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Geography of the Narrative Self in Stuart Turton's *The Seven Deaths of Evelyn Hardcastle*

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Abstract

This paper examines how Stuart Turton's The Seven Deaths of Evelyn Hardcastle *(2018) engages in ongoing debates concerning embodied consciousness and personal identity yet to be resolved by current theories linking mind and body. The analysis integrates a neuroscientific approach (Greenfield), narrative self theory (Dennett, Schechtman), pre-narrative self-consciousness (Zahavi), embodied narrative (Brandon), transpersonal psychology (Grof), and Eastern philosophical concepts (Blackmore, Watts) with close textual analysis to study how Turton's protagonist navigates self-definition across multiple bodily experiences. His behaviour and actions are influenced by emotions, skills and reasoning that he perceives as temporarily acquired from the body and mind of his current 'host'. Although initially it may appear paradoxical, Turton's narrative constructs a complex geography of personal identity, suggesting that consciousness persists independently of specific embodiment, while remaining fundamentally shaped by bodily experience. This paper examines the capacity of speculative fiction to engage with philosophical problems of the mind-body relationship and to advocate for alternative approaches to selfhood and embodied consciousness.*

Keywords

subjective consciousness, narrative self, embodiment, speculative, mind-body relationship

Introduction

The mystery of subjective consciousness, which haunts scientists and philosophers, has spawned numerous explorations in speculative fiction. The aim of the present article is to analyse the geography of the narrative self as construed and depicted in Stuart Turton's debut novel of 2018, entitled *The Seven Deaths of Evelyn Hardcastle*. Interestingly, Turton's literary creation of the fictional self-consciousness incorporates not only Daniel Dennet's non-embodied self, understood as a "centre of narrative gravity,"[1] but also a contrasting approach in which embodiment of the self is instrumental for the generation of narrative.[2] Turton's protagonist, who also serves as the first person narrator, interchangeably inhabits the bodies of different hosts, learning to appreciate and use the diverse abilities of their minds. Despite being afflicted with amnesia, he has preserved some kind of self-awareness, a state which allows him to differentiate between his "minimal notion of the self as the subject of experience"[3] and the embodied cognition of his temporary host, i.e. the

1 Daniel C. Dennett, *Consciousness Explained* (New York: Back Bay Books/Little, Brown and Company, 1991), 410.

2 See Kim Atkins, "Narrative Identity and Moral Identity," *Practical Identity and Narrative Agency*, ed. K. Atkins and C. Mackenzie (New York: Routledge, 2008); Richard Menary, "Embodied Narratives," *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 15, no. 6 (2008); Tim Thorton, "Psychopathology and Two Narrative Accounts of the Self." *Philosophy, Psychiatry, and Psychology* 10, no. 4 (2003); Dan Zahavi, "Self and Other: The Limits of Narrative Understanding," *Narrative and Understanding Persons*, ed. D. Hutto (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

3 Richard Menary, 2008. "Embodied Narratives," *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 15, no. 6 (2008): 83.

cognition depending on "having a body with various sensorimotor capacities […] [which] are themselves embedded in a more encompassing biological, psychological and cultural context.[4]

This article argues that Turton's narrative demonstrates the inadequacy of purely narrative or purely materialist approaches to consciousness, instead proposing that mapping the geography of selfhood requires an integrated understanding that bridges embodied cognition, transpersonal experience, and non-dual awareness. Through the protagonist's uncanny journey across multiple host bodies, Turton's mystery novel illustrates how the self emerges not as a fixed narrative centre but as a fluid, interconnected phenomenon that transcends individual boundaries. To map this complex terrain of consciousness and selfhood, the present analysis employs a geographical metaphor that reconceptualises the boundaries of the self as markers of continuity rather than rigid divisions.

Geography refers to the act of writing about the world, typically accomplished by describing and mapping the land, the sea, and the sky. Although the boundaries drawn in order to capture the essence and limits of different objects and phenomena may appear as static at the moment of delineation, their inherent artificiality and fluidity can hardly be questioned. As Martin Heidegger observed, "[a] boundary is not that at which something stops but, as the Greek recognised, the boundary is that from which something *begins its presencing*."[5] Therefore, once boundaries are reformulated and understood as markers of continuity, they start indicating wholeness, regardless of the notions discussed. The wholeness of a broadly understood world may be conceptualised as Nature, whose boundaries may be imagined as smaller and smaller Chinese boxes, where each part nests an infinite number of others. Similarly, the human species, regardless of its arrogance, represent an integral part of nature. Accordingly, acknowledging the fluidity of human body boundaries may foster philosophical, scientific and speculative mapping of the narrative self whose embodiment serves as a means for experience.[6]

Neuroscientific foundations of consciousness

From a medical perspective, the mind is inextricably connected with the physical brain, which, as part of the body, can undergo not only physical examination but also chemical and surgical treatment, significantly altering its functioning. Electrical activity of the brain, which can be detected and measured by electroencephalogram, indicates different states of mind, for example being attentive, alert, frightened, calm, relaxed, etc. The levels of neurotransmitters, chemicals that brain cells use to communicate with each other, are measured by testing saliva, urine and blood samples. The ability and process of learning and memorizing can be visualised in the computational brain models since parts of the brain activated by different cognitive abilities have been successfully identified. Neuroscientists can observe the flow of information through the senses and analyse the coordination of respective responses and actions. All these scientific discoveries and achievements, combined with unbelievably rapid technological advancement, bring us closer to solving the

4 Francisco J. Varela, Evan Thompson, and Eleanor Rosch, *The Embodied Mind: Cognitive Science and Human Experience* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2016), 173.

5 Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought* (New York: Harper Collins, 1971), 152.

6 Luke Whaley, "Geographies of the Self: Space, Place and Scale Revisited." *Human Arenas* 1 (2018): 26-27.

persistent dilemma of subjective conscious experience, i.e. the "hard problem" of consciousness.[7] The philosopher and cognitive scientist David Chalmers, who coined this expression, asks, "Why should physical processing give rise to a rich inner life at all?"[8]

Susan Greenfield, a neuroscientist and author of many studies on the mind and brain, believes that in order to understand the connection between our highly subjective sense of consciousness and different processes occurring in the brain, more emphasis should be placed on emotions, since "some sort of basic emotional state is present whenever you are conscious."[9] In her study *The Private Life of the Brain*, Greenfield presents emotions as the most basic form of consciousness.[10] She clearly differentiates between an emotional behaviour and a subjective feeling of emotion, emphasising that the former may or may not be an indicator of the latter.

> [A]n emotion, a feeling such as fear, is not identical to behavior such as avoidance. After all, as you lay sweating and terrorized in the lonely house in the middle of the night, you are undertaking no overt avoidance behavior, but you are still very frightened. Avoidance behavior, then, is a good reason to suspect that animals feel fear rather than concrete and exclusive evidence that they do.[11]

The close interdependence of emotions and consciousness implies that consciousness cannot be seen as "purely rational or cognitive."[12] According to Greenfield, intense feelings such as rage or ecstasy can literally 'switch off' our minds, or to put it differently, teleport us to the times when we were very young and when our brains had not yet been shaped by a "highly personalized set of values, history, and unique view or life."[13] In other words, if emotions have the power to temporarily nullify the conscious and experienced self, it may mean that these two terms, the mind and the self, designate the very same notion.[14] As an emphasis on the significance of individual experiences in the development of the internal connections within our physical brains and their influence on our minds may foster a rejection of Cartesian mind and body dualism, the quest for convincing explanations for the enigmatic subjective sense of consciousness remains.

Narrative self and embodied cognition

Based on assumptions that our sense of self is narrative and that we understand our lives as unfolding stories, the belief emerges that "selves are inherently narrative entities."[15] This hermeneutical view asserts that the individual's sense of self must be narrative, just as all human lives have a narrative

7 David J. Chalmers, *The Conscious Mind: In Search of a Fundamental Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 10.

8 David J. Chalmers, *The Character of Consciousness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 5.

9 Susan Greenfield, *The Private Life of the Brain* (London: Penguin Books, 2001), 24.

10 Greenfield, *The Private Life of the Brain*, 22.

11 Greenfield, *The Private Life of the Brain*, 17-18.

12 Greenfield, *The Private Life of the Brain*, 21.

13 Greenfield, *The Private Life of the Brain*, 21.

14 Greenfield, *The Private Life of the Brain*, 186.

15 Marya Schechtman, "The Narrative Self," in *The Oxford Handbook of the Self*, ed. Shaun Gallagher (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 395.

structure. Within this tradition, Marya Schechtman emphasizes the importance of the continuity in the narrative of our lives.[16] As she explains:

> [W]e constitute ourselves as selves by understanding our lives as narrative in form and living accordingly. This view does not demand that we explicitly formulate our narratives (although we should be able, for the most part, to articulate them locally when appropriate) but rather that we experience and interpret our present experiences not as isolated moments but as part of an ongoing story.[17]

However, not all theorists accept that narrative is constitutive of selfhood. Aligning with a materialist viewpoint, Daniel Dennett offers a more radical conception of the narrative self in his study *Consciousness Explained*. Dennett concludes that although the narrative self exists, it has no material representation or continuation in the world. Instead, it exists in the same way as fictive characters like Sherlock Holmes or Mr. Pickwick, or theoretical abstractions such as centres of gravity.[18] For Dennett "A self [...] is not any old mathematical point, but an abstraction defined by the myriads of attributions and interpretations (including self-attributions and self-interpretations) that have composed the biography of the living body whose Center of Narrative Gravity it is."[19]

An approach in which the self is constituted solely through narratives is questioned by Dan Zahavi. Concurring with José Luis Bermúdez, he argues for the existence of different forms of self-consciousness "logically and ontogenetically more primitive."[20] Zahavi refers to the behaviour of newborns, who manifest their own pain or hunger with crying.

> Even prior to any conceptual discrimination between the self and world or between self and other, the child is self-conscious due to the unique first-personal givenness of its experiences. Self-consciousness does not arise thanks to a conceptual discrimination between self and world, but is the condition of possibility for any such discrimination.[21]

In other words, "the existence of prelinguistic and non-conceptual forms of self-experience" cannot be questioned only because newborns have not learnt how to speak yet, thus do not indulge in producing narratives.[22]

In "Body and Self: An Entangled Narrative," Priscilla Brandon not only maintains that our body is essential for the emergence of the narrative self, but also emphasises the reciprocal influence between the two. Her approach dismantles the unidirectional relationship between body and the narrative self, i.e. the idea that the narrative self is "the 'result' or the 'output' of the body and experiences."[23] Brandon believes that "[o]nly by acknowledging an interactive relationship [...] can we begin to capture the way in which different aspects of the self are interwoven."[24] In other

16 Schechtman, "The Narrative Self," 395-397.

17 Schechtman, "The Narrative Self," 398.

18 Daniel C. Dennett, *Consciousness Explained* (New York: Back Bay Books/Little, Brown and Company, 1991), 95-96.

19 Dennett, *Consciousness Explained*, 426-427.

20 José Luis Bermúdez, The *Paradox of Self-Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998), 274.

21 Dan Zahavi, "Phenomenology of Self," in *The Self in Neuroscience and Psychiatry*, ed. Tilo Kircher and Antony David (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 70.

22 Zahavi, "Phenomenology of Self," 69.

23 Priscilla Brandon, "Body and Self: An Entangled Narrative," *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Science* 15, no.1 (2014): 68.

24 Brandon, "Body and Self," 82.

words, she postulates the refinement of the narrative self-concept by acknowledging and studying its influence on the body. As Brandon puts it, in working on the improvement in their patients' self-understanding, many psychotherapists aim for a change of a patient's actions and habits, which undeniably influence the condition of the body.[25]

Transpersonal and dual consciousness

While Brandon focuses on the therapeutic relationship between narrative self and embodied experience within conventional psychological frameworks, the psychiatrist Stanislav Grof proposes a more radical expansion of therapeutic possibilities through altered states of consciousness. These states offer a totally different approach to the mystery of subjective consciousness. The non-ordinary states of consciousness generate experiences which build the bridge of reconciliation between the materialist and the mystical—two seemingly opposite stances, with the latter closely resembling understanding of the unity of the world, as in the great Eastern spiritual philosophies. In his study *The Ultimate Journey and the Mystery of Death*, Grof proposes a new map of the human psyche which is not limited to "the biographical-collective domain and the Freudian individual unconscious." [26] The cartography of the brain designed by Grof is expanded by perinatal and transpersonal domains[27] vividly described on the basis of individual experiences of the author as well as testimonies of his fellow scientists, co-workers and patients.

Grof coined the term 'Holotropic States' to name non-ordinary or altered states of consciousness, facilitating an individual's movement toward wholeness and integration with it. Holotropic states of minds, which appear to be similar to some mystical and spiritual experience, can be induced by shamanistic rituals, the intake of psychedelics such as hallucinogenic plants or chemical alkaloids like mescaline or LSD, or experiential therapies such as Holotropic Breathwork. Since the altered states of consciousness can also be induced by various traumatic experiences, traditional medicine considers such states pathological, thus different pharmacological measures are used to either prevent, tame or eradicate them. As Grof states, "anything associated with these states has been seen as embarrassing leftover from the dark ages or as a legacy from humanity's infancy, which scientific progress has discredited and outgrown." [28]

The perinatal domain of the psyche scrutinized by Grof refers to the significant influence of the experience of biological birth on our lives, regardless of the denial of this influence by academic psychiatry, which underestimates the ability of the newborn's brain to record these earliest memories.

> Various schools of experiential psychotherapy have amassed convincing evidence that biological birth is the most profound trauma of our life and an event of paramount psychospiritual importance. The primary event is recorded in our memory in miniscule details down to cellular level, and it

25 Brandon, "Body and Self," 77.

26 Stanislav Grof. *The Ultimate Journey: Consciousness and the Mystery of Death* (Saline, MI: McNaughton&Gunn, 2006), 127.

27 Grof, *The Ultimate Journey Death*, 128.

28 Grof, *The Ultimate Journey Death*, 123.

> profoundly affects our psychological development. Because birth represents an actually or potentially life-threatening situation, it creates a deep liaison between birth and death in our unconscious.[29]

Likewise, Greenfield states that when the behaviours of adult people are determined by strong emotions for some reason, their "physical brains must in some way be temporarily transformed, […], to recapitulate a more fundamental brain state characterized by a consciousness bereft of logic or reason, a consciousness stripped of meaning and memories, that is the brain state of an infant."[30]

This convergence between neuroscientific and transpersonal perspectives on consciousness points toward broader questions about nature of awareness itself. Drawing on both empirical research and Zen philosophy, psychologist Susan Blackmore offers practical approaches to examining these questions through mindfulness practices that reveal the constructed nature of our moment-to-moment experience. In *Zen and the Art of Consciousness*, Blackmore diligently exemplifies fallibility of humans' cognitive processes, exposing the consequences of the gaps in human reasoning based on an unreflective and unquestioning belief in products of our senses. People not only believe in what they see, but they are also wrongly convinced that they consciously decide to perform certain actions based these experiences. To exemplify, the phenomenon of "change blindness," i.e. our frequent failure to notice a major change that happens when we move our eyes or simply blink,[31] shows how chaotic and fragmentary our experience is. Many people are surprised to discover their failure to notice the change of colour of objects in two consecutive scenes of a movie.[32] Another example of fallibility of our perception concerns the phenomenon of selective hearing when we only hear what we expect, or when we temporarily become 'deaf' when focused on important or absorbing tasks.

Blackmore explicitly states that the practice of meditation may facilitate our understanding of the phenomenon of consciousness. The challenge to adopt a counter-intuitive view of consciousness may dispel the unshakeable conviction that the human species is equipped with a prime mover which makes us different and thus separated from the world.[33] Meditation offers a chance to absorb and accept a totally different approach to the pressing necessity of finding a scientifically researched answer to the question 'How do I know that I am conscious now?'

The simple exercise of asking oneself, "Am I conscious now?" can create the impression of being suddenly awakened—as if before the question was asked, one had been either unconscious or somebody else. Blackmore states that the hardest part of this exercise is to keep asking the question, since it makes us understand that most of the time we are experiencinge the world without paying attention to it.

29 Grof, *The Ultimate Journey Death*, 133.

30 Greenfield, *The Private Life of the Brain*, 30.

31 Susan Blackmore, *Zen and the Art of Consciousness* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2011), 34.

32 Blackmore, *Zen and the Art of Consciousness,* 34.

33 Blackmore, *Zen and the Art of Consciousness,* 38.

> The question propels becoming conscious and becoming open to everything around. Although it seems impossible, in good faith, to answer 'No', it is hard work to answer 'Yes', 'Yes, I am conscious now', perhaps because it reminds [us] that most of the time [we] cannot have been.[34]

The persistence in performing the exercise of asking and answering the question concerning our current state of mind may be rewarded with a feeling of continuity, yet, as Blackmore states it is not certain whether this represents a continuity of self, of the world, or of what is commonly called consciousness.[35]

Referring to the wisdom of Zen, Blackmore states there is no such thing or place as 'my' consciousness, since whenever we ponder the questions concerning our consciousness or identity, "we construct an observing self and provide an answer, but most of our lives we are not going around asking such questions or thinking about self."[36] In other words, we wrongly assume that our answer to the question "What is my consciousness now?" extends to rest of our lives, or any other moment of our lives—to all the moments when we are not even asking it. However, when we reject the concept of the "self" as congruent with "our own unique consciousness" somehow generated by the physical mind, we arrive at the Buddhist idea of "non-self." Non-self, which can be derived from the Zen concept of non-duality, rejects the uniqueness of our existence, which is difficult, if not impossible, to accept for many steeped in Western thought. The Zen Master and Nobel Peace Prize nominee Thich Nhat Hanh understands non-self as interconnectedness of everything: "[t]rue mind is our real self, […] the pure one-ness which cannot be cut up by the illusory divisions of separate selves, created by concepts of language."[37] Nevertheless, many individuals raised in Western cultures cling to the belief that their life is meaningful in some special way. Thus, at the heart of their concept of self lies a disturbing question "Will any part of me live when I die?"

Individual consciousness and memory loss

Neatly enveloped in the 'whodunit' formula, the complicated threads of Turton's narrative deftly follow the rules of the mystery novel typified by Agatha Christie. This seemingly traditional approach creates an impression that all the uncanny elements featured, such as entrapment in a time and space loop, the motifs of body swapping and mind sharing, are part of a slightly refurbished classical convention. However, these elements ultimately reveal the narrative's true nature as speculative fiction, exploring profound questions of consciousness, identity, and the nature of existence itself. Nevertheless, prompted by the reference to the seven deaths of the eponymous character, the avid reader of classical detective mysteries is likely to assume that there must be some clever catch which, when revealed by a perceptive amateur detective will allow the closely knit society involved in the criminal conundrum to return to 'normal.' This expectation persists regardless of the presumably metaphorical deaths experienced by the victim. Interestingly, contrary

34 Blackmore, *Zen and the Art of Consciousness,* 43.

35 Blackmore, *Zen and the Art of Consciousness,* 46.

36 Blackmore, *Zen and the Art of Consciousness,* 163.

37 Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Miracle of Mindfulness: An Introduction to the Practice of Meditation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1975), 42.

to such an expectation, death and life in Turton's novel are inseparable and their coexistence constitutes both the mystery and the solution.

In *The Seven Deaths of Evelyn Hardcastle,* the tale of the autodiegetic narrator begins as he is desperately trying to find a way out of the forest, remembering, yet not comprehending "the last concern of the man [he] was,"[38] the name Anna which he heard himself shouting. The significance of the name remains a mystery to him, yet he senses that it "is trying to lead [his] mind somewhere."[39] It soon becomes evident that he is suffering from dissociative amnesia, which manifests itself in the loss of identity. He neither remembers his own name nor recognizes his body. Nevertheless, his narrative self perceives and evaluates his present state of consciousness as strange and unnatural.

His disorientation and anxiety appear to result from an extremely strong emotion such as rage, despair or terror. Such intense passions oftentimes generate completely unreasonable reactions or make us feel as if we have literally 'lost' our mind,[40] i.e. being unable to recall things or use certain skills which we consider so obvious that we have always taken them for granted. Turton's protagonist, whose real name Aiden Bishop remains unknown for him and thus for the reader for the vast part of the novel, finds himself terrified to death in the middle of the forest. His last conscious thought concerns his own crying out of a female name, which he considers a paradox due to the complete emotional indifference he felt upon consciously realising his articulation of the name.

> My mind has gone blank. I don't know who Anna is or why I'm calling her name. I don't even know how I got here. I'm standing in the forest, shielding my eyes from the spitting rain. My heart's thumping, I reek of sweat and my legs are shaking. I must have been running but I can't remember why.[41]

This uncertainty about the precise moment of consciousness reflects broader questions about memory and awareness. Hearing his own cry, Aiden is aware of himself as being conscious in this particular moment, believing his awakening coincides with the sound of the cried name. Turton's protagonist's line of reasoning resembles the psychologist Susan Blackmore's descriptions concerning our mindful, or rather mindless participation in life. As she demonstrates, when we attempt to recall "What was I conscious of a moment ago?,"[42] we quickly discover our inability to provide precise answers, which in turn triggers our narrative self to construct feasible scenarios. We cannot distinguish whether we were truly conscious during past events, or have only become conscious of them through later recollection. This unreliability of our "threads of past awareness"[43] explains why the testimonies of eye witnesses vary: our seemingly coherent stories of the narrative self may conflate the past conscious experiences with those experienced absent-mindedly.

38 Stuart Turton, *The Seven Deaths of Evelyn Hardcastle* (London: Raven Books, 2018), 3.

39 Turton, *The Seven Deaths of Evelyn Hardcastle*, 3.

40 As Greenfield argues, "[e]motions […] are the building block of consciousness. Emotions are with us all the time, to a greater or lesser degree, depending on how much you are using, or losing, your mind at any one moment" (2001, 21).

41 Turton, *The Seven Deaths of Evelyn Hardcastle*, 1.

42 Blackmore, 50.

43 Blackmore, *Zen and the Art of Consciousness*, 54.

Although Turton's protagonist Aiden cannot remember anything from his past, not even very recent events, his bodily reactions such as his racing pulse, sweating and trembling clearly indicate intense fear. Nevertheless, this sensation remains in the sphere of speculation, since at first he cannot fathom its source. The sentiment of total uncertainty induced by his inability to recall any data concerning his life—his name, surname, age, family status—intensifies when he cannot recognize his own hands. Initially Aiden's uncanny estrangement from his body and mind induces a feeling of panic that affects his breathing. Gradually, however, he learns to listen to his subconscious self, which he interprets as an inner protective voice. Without this voice, which momentarily takes control over his otherwise uncontrollable emotions, he feels he could suffocate.

> *Be calm.*
> 'I can't breathe,' I grasp, blood roaring in my ears as I sink to the ground, my fingers digging in the dirt.
> *You can breathe, you just need to calm down.*
> There's comfort in this inner voice, cold authority.
> *Close your eyes, listen to the forest. Collect yourself.* [44]

Marked throughout the novel with italics, the voice may be interpreted as either the protagonist's subconscious self, a sign of his split personality, or even an indicator of the presence of somebody else, for example, a hypnotist or a psychiatrist. The last interpretation would be congruent with the purpose of Blackheath, which is only revealed to Aiden close to the end of his stay there.

> My skin prickles, my blood running cold.
> "This was all a test?" I say slowly.
> "We prefer to call it rehabilitation."
> "Rehabilitation…" I repeat, understanding rising within me like the sun over the house. "This is a prison?"
> "Yes, except instead of leaving our prisoners to rot in a cell, we give them a chance to prove themselves worthy of release every single day. Do you see the beauty of it?" exclaims the Plague Doctor. "The murder of Evelyn Hardcastle was never solved, and probably never would have been. By locking prisoners inside the murder, we give them a chance to atone for their own crimes by solving somebody else's. It's as much a service, as a punishment."[45]

In the course of the novel, Aiden meets Anna, the woman whose name he cried in the forest, and eventually discovers her role in his 'stay' in Blackheath House. Aiden Bishop and Anna have accepted the names given to them in the uncanny prison, yet neither of them remembers who they are or why they are trapped in the time loop in the secluded mansion. To regain freedom, which for them means an unspecified type of life outside Blackheath, they are tasked with solving the conundrum of Evelyn Hardcastle's premature death, i.e. identifying her killer. For no apparent reason, Evelyn's death at a party thrown by her parents in Blackheath repeats every day. Aiden and Anna as well as some other guests seem to be caught up in a series of events, seeking to detect patterns and clues that will lead to the desired solution.

Every day, Aiden observes the events from a different perspective, since each time he falls asleep, he wakes up in the body of a different host, none of which he can identify with. On

44 Turton, *The Seven Deaths of Evelyn Hardcastle*, 1.

45 Turton, *The Seven Deaths of Evelyn Hardcastle*, 448.

the one hand, the characters' amnesia for their lives, relationships, interests, achievements, etc. prior to Blackheath intensifies the feeling of total confusion generated by the unreliability of their minds. On the other hand, their lack of recollection of past experiences—a lack which would normally result in numerous prejudices and firm convictions—facilitates their mindful experience of the present moment. This mindfulness gradually enhances their sensual, extra-sensual, and interpersonal perception of the world.

Embodied consciousness across multiple hosts

While Aiden's initial amnesia represents a complete dissolution of individual consciousness, his experience begins to challenge not only personal identity but the very boundaries of consciousness itself. Aiden's narration may be interpreted as his own account of his participation in the therapeutic sessions, utilising the holotropic states of mind. As established in Stanislav Grof's framework, such non-ordinary consciousness states can be induced by trauma, and they offer access to transpersonal domains of experience typically dismissed by conventional psychiatry.

In *The Seven Deaths of Evelyn Hardcastle*, the italicized voice may suggest a more complex phenomenon than subconscious guidance. This voice may be interpreted as a thought insertion, one of the most frequent symptoms reported by patients suffering from schizophrenia.[46] As for those suffering from this condition, for Aiden the belief that some of his thoughts are not his own violates "a person's sense of agency and sense of boundary between mind and world."[47] For precisely this reason, schizophrenia is often called "a disease of the self."[48] If Aiden is indeed experiencing something analogous to thought insertion, he would be typical of patients who, while they preserve their sense of subjectivity, their sense of agency is impaired because they believe that they are not the authors of some of their thoughts. This selective impairment of one of these two distinct brain capacities—the sense of agency and the sense of subjectivity—joined together in the traditional conception of self-consciousness shows that the phenomenon of the self is not a "monolithic entity."[49] Consequently, Aiden's fragmented consciousness serves as a literary exploration of the nature of selfhood.

Turton's protagonist's loss of episodic memory—the repository for events from one's personal life are stored—may be interpreted as the loss of the self, understood as an intrinsically narrative phenomenon. In other words, Aiden has lost his identity, as significant data and events that comprise his narrative self are now inaccessible, leaving him unable to recollect and retell his life narrative in a chronological order. Marya Schechtman's emphasis on experiencing present moments as part of an ongoing story[50] finds a compelling literary embodiment in Aiden's very struggle to piece together his identity from immediate sensory evidence.

46 Gerard O'Brien and Jonathan Opie. "The Multiplicity of Consciousness and the Emergence of the Self," In *The Self in Neuroscience and Psychiatry*, ed. Tilo Kircher and Antony David (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 107.

47 O'Brien and Opie, "The Multiplicity of Consciousness and the Emergence of the Self," 107.

48 O'Brien and Opie, "The Multiplicity of Consciousness and the Emergence of the Self," 108.

49 O'Brien and Opie, "The Multiplicity of Consciousness and the Emergence of the Self," 108.

50 Schechtman, "The Narrative Self," 398.

Despite his dissociative amnesia, Aiden starts to build his narrative from scratch by drawing inferences from the situational script of a party evoked by the elegance of his attire: "No one gets dressed up to spend an evening alone, which means, somebody must know I'm missing by now."[51] The script—defined as "a socio-culturally defined mental protocol for negotiating a situation"[52]—provides Aiden with a feasible scenario of the forgotten evening. The dinner jacket, the white shirt stained with red wine, and the lack of an overcoat suggest an abrupt departure from a reception in the immediate vicinity to the place in the forest where the protagonist finds himself. The sophistication of his attire implies a high social context, leading him to speculate that his concerned companions might have begun searching for him. The chilly weather further supports Aiden's speculations about the absence of warmer clothing. Despite his total bewilderment, Aiden instinctively realizes that he has to move to warm himself up, demonstrating that his mind has retained the ability to execute instrumental scripts for fundamental, repeated actions.

This process of reconstructing identity through careful attention to immediate sensory data reveals a deeper psychological mechanism at work. Taking into account the Zen concept of mindfulness, I would argue that the protagonist's effort to regain his own identity resembles the practice of mindfulness, which emphasises full awareness and acceptance of the present moment. Rather than being overwhelmed by his memory loss, Aiden learns to laboriously interpret and piece together a fairly coherent narrative from data registered by his senses. He believes that creating and preserving his own story line is essential to control his mind and maintain sanity. Initially, his attention is drawn to seemingly insignificant observations, such as the sound of raindrops on leaves, which helps calm his distressed mind. Having tamed his narrative self and directed its attention outward, he clings to the smallest recent recollections to establish his position in time: "One by one I knit these new memories together until I have got five minutes of past to wrap myself in. It is enough to staunch the panic, at least for now." [53] As the character-narrator, Aiden discovers that mindful observation of even the most trivial objects and actions not only reduces his anxiety but, more importantly, fosters his experience of the self as part of a larger whole.

Blackheath is an eerie prison, resembling a chronotope of the Poe-esque locked room, permeated with the atmosphere of macabre and murder, its rules designed by unspecified authorities. A man costumed as a medieval plague doctor who claims responsibility for assessing Aiden's rehabilitation visits him only when he is alone, evoking the dynamic of a psychotherapeutic session during which a special relationship based on trust and honesty is gradually established between the patient and the doctor. Consistent with this therapeutic dynamic, Aiden does not perceive his interlocutor as an enemy, although Aiden and the Plague Doctor's encounters invariably bring a number of threatening and disturbing revelations. On the contrary, he gradually accepts the Plague Doctor's explanations, suggestions and decisions concerning his stay in Blackheath House, as if he understood that his success in the process of solving the criminal conundrum is integral to his recovery.

51 Turton, *The Seven Deaths of Evelyn Hardcastle*, 2.

52 Peter Stockwell, *Cognitive Poetics: An Introduction*. Second Edition (New York: Routledge, 2020), 105.

53 Turton, *The Seven Deaths of Evelyn Hardcastle*, 2.

Although inconceivable in a "single-track model" of consciousness,[54] Aiden's mind functions in different hosts, as if their bodies and minds extended or supplemented the mind which he believes to be his own. Understandably, he cannot come to grips with the uncanny experience. Having previously inhabited a doctor named Sebastian Bell and then a butler who was brutally beaten to unconsciousness, Aiden is bewildered to see in the mirror "a young man with striking blue eyes and precious little wisdom behind them."[55] Witnessing Aiden's astonishment, the Plague Doctor introduces him to his new host: Donald Davis.

Unfortunately, Aiden's new host Davis is stubborn and uncooperative. It is Davis's recalcitrant mind that fortifies Aiden's resolve not to succumb to the Blackheath reality: "Murder in the morning and costumes at night, cryptic notes and burned butlers; whatever's happening here, I will *not* be yanked around like some puppet on a string. I must escape this house."[56] Aiden's futile attempt to escape results, however, in losing one host and consequently all the information that might have been acquired while inhabiting his body; from the psychological perspective, such an unyielding attitude significantly slows down the process of Aiden's recovery. Paradoxically, his failure to escape from Blackheath alters his traditional convictions about the self. He comes to realize that all his hosts may constitute a single consciousness, collectively creating his narrative self.

> Somewhere among those trees, a girl is being murdered and Bell is coming awake to see it. A killer will spare his life with a silver compass that points to a place that doesn't make sense, and, like a fool, he'll think himself saved. But how can I be in that forest and in this car—and a butler in between? My hands tighten around the wheel. If I was able to talk to the butler when I was Sebastian Bell, then presumably, whoever I'll be tomorrow is already walking around Blackheath. I might even have met him. And not just tomorrow, but the man I'll be the day after that and the day after that. If that's the case, what does that make me? Or them? Are we shards of the same soul, responsible for each other's sins, or entirely different people, pale copies of some long forgotten original?[57]

Having realized that his situation eludes rational explanation, Aiden grows more cautious participating in the same events through different hosts. Although he knows what to expect since the events invariably repeat themselves, ending with Evelyn's death, he discovers that each host's perspective provides not only new clues to the murder, but also a deeper understanding of his own multifaceted consciousness.

Transpersonal consciousness and non-dual awareness

As Aiden's understanding of his fragmented consciousness deepens, his experience begins to transcend the boundaries of individual self, suggesting access to transpersonal dimensions of awareness. As Stanislav Grof explains, this transpersonal realm requires a change of perspective and a less conventional approach to the self to become open to the experience and sensation of others. To understand the transpersonal realm, one must "look beyond the belief that consciousness exists only

54 O'Brien and Opie, "The Multiplicity of Consciousness and the Emergence of the Self," 113.

55 Turton, *The Seven Deaths of Evelyn Hardcastle*, 81.

56 Turton, *The Seven Deaths of Evelyn Hardcastle*, 83.

57 Turton, *The Seven Deaths of Evelyn Hardcastle*, 87.

as the result of our individual lives."[58] This shift becomes evident when Turton's protagonist shares the humiliation of his second host, a rich banker known as Lord Ravencourt. Even Ravencourt's intellectual acuity does not compensate for his physical incapacities which result from both his old age and huge weight, manifesting itself with "the waves of flesh lapping against [his] hips."[59] As residing in Ravencourt's body and being undressed by the Lord's valet, Aiden shares the shame felt by his host.

> In practiced motions, he unbuttons my pyjama top and pulls down the bottoms, lifting my feet one at a time so I don't become tangled in them. In a few seconds I'm naked, my companion standing at a respectful distance. Opening my eyes, I find myself reflected in a full-length mirror on the wall. I resemble some grotesque caricature of the human body, my skin jaundiced and swollen, a flaccid penis peeking out of an unkempt crop of pubic hair. Overcome by disgust and humiliation, I let out a sob. [60]

Although sharing the body with Lord Ravencourt is initially humiliating for Aiden, he quickly learns to appreciate his host's way of reasoning as well as his skill to remain composed. He truly admires how Ravencourt controls his breathing, a technique used to reduce or even eradicate the feeling of fear: "Closing my eyes, I let a long breath out through my nose, releasing my fear with it. It's a habit of Ravencourt's, a way of clearing the mind, though I couldn't say how I know that. When I open my eyes again, I'm calm." [61]

The inconveniences experienced while in Ravencourt's body and mind are nothing compared to the torment felt while Aiden resides in the body of the butler. The poor servant is mercilessly beaten by Gregory Gold—the very man Aiden will later inhabit.

> My vision blurs, the world reduced to a smudge of color and a flash of pain as I crash into a wall, then drop to the floor, blood trickling from my head. He's looming over me, an iron poker in his hand. "Please," I say, trying to slide backward, away from him. "I'm not—" He kicks me in the side, emptying my lungs. I reach out a hand, trying to speak, beg, but that only seems to infuriate him further. He's kicking me faster and faster until there's nothing I can do but curl up in a ball as he pours his wrath upon me.[62]

For this assault, Gold will be equally mercilessly tortured by the master of the house. Residing in yet another host, Aiden sees him unconscious "bound by his wrists and dangling from a hook on the ceiling, his feet only barely touching the floor."[63] Aiden's predicament forces him to embody both victim and perpetrator, surpassing the confines of subjective consciousness posited by scientific theories. His immersion in both the butler's anguish and Gold's rage critiques the conviction of experiential duality. Our conventional modes of understanding are constrained by a steadfast adherence to the idea of opposites. Through Aiden's embodied experience of both victim and perpetrator, Turton suggests these dualities may be false constructions that obscure the

58 Stanislav Grof, *The Holotropic Mind: The Three Levels of Human Consciousness and How They Shape Our Lives* (HarperCollins, 1993), 80.

59 Turton, *The Seven Deaths of Evelyn Hardcastle*, 92.

60 Turton, *The Seven Deaths of Evelyn Hardcastle*, 92.

61 Turton, *The Seven Deaths of Evelyn Hardcastle*, 107.

62 Turton, *The Seven Deaths of Evelyn Hardcastle*, 78.

63 Turton, *The Seven Deaths of Evelyn Hardcastle*, 50.

interconnected nature of consciousness itself. This insight extends beyond human relationships to existential categories. While we conventionally assume that one can only be alive or dead, Aiden's repeated deaths and rebirths suggest their intrinsic interdependence, or rather, their coexistence.

Conclusion

The integration of neuroscientific and philosophical perspectives reveals how Turton's mystery novel transcends conventional approaches to consciousness, ultimately demonstrating the therapeutical potential of moving beyond traditional dualities. Through Aiden's embodied experience of both victim and perpetrator roles, Turton's protagonist moves toward the recognition that, as Alan Watts argues, "[the] basis of life is unity."[64] In his study *Buddhism: The Religion of No-Religion*, this Episcopalian priest and Zen practitioner draws the reader's attention to the circle, pointing out that to notice one point on the circle is to acknowledge all the others: "[s]imilarly, all sensations, all feelings, all experiences, occupy a point on a circle of sensations."[65] Such an approach both leads to and is a consequence of non-duality, or non-self. Mirroring this philosophical insight, Turton's protagonist, switching repeatedly from host to host, not only grasps the elusiveness of the notion of the self but also learns to accept interconnectedness within the universe. This major shift in Aiden's approach demonstrates the kind of integrated understanding that bridges embodied cognition, transpersonal experience and non-dual awareness.

Thus, the novel reveals the inadequacy of purely materialistic approaches that reduce consciousness to brain states, or purely narrative approaches that construct identity through story alone. Instead, the therapeutic recovery of Turton's protagonist emerges through what Stanislav Grof terms the interpersonal realm of the human psyche, transcending the boundaries of individual materially-bound consciousness.[66] Whether Aiden's holotropic states result from posttraumatic delusions or drug induced consciousness, his access to this transpersonal domain allows him to—at least temporarily—experience "the self as something that exists outside and independent of us, something that in its essence is not bound to matter." [67]

Such an integrated transformation is evident in Aiden's final assessment of his journey. Leaving Blackheath House—the mental prison that confined him—Aiden evaluates it as a nightmarish space "speaking to the monster in [him]," [68] yet he qualifies all his hosts as "figments of [his] fracturing mind," [69] a description which signals not fragmentation but integration, typically interpreted as a sign of mental recovery. Ultimately, completeness comes not from solving the criminal conundrum of Evelyn Hardcastle's death, but from the protagonist's conviction that he may "start again, free of the past, free of him[self] and the mistakes he made."[70] Such a liberation from the illusion of

64 Allan Watts, *Buddhism: The Religion of No-Religion* (Tokyo: Tuttle, 1999), 21.

65 Watts, *Buddhism*, 21.

66 Grof, *The Holotropic Mind*, 80.

67 Grof, *The Holotropic Mind*, 80.

68 Turton, *The Seven Deaths of Evelyn Hardcastle*, 480.

69 Turton, *The Seven Deaths of Evelyn Hardcastle*, 479.

70 Turton, *The Seven Deaths of Evelyn Hardcastle*, 504.

separate selfhood is achieved not through pure narrative reconstruction or materialist intervention alone, but through the dissolution of fixed boundaries between self and other. By remapping of the geography of self, Turton's speculative mystery demonstrates literature's unique capacity to point toward new ways of addressing the enduring mystery of human consciousness.

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