the realm of identity politics function only nominally, as "the different identity groups clash on tactics and

² For details of Browne's professional endeavours, refer to Easley (270-72, 277-280).

³ For the Victorian conventions of disability writing, see Warne (183) and Holmes (xx).

⁴ For instance, the division recognized between mental illness and intellectual or developmental disabilities has been a subject of interest in interdisciplinary fields. See, for example, Scheyett et al. 13-23.

⁵ In addition to those cited, see also Mollow 269; Couser "Disability, Life Narrative" 602.

agendas,” offering “a fantasy of cohesion without actually creating one.” But even though the “one thing these groups have in common is the wish to have the full rights of any citizen” (Davis, “Identity Politics” 535), those who endorse a more democratic form of politics for the underrepresented have nevertheless only slowly and unevenly moved towards including disabled people, and particularly women with disabilities, in progressing towards better understanding and, possibly, constructive change (Jung 265).⁶

However, considerable attention within the field by now has been dedicated to intersectionality, fostering a burgeoning body of literature that explores the potential of autofiction as a tool for disrupting the regulating ideologies underlying the normative identity politics that marginalize females, non-whites, or any other group that does not fit in the category of the dominant group. And there are writers, professional or otherwise, who speak from the margins, seeing autofiction as a medium for expressing their ethical convictions and experiences. One of these, for example, is Karen Ferreira-Meyers, who argues that certain Anglophone and Francophone African texts grant their women authors their “autofictional visibility” (134). The noted writer Edmund White locates his work within the genre of “gay autofiction,” arguing that the form grants the author “both the prestige of confession . . . and the total freedom of imaginative invention” (8). Noteworthy among recent contributions is Elizabeth Grubgeld’s exploration in *Disability and Life Writing in Post-Independence Ireland*, where she posits that disability life writing in Ireland is uniquely influenced by “cultural factors and the protocols of genre” (23), examining “how genre choices create or diminish possibilities for writers and how they affect reading practices” (74). As demonstrated by these writings, autofiction can be one of the many potential filters for the ever-increasing volume of writing about disability, illness, injury, suffering, and healing.

Literary scholars thus have explored the potentiality of the genre as a new lens to reevaluate the therapeutic benefits of writing about one’s suffering and pain for the entire human community. Perhaps one of the most notable contributions has been that of Leigh Gilmore’s *The Limits of Autobiography: Trauma and Testimony* (2001). Interrogating the widespread notion of “conventions about truth telling” (3) in trauma narratives, Gilmore argues that the primary function of the genre is to free people, both authors and the readers, from traumatic experiences, emphasizing “the productivity of the limit” imposed upon autobiographical narrative (14). Among those writers who commit to recovery through writing, Belinda Hilton incorporates her struggles into a story as a quest for self-knowledge, “a process of reading my self-worth” (58). Arthur W. Frank writes that as the person who tells the tale of a “fragile human body and a witness to what endures” (xi–ii), “the wounded storyteller” shares “the common bond of suffering” that “joins bodies in their shared vulnerability” (xix).

These writers all agree that narratives of pain or disability, whether somatic or psychic, are highly significant to an increasingly prominent literary model of cure. Authors of such narratives frequently insist on the importance of expressing one’s experience as an invalid, and therefore someone considered ‘invalid’, through writing, not only as a means of gaining distance from the experienced pain or suffering, but also of identifying and countering the by-products of such

⁶ The same concerns are the subject of other scholars, including Garland-Thomson, “Feminist Theory” 279–94; Wendell 17–19, 31–44, 91.

suffering, such as discrimination, stigma, and self-denial. When it comes to Browne, some of her poems address autobiographical aspects. Publishers strategically promoted features like “her Irishness (...) her blindness and working-class roots” for branding purposes, and framed them as extremely uncommon experiences” in editorial prefaces (qtd. in Easley 261-62). Therefore, it is imperative to discern between autobiographical writing and autofictionality, wherein the author’s interior life supersedes external categorizations—how others see and label it.

Over the last three decades, critics have increasingly discussed the murky terrain between auto/biography and its various subsets, how we perceive and interact with narratives of our own and other people’s lives, and how we read and create narratives that draw on memory and recollection—in short, how and why we draw distinctions between factual and non-factual elements in auto/biography (Damlé and Rye 14). To put it another way, autofiction, or biofiction for that matter,⁷ is an attempt to acknowledge and deploy the blurred distinction between fact and fiction with the same degree of freedom often exercised with the fluid boundaries between auto/biography and the novel.

The publishing institutions in Browne’s time often required the omission or special labeling of the sparsely represented others. Accordingly, authors who were marked by other ‘different’ body categories—race, ethnicity, and disability, and earlier, gender—were expected to reveal their identities in accordance with those marks. In the same manner as in slave narratives, blind writers of the nineteenth century, such as James Wilson and Abram V. Courtney, claim their blindness and authorship on a title page. Browne’s novel differs from her predecessors’ and contemporaries’ work in two significant ways: the novel includes no said identifiers other than her name on the title page, and it uses a fictionalized voice.

What is novel about Browne’s work is its movement beyond the conventions of earlier, and many later disability narratives. Drawing upon the inherent fictionality of auto/biographical writing, and her own resources in creating an account that weaves together memory, conjecture, fiction, and imaginative sympathy, she shares her personal experience with abled ideology, but also a sense of compassion for the limiting consequences of such an ideology for the sighted. I argue that Browne inserts important aspects of her life history, her thoughts, and her understanding of her place in the world, and that, in so doing, she enables herself to explore her experiences with the forces of compromise and compassion in ways that more traditional forms of autobiography, and especially those by writers with disabilities, would not allow her to do. More specifically, Browne uses Frederick’s story to justify and achieve her ‘place’—her share of the world—and further to demonstrate that that place can be attained in an alternative way to a traditional, patriarchal way.

⁷ In this study, I choose to focus on autofiction as a fictional offshoot of life writing because memory plays a more significant role in it than in biofiction, or one of the other fact-fiction hybrid genres.

My Share of the World as Autofiction

My Share of the World deviates from the original definition of autofiction,⁸ and not only because the author's and the narrator's names differ—Browne is a blind woman writer whose adult life was a constant struggle to make ends meet, while Frederick is a young, able-bodied man who has followed a number of occupations. While his job-hopping may suggest the instability of his social status deriving from his lowly beginnings it is rather more indicative that the opportunities are opened up for him and that he can avail himself of them. Yet, when it comes to his and Browne's ways of living in the world, many coincidences blend in the creation of the bildungsroman narrative. Although Browne did not compose a full-fledged autobiography, she did document fragments of her life in various contexts, notably in letters to her friends and editors. The subsequent information is drawn from one of the most detailed sources, the Preface to *The Star of Attéghéi*, published in 1844.

To begin with, both the I-narrator and his creator are of Irish heritage and background. Both are of rather humble birth, but in time achieve a somewhat more successful social life in England. Despite a lack of formal schooling (I: 11; SA ix-xvi), both come to nurture and develop an appreciation of literature, as they were raised listening to fairy tales and other imaginative stories, including adventure and travel tales such as *Robinson Crusoe* (I: 11; SA xi). They recited and imitated verses they admired, eventually progressing to composing their own (I: 172, 220; SA xvii). And as the plot of the novel embodies, both eventually became writers.

As regards the treatment of blind persons, however, the far more important parallels are those between their understandings of the world, the self, and relations with others, and how they express them. My intention in outlining them here is not to connect the factual dots between Browne's life and the fictional narrative she created, or vice versa; nor am I trying to draw conclusions about the nature of writing one's life from what they hold in common. Rather, I am interested in the relationship between the author and the narrator, implied or otherwise, which enables Browne to draw writing and living together in ways that exceed the commonly-recognized limits of auto/biographical expression. In doing so, her narrative achieves an integrated and intertwined representation of disabilities, a feat not readily accomplished through more traditional forms of autobiography/biography, especially prior to the twentieth century. Of course, the cultural and critical difficulties involved with engaging with disability have not prevented disabled and abled people from writing about disability, regardless of the period. Despite considerable obstacles, disabled individuals were recording and publishing accounts of their lives in their voices (Newman 261–75), a few notable examples in the nineteenth century being Harriet Martineau, John Kitto, and Laura Bridgman. As for Browne, she asked her sister to take dictation of her stories, and in later years employed an amanuensis.

⁸ Serge Doubrovsky, who is considered to be the first author of autofiction, declares that autobiographical writing is “a privilege reserved for “the important people of this world,” supposedly done “in a refined style,” and that autofiction is therefore something different. His autofiction retains those formal qualities of presenting the supposed author, narrator, and protagonist as a single person that Philippe Lejeune famously called the “autobiographical pact.” Or if we think of autofiction as a fictional narrative composed “of strictly real events and facts” (Doubrovsky; qtd. in Blejmar 27), the implied binary suggests that the reading experience will primarily be a matter of keeping track of what is real and what is not.

It is however often the case that such writers, professional or otherwise, find they must foreground their physical or mental impairment, which powerfully determines how they are perceived as authors and how their narratives are understood. Adapting their voices and records to meet the existing assumptions of readers, and therefore to the commercial priorities of publishers, often can mean conforming to widespread stereotypes about the disabled. For instance, in “Conflicting Paradigms,” G. Thomas Couser discusses what he calls “hegemonic scripts” (79) and culturally “preferred rhetorics” that have often been imposed on disability life writers as the unfortunate consequence of the prevailing normative system. Consequently, as Couser and other critics point out, disability narratives are often forced into such modes as the “pity-me narrative,” the “I-had-it-better-before-I-became-disabled narrative” (Yergeau), or more crudely, narratives that could be called “inspiration porn.”⁹

Arguably, not much of Browne’s prose was reviewed compared to her earlier, poetic works. The point is indicated by Marya DeVoto in her entry in *The Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, in which she provides a summary of the general receptions of Browne’s work by her contemporaries; seemingly without exceptions, reviewers’ attention was drawn primarily to Browne’s biographical portrait, which consequently highlights their eschewal of the aesthetic value of her works (71, 74-75). In DeVoto’s words, the picture we obtain from those commentaries is no more or no less than “the bravely struggling blind poetess critics liked to admire” (74).

By using Frederick instead in her novel, Browne situates the ‘I’ in someone with some freedom of action in the world, and thus unites reader, character, and creator in a community of fellow-feeling, and therefore responsibility, that arises from the ability to acknowledge others. Even more importantly, however, by presenting what options Frederick can explore, and how he succeeds and fails in navigating the social world that has a place for him, Browne suggests that a shadowy yet highly perceptive figure, one who does not have such options, can therefore perceive Frederick’s own ‘blindness’ as a sighted, situated person in the world, and convey that to equally unconsciously blind readers. Browne forges links between the self and the world, within which one shares and occupies space, through writing that bridges the distances between them, enabling sympathy with others.

To put it differently, Browne grapples at length with the nature of our acts and sympathies, asking what justifies ‘my place’ at the expense of others, who could equally and righteously claim their own place. Indeed, the protagonist’s series of blunders in the novel are mostly related to misinterpretations of others’ claim for place, as though he cannot see their struggles. There are a number of accounts of female characters’ lives that address the issue of entitlement or exclusion which underscores the male protagonist’s status of blindness. The issue of entitlement or exclusion permeates the novel, and is articulated and further critiqued by the female characters, with regards to the male protagonist’s status of blindness. Frederick is searching for his ‘place’, in both a materialistic and a philosophical sense—his fair share of social interaction,

⁹ Eleana Vaja points out that the term was first used by Stella Young in her TED talk, “I Am Not Your Inspiration, Thank You,” in 2014 (187).

of tangible wealth, of reputation, but also his more fundamental sense of self and personal meaning, which he seeks through an appeal to the presence of others.

Yet a question remains unposed. Frederick clearly assumes he is entitled to his share, however insignificant it might be, and sets out to claim it. Why does he believe this? Why does he unreflectively assume his right to his slice of pie, and at whose cost will it be? At any period of history, even when a social pyramid or hierarchy is subject to assessment and critique, an underlying premise is that there is an already existing social structure *within* which individuals or groups are divided, most commonly into hierarchical layers stretching from the bottom to the top. What is less commonly acknowledged, however, is that there are always people who in some sense are positioned permanently *outside* of the frame. They are not acknowledged as really having a place, and this fact is more generally encapsulated by the female characters in the novel.

Other People's Place in the World

As Herbert Spencer began writing on what became known as Social Darwinism after reading *On the Origin of Species*, Browne presents her own account of a mode of systemic oppression through total exclusion, by means of her portraits of female characters. Pushed to the margins of society by circumstance, many of the women in the novel are ultimately denied a place within the decent community. More often than not, exclusion due to gender is linked to other factors, such as class, nationality, age, and dis/ability, but what doubles the burden on these characters is their exclusion from even seeking their position in relation to the world. Neither literally nor figuratively can they secure a place.

Instead of recounting the patterns of female characters' obliteration from an observational standpoint, Browne explores the notion of being ethically blind by displacing them into a familiar Bildungsroman plot. Seeing Frederick's life structured by a series of those of women, readers will take notice how his hopes, struggles, and aspirations—the meaning of his life—are justified by his relationship with them. Those women are deprived of status within the social world—a forsaken mother, a seduced and abandoned mistress, and a blind wife eventually replaced by a physically more robust woman. But portraying a blind heroine, or for that matter, a succession of rejected or ignored women, is only one possible conduit that Browne employs for introducing autobiographical content into her novel, and despite some of the visible similarities in their lives, it is not the most significant one. In fact, her decision not to use one of these women as the first-person narrator is an implicit refusal to assume the role of a victim, or an object of pity, or an outcast or social exile. Abandoned by her husband for a more comfortable life in America, Frederick's mother for instance is relegated to the role of a non-paying lodger of her husband's family. Her advice to Frederick confirms her sense of exclusion and dependence: "If you marry, be a good man to your wife, for women have a poor turn in this world" (I: 131).

But the most significant character in the novel is Lucy Fenton, who, through convention, then disability, is denied a place in the world. The deterioration of her sight leads not only to a decline in her physical abilities, and a steady decrease in what she is permitted to do—most notably, a prohibition against reading and writing imposed on her by her husband George and her doctor. A

lapse follows her detachment from even an assigned role into “temporary insanity” (III: 268), which then becomes the official explanation for her suicide. I hardly need to mention that the doctor is male. Browne’s interest in how signs of a woman attempting to claim intellectual freedom and independence are pre-empted on medical grounds anticipates the work of such renowned later feminist writers as Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Virginia Woolf, and Sylvia Plath.

Well before this final tragedy, however, Lucy had not only been deliberately displaced but replaced. As her sight weakens, George’s mother and two unmarried sisters devote “their entire energies to the surveillance of Lucy’s ménage” (III: 182). With everyone in the household focused on Lucy’s inability to fulfill her assigned role when she accidentally knocks the tea set onto the floor while serving her party guests, George predictably loses his temper, asking the maid to “put things to rights and make the tea” (III: 210) in place of his incapable wife. Miss Gathers, a “plain, coarse, uneducated” (III: 186) and “hard-faced little woman” (III: 169) assumes the “office at once by transferring herself to Lucy’s seat” (III: 211). What is especially striking in this scene is the emphasis Frederick, and therefore Browne, places on the powers of sight and hearing of the ambitious and aptly named Miss Gathers. With a “pair of eyes as sharp as needles, with no expression in them but that of keen sight” and “ears acute enough to hear the grass growing,” fortified by a nature that is “devoid of feeling, scruple, or attachment” (III: 184), she is in Frederick’s mind the exact opposite of his beloved Lucy, and she steadily expands her place in the Fenton household as Lucy loses hers.

As for the name ‘Lucy’, which derives from ‘lux’, meaning ‘light’ in Latin (Roy 1: 411–12), some might say that it is ironic because she is the one who eventually loses her sight. From a young age, she was a bright woman who had a lot of ‘light’ to offer. Even after her cold-hearted family dims her, she remains the light of Frederick’s life. As a blind and, in the Fentons’ eyes, incapable person, Lucy becomes increasingly objectified; ultimately, the only action she can take is to stop being a person at all. Browne has the conventionally capable Miss Gathers literally assume Lucy’s place. “In the second year of his widowed state” George takes Miss Gathers as his wife (III: 284).

Milly Wilton, a sister of Frederick’s former colleague, provides another example. She and her brother are orphans and raised by their aunt. Although they have an identical childhood, and although she is three years older and her brother readily acknowledges her superiority to him with admiration (I: 287), their respective genders make their journeys through life very different—or more accurately, he has one, while she does not. While a relative offers the brother a place as “a teaching pupil,” Milly has no other option than to stay “at home to be useful” (I: 284). Though they do nothing to change her circumstances, her relatives and acquaintances ceaselessly pity her “for her having to work and for not being married.” The continual reminder of her total lack of position ultimately succeeds “in waking up the girl to a sense of those great misfortunes, and thus did her full share of the mischief” (III: 49). Driven to desperation, Milly ends up the mistress of an affluent gentleman, and Frederick astutely observes that “It was the rag of rank which fluttered in the poor girl’s eyes, and dazzled those of her family, till they lent themselves to her downfall, and their own” (III: 160). Nor does this end represent a rise or fall in status, but rather one of a series of transfers to other dislocated realms of life.

The stereotypic fate of the 'fallen woman' awaits Milly. A kept object living in clandestine obscurity until her lover/benefactor/jailor abandons her for a more suitable spouse, she lives somewhere under an assumed name. When Frederick volunteers to help her, Milly predictably wishes "to go to Australia, or anywhere out of the world" (III: 277), since that would correspond with her state as someone with no place to occupy in society. By pure luck Milly does not die, like Frederick's mother and Lucy, and lives a frugal but decent life with a poor yet honest man. Nonetheless, the implication remains in her episode: the patriarchal and hierarchical structure of the social world which must deprive some people of any place or role is yet again presented before Frederick as he seeks to find his own.

A blind female writer therefore uses the autobiographical narrative of a male sighted protagonist to grant readers access not only to her experience as other, but to their own experience as those who other, and even to the experience of being the objects of pity or sympathy as a result of their status as 'blind' individuals. For Browne, the act of writing becomes a fundamental and expansive human act. Through Frederick, she undeniably invokes sympathy for her fellow sufferers, whether due to gender, disability, or a lack of economic status, but also extends sympathy to those who would consider themselves geographically, temporally, politically, ideologically, socially, and even physically different from her.¹⁰ By having Frederick describe the consequences of his 'failures' to see the actual nature of things, Browne raises the question of why sighted people presume they are more perceptive than blind people. In so doing, an author who does not have visual access to the world acquaints her readers with the over-credulous trust we place in vision, which registers among the blind as arrogance and ignorance about our actual limitations.

Frederick's Place in the World

Browne can almost surreptitiously inject this revelation into her narrative because, on another plane, she adheres so closely to the conventions of the autobiographical fiction with a male protagonist. Overcrowded with characters and caricatures, and expansive in its engagement with social concerns, the novel is markedly Dickensian in nature, as critics have noted.¹¹ The narrating protagonist's unprivileged upbringing leads readers to anticipate the success story of a self-made man who ultimately claims his share of the world. Browne certainly provides such a narrative, following Frederick's material and social advancement, his successes and failures, and most importantly, his development as a person. Often these components are at odds with each other. Living under the roof of his extended family, whose hard luck had made its members resemble "the true mammon-worshipper" (I: 7), Frederick in later years still remembers "a light"

¹⁰ Quite a few of Browne's poems, such as "The Emigrant's Request," "The Parting Gifts," and "Songs of Our Land," express her sympathy towards other marginal groups of people she learned about through reading. As an unsigned article in *The Dublin Review* points out, Browne particularly sympathizes with exiles, who had to "abandon the home of their fathers, and seek a foreign clime, when they may earn the daily bread which is refused them at home" (*The Dublin Review* 553). More recently, critic Thomas McLean notes that Browne's "The Star of Attéghéi" relates the tragedy of "an oppressed nation and culture with affinities to Ireland itself," concluding that her work "deserves to be read" along with her contemporary Irish and European poets' advocacy ("Arms and the Circassian" 314).

¹¹ See, for instance, Murphy 103; DeVoto 198–99; Tilley, "Frances Browne" 153.

in his childhood “which after fortunes could not bring”: “I loved my mother, and my mother loved me, as if there were none but ourselves in the wide world” (I: 10). On losing his mother, he not surprisingly considers himself “alone in the world” (I: 167).

And yet, although deprived of his mother, and starting on the bottom rung of the ladder in society, like David Copperfield, he is male, heterosexual, white, and able-bodied, and therefore possesses the potential to climb upward simply because of what he is. Leaving his relatives’ place to take an apprenticeship at the age of fifteen was how he made his “entrance to the world” (I: 34), and like male narrators, he credits his ability to “get up in the world” almost entirely to his own efforts (I: 58). “I would not go to be a poor dependent on the family,” he recalls, as “[e]ven the Roses should see that I was able to make my own way into the world” (I: 187). His determination arises from the valuing of self-reliance that Karl Marx identified as the social imperative of the independent being. Only someone who stands alone on his own two feet can claim independence. One is dependent if others provide the “maintenance of life,” or, if acknowledged as the “*source* of life” (Marx 144).

The disparity between what Frederick hopes and thinks himself to be, and what he is, parallels the general experience of people as a self among other selves. Though his narrative suggests that he does not always see it, readers recognize how dependent—if not financially, then certainly emotionally and ethically—Frederick is. His relations with others condition and define what it means to stand on his own feet. Most notably, when he meets Lucy for the first time, he recognizes her as his source of life, meaning, and happiness. But Frederick’s memories at the time of writing more commonly arouse feelings of self-mockery, pathos, sorrow, and nihilism, in part because he has come to realize that the events that granted him his independence were often the ones that depended most on the actions of outside forces and others.

We can recall that what Frederick calls the “true beginning of life” (I: 1) was his memory of a room full of human faces ignoring him, absorbed in themselves and their business; the settlement of property following someone’s death. The sense of being ignored or irrelevant he had proved to be grimly false, since what was occurring in the room would come to affect his entire life—materially and emotionally. The fortune under scrutiny, which Frederick will ultimately inherit after the deaths of Lucy and Lavance, another relative who is close and dear to him, was built upon the slave trade, accounting for Frederick’s references to his benefactor, his great uncle, as “the old sinner” (III: 254). Although Frederick fully enjoys its benefits, he cannot ever shake off the idea of where it came from, and the guilt and anguish hang like a millstone around his neck. However, even heavier is the guilt he feels at how he became the one to inherit it. Though without conscious or malicious intent, the lawyer who administers the will reduces Frederick’s greatest love and greatest friend to the status of obstacles. After the first death, because “the first-named heir has been removed by the lamentable occurrence,” the lawyer observes that “there is one less between yourself and the property” (III: 255). The mature Frederick is haunted by the fact that whatever success or affluence he enjoys at the time of writing was not the result of his own efforts, but of the sacrifice and suffering of others: “I have cursed that money through my helpless nights for the way by which it came to me, and risen and paid my taxes with it” (III: 275). Twenty-five years afterwards, Frederick still falls prey to his past. Although he cannot detect any reason or justification for the course of events, behaviour, and coincidences that ultimately granted him his financial and social status, he still feels victimized by who he is in the

eyes of the world— someone who prospered by taking another's place. In consequence, he detaches himself from all connection with the exterior world and other people, but he cannot free himself from the fetters of the past: two deaths and their consequences.

As a result of two unrelated but concurrent deaths, Frederick becomes the sole heir to a fortune, and at the novel's end he grimly presents himself as an affluent, yet solitary old man who concludes he has "done nothing, except write this story" (III: 288): "It is five-and-twenty-years since the death of my best friend, my first love, made me a man of wealth and importance. Of these years, I have no story to tell . . ." (III: 287). During these years, people have gathered around him, hoping to make his acquaintance. The belles, socialites, literati, and diplomats have flattered him, often hoping to exploit him. But he has always been alone, ultimately left to himself and his memoir.

Let's pause here and think about the explication of his act of writing on this particular topic. When Frederick begins to set down his autobiography at the end of the story, both he and the reader agree that the action is a weary, last-ditch attempt to fill the void he feels in his well-positioned life. At this point, Frederick admits that there is nothing in particular about his life worth recording, "other than relating it to other individuals' life" (III: 288), because he realizes in retrospect that his interaction with those others was responsible for "the more important and interesting events of my life" (*ibid.*). Although committed to telling about his experience with those "other individuals' whom he cared for, Frederick realizes that he does not know the "whole story" and "what I know I cannot justify" (III: 247). Finally, Frederick announces that his ultimate goal through writing is greater understanding, and perhaps redemption. His attempt at writing his autobiography, primarily through telling the stories of others, will force him to "collect materials for better ones" (III: 288), in hopes that he will take up a pen again at an uncertain time in the future.

His self-assessment at the time of writing therefore paradoxically foregrounds his personal incompetence as a storyteller. He has finally come to understand that knowing and representing others' lives should be his priority, but at the cost of also realizing that because of his lack of awareness at the time, he does not have the knowledge or resources to do so. Frederick's narrative, therefore, is necessarily the product of an individual whose conventional success and embeddedness in the social world have left him unable to understand the lives of others, or for that matter, anything. This awareness extends to his choice of genre. Despite his performance of the role of the protagonist and the narrator of the text—the conventional definition of autobiography—he knows, and makes sure to let the reader know, that he has come to the conclusion that he has merely been a witness or onlooker, registering, often mistakenly, the transitory appearance of the world, while playing a minor or supporting role even within his own life. At bottom, his deeply felt personal failure in life mirrors a failure inherent to the autobiography genre itself, because it forces people to evaluate their lives in terms of how big a share they can claim of their living and existence in the world. The creation of such an ending gains more depth when we consider that Frederick's remark, "I have no story to tell," echoes Browne's own reflection. At the end of a letter quoted in the Preface to the novel, she writes, "I have little more to tell; — this story of my mind's progress being the story of my life," and how the books she acquired throughout her career served not only as educational means but also as "unspeakable sources of entertainment" in her solitude. Despite initially echoing Frederick's

desolate monologue, Browne's perspective shifts as she continues, "I have few memories, to disturb my grateful recollection of those who have cheered me onward in my chosen but solitary life" (SA xx).

What is lacking in Frederick's world but demonstrated in Browne's is a sense of interconnectedness in their worlds. While Frederick laments the perceived barrenness of his story apart from the discontinued, fragmented lives of others, Browne's is richly populated with memories. This contrast showcases Browne's agency in shaping her narrative, enabling her to ingeniously craft a world devoid of interconnectedness and agency for her protagonist.

Conclusion

Browne not only pre-emptively utilizes the fiction-fact dichotomy to create two 'versions' of her story—her interpretation of the world—but also creates an autofiction that implicitly refutes the cultural presupposition that because a blind person's experiences, knowledge, and insight are far more limited than a sighted person's, so too is their capacity for sympathy, real or imagined. By showing how the male narrator wants and expects his 'share of the world', but does not ultimately find it, Browne, through her robust, sympathetically imaginative writing, claims a place for herself in the world. If by writing his story Frederick attempts and fails to use autobiography as a tool for exploring, understanding, and expressing himself, partly because of his life, and partly because of his chosen genre, the narrative that Browne produces successfully conveys a sense of her positionality and understanding of the limits of abled self-knowledge, gained precisely because of who she is, as someone set outside these social and literary conventions by her gender, but above all by her specific disability.

As discussed above, the self-representation by blind women in the nineteenth century has remained one of many blank pages in the heritage of Western life writing. I have interpreted Browne's *My Share of the World* as neither a novel nor an autobiography, but as an example of female disability autofiction that on multiple levels functions as an agent for counter-normativity. The vast discrepancies and inequalities between the male-dominated, ableist society and the fortunes of blind women, as well as in the degree to which they are noticed and represented, arise from a toxic mixture of assumptions about women and the blind that make self-assuredness impossible to imagine.

Browne provides us with an example of how autofiction can allow a writer to evade confining her voice, her presence in the narrative, or her other characters, within a culturally imposed understanding of the blind person's or writer's limited capacity. Autofiction offers a space in any narrative design for marginal or weaker groups to construct their own sense of self, untied to their disabled or discounted identity imposed by other persons' misperceptions. The fluctuation afforded by the blurring between fact and fiction, self-representation and the representation of others, accords with Dervila Cooke's assertion that "all versions of reality" contained within a storyteller's life not only have validity, but tell us something true about the storyteller (68). In her remarkable blind autofiction, Browne demonstrates why *My Share of the World* is not necessarily her share of the world—as a woman, and as someone who is blind—to an abled audience whose own blindness can perhaps be dispelled somewhat by reading.

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