

Tanja Reiffenrath, University of Paderborn, Germany (tanja.reiffenrath@upb.de)

## Mind over Matter? Joshua Ferris's *The Unnamed* as Counternarrative

### Abstract

Mental disorders have become the topic of numerous contemporary American novels. Attesting to the ongoing fascination with the workings and the sciences of the human mind, many of these texts turn to neuroscientific questions. This paper offers a close reading of one of these 'neuronarratives' – Joshua Ferris's acclaimed 2010 novel *The Unnamed*, a story in which the protagonist is afflicted with an utterly mysterious condition that disrupts his sense of self as his mind appears to be separated from his body. In this paper, I aim to show how such a dualist conception problematizes not only the concepts of self and agency as the unnamed disease is linked to contemporary lifestyles in corporate America, but also helps to craft a counternarrative that challenges recent materialist conceptions and neuroscientific theories.

**Keywords:** illness narrative, mental illness in fiction, (in)coherence, neuronarrative, body, mind, Philosophy of Mind, dualism

In Joshua Ferris's acclaimed 2010 novel *The Unnamed*, coherence – or rather, the lack thereof – presents a central problem to its readers. This is of course due to the topic of the narrative: The protagonist Tim Farnsworth, a good-looking and successful lawyer in New York, is afflicted with a sudden, severe, and utterly mysterious condition that does not have a name but may best be described as "compulsive walking," for it forces him to keep walking until he collapses. Rendered through the voice of an authorial narrator who turns to Tim, his wife Jane, and his daughter Becka as reflector characters, *The Unnamed* traces Tim's gradually declining mental health. As he becomes less aware of the world around him, information is deferred and at

times even entirely suppressed, thereby creating gaps in the story. This narrative strategy eventually disrupts the entire structure of the book, causing the disintegration of the chapter divisions that bring order into the first three sections of the narrative, before culminating in the fourth and final section which comprises a loose sequence of paragraphs that form the incoherent and fragmentary account of the events finally leading to the protagonist's death.

Disruption and incoherence, however, extend beyond the structure of the book and the mere representation of its protagonist's enigmatic condition. In a close reading of the narrative, this paper aims to shed light on the disruption of the protagonist's sense of self. The split between body and mind serves as a conceptual trope in the novel and problematizes not only notions of self and agency but also contemporary lifestyles and American corporate culture. The novel hence presents readers with a fragmented self in the modernist tradition and picks up on the connection between mental illness and modernity as explored by numerous scholars<sup>[1]</sup>.

However, the cultural critique inherent in the book is also directed at neuroscientific theories and pushes forward writers' engagement with the cognitive sciences. While the ensuing dichotomy between the mental and the physical complicates the interpretation of the protagonist's disease, contributing considerably to the incoherence of the narrative, it also bespeaks the sense of disruption and incongruence that occurs when folk notions of the self encounter reductionist neuroscientific concepts, thus also creating, as I want to argue, a counternarrative to the materialism the sciences of the mind propose.

Published 10 years after the end of the 'Decade of the Brain' President Bush proclaimed in 1990 to incite research on "one of the most magnificent – and mysterious – wonders of creation" (n. pag.), Ferris's novel, alongside other bestselling texts such as Jonathan Lethem's *Amnesia Moon* (1995) and *Motherless Brooklyn* (1999), Nicole Krauss's *A Man Walks into a Room* (2002), and Richard Powers's *The Echo Maker* (2006), vividly illustrates the contemporary fascination with both the sciences and the workings of the mind. It is therefore not surprising that we have transitioned, according to journalist and psychopharmacologist Felix Hasler's reports, into the 'Century of the Brain,' a denominator that attributes significance to the brain in similar ways in which genes have dominated biological discourses in the 20th century (28). A

plethora of fields and scientific theories have emerged, yet the sciences of the mind have also brought forth new approaches to literary texts: During the last 25 years, Monika Fludernik and Greta Olson contend, cognition has become a crucial point of inquiry in narrative analyses and may even rise to the most significant concern in narratological studies (8). In this vein, narratives are read as a “mode of mental access” that allows theorists to study the mind, along with processes of perception and cognition (Fludernik and Olson 3). The developing field has been coined ‘cognitive narratology’ and needs to be seen as a subdomain of postclassical narratology. It encompasses research building on the work of classical structuralist critics by using concepts and methods that narratologists like Barthes, Genette, and Todorov did not have at their disposal at the time they were formulating their theories. The relationship between minds and narratives may be studied in terms of both the construction and interpretation of texts, such as the ways in which the story is produced by the narrator, and the processes through which readers may comprehend the storyworlds and the cognitive states and dispositions of the characters in the narrative.<sup>[2]</sup>

Moreover, the advances in the sciences of the mind have considerably altered the artistic landscape in Britain and the United States. In his comparative analysis of David Lodge’s *Thinks ...* and Richard Powers’s *Galatea 2.2*, Gary Johnson identifies what he terms ‘neuronarratives’ as an emerging subgenre encompassing texts in which authors are responding to the changes in our understanding of the human mind (171). To be more precise, he uses the term to “describe a work of fiction that has cognitive science as a, or the, main theme” (170). According to him, these stories are conspicuous in the veritable “explosion” of fictional stories concerned with scientific concepts and theories and markedly strive to inform readers on the nature of the mind (173). In contrast to earlier stream-of-consciousness novels, Johnson purports, these narratives no longer “‘simply’ . . . represent natural human thought,” but broach issues of consciousness and the mind as scientific questions, adding to the mimetic representation of the mind the element of scientific explanation (170). As a result, the workings of the mind are not only represented on the level of narrative discourse, but have equally moved into the

content-level, leaving readers with “a rudimentary working vocabulary” in neuroscience (171, 180).

While Johnson’s reading centers on two narratives portraying intact thinking minds coming to terms with the divide between the arts and the cognitive sciences, authors and readers alike are also greatly fascinated by minds in crises and unruly bodies. In her study “Brain Plots,” Gesa Stedman observes that a growing number of recent literary works of art incorporate neurological diseases (113) and writer and editor Austin Allen, for instance, speaks of a watershed moment in American culture as “neurologically abnormal characters” are allocated protagonist roles in contemporary literature (n. pag.). Stephen Burn aptly reads such characters as synecdochal glimpses on the pervading sentiment of disorientation around the turn of the millennium (43), yet contemporary writing may also be read more specifically as revealing deep-seated ontological insecurities that have their roots in recent materialist conceptions of the self.

Coined ‘neurochemical self,’ ‘synaptic self,’ or ‘cerebral subject,’ these conceptions develop perspectives on the self informed by neurochemical and neuroscientific theories. A prominent example is sociologist Nikolas Rose’s essay “The Neurochemical Self and Its Anomalies,” in which he scrutinizes, in Foucaultian fashion, the gaze of psychopharmacology and psychiatry and notes that “diseases of the will,” such as alcoholism, have come to be seen as “diseases of the brain” (407). This somatization, that is, the conceptualization of the self in neurochemical terms, “flatten[s] out” the opposition between the mind and the brain, “between organs and conduct” (408). Similarly, neuroscientist Joseph LeDoux’s concept of the ‘synaptic self’ proposes that “we are our synapses” (7; my translation) and that the self emerges through the interconnections between neurons, for these interconnections enable the flow and storage of information and therefore affect all processes in the brain (10).<sup>[3]</sup> These theories overturn traditional notions of agency and produce a view of the self as no longer free, but determined, at the same time moving explanatory models entirely into the realm of the cognitive sciences.

As part of these scientific theories, they enter neuronarratives, yet do not remain unchallenged, as other scholars<sup>[4]</sup> have already noted. While neuroscientists celebrate our times as the age in

which the secrets of the brain and the mind are soon to be deciphered, literary texts, such as *The Unnamed*, which revolve around experiences of mental disorders and psychological breakdowns elucidate that the seemingly robust categories and the relationship between body, brain, and mind are anything but clear and stable. Notwithstanding embodied accounts of consciousness and cognitions, many illness narratives elucidate that particularly in moments of crisis, the congruence of body/brain and mind is contested and often re-conceptualized in a dualist fashion. Along these lines, the protagonist of Ferris's novel echoes a clearly Cartesian stance when he grasps his self as "[i]ndivisible, complete, that thing made of mind, distinct from body" (TU 81).

In his *Meditations*, philosopher René Descartes conducts his famous thought experiment of what may be called hyperbolic or metaphysical doubt and assumes that all established convictions about the world and the nature of being must be false. According to sociologist Nick Crossley, in order to transcend the superstitions and prejudices that presumably haunted and thus impeded the thinking of his contemporaries as much as his own thoughts, Descartes resolved to "doubt everything of which he could not be absolutely certain, so as to find a solid foundation for knowledge" (8). Throughout his philosophical inquiry, Descartes hence questions any knowledge regarding the existence, structure, and quality of material things, including his own body (cf. Perler 23). The only belief that he can then be sure of is the belief that there is a thinking person who meditates on all these (possibly mistaken) ideas. Descartes's doubt has then reached his goal, philosopher Dieter Teichert concludes, as he has found one postulation that can withstand all doubt: "I think, therefore I am" (35).

It is with this postulation that Descartes has arrived at the core of what is today considered substance dualism: Because he is able to doubt the existence of his own body and defines himself as a thinking being, Descartes comes to the conclusion that his mind and body, or rather his mind and matter, must be different substances, with himself consisting essentially of the mental substance (cf. Crossley 9). Ferris's protagonist conceives of his self in a similar way when the narrator remarks that "[he] thought that he had . . . an essence. He thought his mind was proof of it" (TU 81). As a consequence, *The Unnamed* turns to the mind for a definition of

the self, thereby viewing the body as the lesser substance, and, as my analysis will show, finally as dispensable, a narrative undercurrent that adds to the cautionary tone of the novel.

In light of recent discussions and profound changes in the cognitive sciences, the long-standing questions of philosophy of mind have strongly gained in importance (cf. Metzinger 225). It is especially the mind-body problem that is currently at the center of critical attention, reformulated as the question of how far the mind may be equated with the brain.<sup>[5]</sup> An increasing number of neuronarratives, too, explicitly engage in this question and meet neuroscientific materialism and reductionism with a critical eye. The disordered minds of their narrators or protagonists, Burn argues, move the basic axioms of the world – concepts of mind, body, and self, I hold, are part and parcel of these – into the center of the stories and make the familiar strange in order to “probe . . . the root conditions of modernity” (43). While *The Unnamed* certainly scrutinizes a number of issues that lie at the heart of modern society, such as marriage and parenthood, in the following I will particularly focus on two aspects, namely the problem and significance of diagnoses, and life in corporate America. Both aspects undergo defamiliarization through the incoherence in the story and its overt use of Cartesian dualism that is driven to extremes at the end of the narrative.

Early in the novel, it is suggested that a materialist frame of reference does not reveal anything about the nature of the protagonist’s condition but instead proves to be utterly misunderstanding of his problem. When the medical professionals treating Tim are unable to find physical causes for his condition, they begin to doubt its very existence: “‘There is no laboratory examination to confirm the presence or absence of the condition,’ [Tim] was told by a doctor named Regis, ‘so there is no reason to believe the disease has a defined physical cause or, I suppose, even exists at all’” (TU 41). The doctor’s name Regis here undoubtedly evokes associations of “king” or “kingly,” hence reiterating the authority that lies in the doctor’s expression. This authority is underlined by the phrase “there is,” an expression that generalizes and universalizes the absence of a feasible test that might provide a diagnosis and explanation. The fact that the doctor’s opinion is voiced in direct speech contrasts with Tim’s reception of the message, which is uttered in the passive voice and underlines his role as a person who is

acted upon, but may not act himself. Nonetheless, this statement elucidates that Tim is not only depicted as the victim of his disease, but also of the doctor's authority, which is in this case grounded in lab examination. Since there is no lab exam to prove the condition, the doctor's logic entails that there is no condition at all. This is further underlined by the parallel construction of the doctor's statement, in which "presence" and "absence" correspond to "physical cause" and the doubt in its existence. The quotation thus illustrates that Tim's doctors refuse to conceptualize the disease in other than physical, neuroscientific terms.

Similarly, another doctor has a helmet custom-made for Tim, "retrofitted to perform an extraordinary purpose . . . [and] advance an understanding of his mystery" and the narrator's lauding introduction of the medical invention speaks to the momentousness a diagnosis would have (TU 86). What looks like a "common bicycle helmet" has been equipped with sensors and a wireless device that records his brain activity and needs to be clipped to his belt (TU 86). Even though this sophisticated diagnostic device bears resemblance to the gear of a sporty urbanite, Tim realizes that he can never wear it into work and the experience of trying on the helmet is devastating: Several sentences form the climactic sequence in which Tim first notes that the helmet is "pinching his skin" and is thus extremely uncomfortable, where his wife cannot help but to laugh at the sight of him, and where he eventually "despair[s] and [feels] the urge to cry" at the absurdity that "this little piece of medicalized headgear" may alleviate his torments (TU 87).

In these scenes, *The Unnamed* also presents an explicit critical commentary on institutional medicine, in particular neurology and psychiatry and their respective diagnostic and therapeutic practices that not only alienate the patient, but readers as well. Similar to other scenes in which Tim and his family encounter physicians and learn about virtually absurd treatment methods – one consists of the family handcuffing Tim to the bed (18) – the two passages use exaggeration and insinuated irony to disrupt readers' ordinary perceptions and beliefs about medical practice and overwrite it with strange and alienating experiences of undergoing tests and treatments in the name of diagnosis and cure. I agree with Audrey Watts who holds that there is great power inherent in such moments of disruption (20). In this case,

these serve to defamiliarize readers with the authority and capacities of medicine and its stable categories and present what she regards as a “momentary escape” from the familiar, habitual, and internalized (20).

Expressing skepticism and challenging the “widely accepted truths” about institutional medicine (cf. Mutua 132), Ferris’s novel indeed lends itself to an analysis as a counternarrative to medical procedures and their reading of the human body and mind, and is reinforced by the clinical professionals’ apparent misunderstanding of Tim’s condition which they eventually sugarcoat. As neither of the diagnostic tools reveals any decipherable brain activity and therefore tangible results, the protagonist’s problem is dismissed as a “benign idiopathic perambulation” (TU 41), which becomes evident not only in the strikingly innocuous definition of his condition, but also through the fact that Tim, the focalizer in this passage, renders the doctor’s provisional diagnosis in direct speech, both unwilling and unable to incorporate the medical vocabulary into his own explanatory model. The adjective “idiopathic,” Tim notes, is one that he needs to look up in a dictionary. His ignorance of its meaning, the italicized font face that highlights the expression, as well as his reproduction of the dictionary entry – Tim serves as a mediator between the doctor and the reader here, translating the technical term – point to the idea that the medical and scientific attempt to frame his condition is entirely detached from his life and concerns. It is therefore not astounding that Tim does not dwell on the implications of the term; instead, he lets his mind wander to “*Ideopaths*” (TU 41; emphasis in original), his description of the doctor and her associates which insinuates not only his contempt but also the idea that for him, “idiopathic” carries a certain undertone of idiocy.

On the one hand, the fact that the protagonist’s disease may not be assigned a definitive name and category denies him control and agency. Without a proper name for his problem, an understanding of its nature, and a firm diagnosis, the novel initially suggests, Tim is forced to remain a victim of his condition. On the other hand, the unnamed disease also opens up a fascinating frame of reference in which the signifier of the disease is assigned dichotomous signifieds and may be read as either a physical, neurological, or a mental problem. It is this aesthetic choice that harbors the potential for a more complex counternarrative, since the

narrative eventually departs from the medical realm as Tim and Jane abandon their search for the "One Guy," a saintly doctor that might help to diagnose and cure Tim (63), and resolves around the binary of the mental and the corporeal. The narrative situation makes powerful use of this dichotomy; passages of the novel that employ classical zero focalization and reflect both the language and thoughts of the authorial narrator aid the impression that Tim's body is perfectly fine, but that there may be a mental problem that is the cause of his compulsion. In contrast, Tim's wife Jane, for instance, describes him as "the frightened soul inside the runaway train of mindless matter, peering out from the conductor's car in horror" (TU 24), creating the image of a modern horror story in which Tim's mind is trapped in his moving and uncontrollable body.

Reminiscent of the myth of "the ghost in the machine," the imagery employed in Jane's focalization serves as an effective reminder of Cartesian dualism (cf. Crossley 10). Although contemporary philosophy of mind has come to disapprove of Cartesian dualism,<sup>[6]</sup> its postulations offer valuable insights for the reading of Ferris's narrative, since they decidedly counter the recent master narrative of the materialist self. This master narrative, that, as Molly Andrews argues, provides the framework for normative experiences and governs how we understand others and ourselves, may well be confronted by an alternative tale when individuals feel that their experiences do not comply with the dominant narrative and need to find meaning "outside of the emplotments which are ordinarily available" (1). Dualism then may offer such an alternative framework and hence an adequate lens for the reading of Ferris's and other books. More than that, Catherine Emmott reminds that even though Cartesian dualism does not provide an appropriate description of the self, a folk notion prevails that assumes that one is "inside" one's body, an assumption that is well mirrored in the use of the split self as a conceptual trope (245). In his study *Kinds of Minds*, philosopher Daniel Dennett elaborates this issue arguing that common beliefs such as, "There's nothing wrong with your body – it's all in your mind" reflect a strong bias in everyday conceptualizations of the self that view the mind as "the body's boss, the pilot of the ship" (77). Moreover, it is particularly in the context of illness narratives that the metaphor of the machine-like body receives relevance,

since modern biomedicine does indeed tend to conceive the body as mechanical, fragmented, and isolated from the patient. Michel Foucault, too, notes that during times of illness, the subject no longer recognizes its own body properly, but instead takes it for a cadaverous, inanimate machine that is moved by forces beyond the self (86). The self is then dissociated from the body and does not perceive itself as the body, but merely as the body's "owner" (cf. Dennett 77). In these critical voices it becomes apparent that while the body is reduced to a "cadaver" or "machine" external to the self, the mind becomes the locus of the self and defines a functioning self.

This is precisely what readers find when they examine the passages of the novel in which Tim is used as a focalizer, since these scenes reveal that the protagonist's self is a split self:

Throughout the course of the plot, Tim attempts to separate his mind from his body in order to reclaim control, both over his self and over the very definition of his condition: "When the illness returned a second time, he thought of the treadmill. He'd beat his body at its own game, outwit dumb matter with his mind" (*TU* 44). Evidently, Tim defines his self along the lines of this thinking mind, conceptualizing his body as a "dumb" burden that may be tired out to avoid another onset of the condition, as is also illustrated in statements like "[h]is mind was intact, his mind was unimpeachable" (*TU* 24). In contrast to the expensive and sophisticated neuroscientific technology his doctors have employed, the resolution to simply run on the treadmill until his body is too tired to force him on another walk appears utterly old-fashioned, yet consequential. His mind, Tim claims, can control his body, as it is "intact" and flawless.

This notion of the split self mirrors the sense of fragmentation that permeates postmodern societies. More than that, though, it has to be seen as a major influence on the aesthetics of illness narratives, since it frequently occurs in times of personal crises and reflects a sense of alienation from the self (cf. Emmott 244), or, in this case, at least from that part of the self that has apparently ceased to function. Tim purposefully detaches his self here from what he holds responsible for his compulsion, namely his sick body, and from his condition respectively, subsequently turning alienation into an inner war. If mind is in Cartesian fashion seen as an internal substance, then mental life is something entirely private, independent of the social

world (cf. Crossley 17). In other words, it is the only thing that one can know and, by the extension of this definition, that one can trust and entirely control. It is the issue of control that accounts for Tim's attempt to save and preserve his self in the substance of his mind.

Throughout the course of the narrative, Tim's mind and body then continue to be separated by what toward the end of the novel appears to be an unbridgeable split. Tim, in an effort to gain control over his body, tries to "outwit" it, but he fails: "His body wouldn't be contained or corralled. It had, it seemed to him, a mind of its own" (TU 44). Much like a wild animal, his body may not be confined to the space of Tim's house and office – notice especially the use of the verb "corralled" – and rears and rebels against his attempts to gain control. The protagonist appears here, as Dennett aptly illustrates, as a "puppeteer self" frantically trying to control a defiant "body-puppet" (80). In another passage, Tim calls his wife from one of his walks to tell her: "Well, I've fed that son of a bitch and now *we're* standing outside the mini-mart where I bought the burritos" (TU 200; my emphases). This constitutes one of the most significant changes in the narrative, since Tim stops referring to himself as a unified and coherent identity, but starts talking about himself and "the other" – his body – in the first and third person. Interestingly, the narrator here acknowledges Tim's perspective and adjusts the pronouns accordingly. It is at this point that a desperate struggle for control and domination is initiated by Tim, as is elucidated, for instance, when he ignores all signs of hunger and pain his body sends ("The other stopped saying food, food, and started saying leg, leg – but he continued to eat the doughnuts and ignored him" [TU 207]), thus gradually attempting to hurt and starve his own body. Tim's self and his body are now depicted as two separate entities, each with their own needs.

Strikingly, the notion of the protagonist's mind and body not only corresponds to the dualism of self and non-self, but may also be aligned with the binaries of civilized and brute, which constitute a recurring motif in the novel. The reader not only gets this impression when the narrative is told from Tim's perspective, but also when his wife Jane is used as the focalizer in a scene where she feels she would rather not be informed of another one of Tim's attacks because otherwise "she could still picture him in a climate-controlled conference room . . .

drinking civilized lattes and assessing the other side's evidence" (TU 25). In this passage, the idea of behaving in a civilized manner is connected to a safe and controlled indoors environment, in which rationality reigns. "Civilized behavior" is ultimately considered normative and passages such as this one illustrate that control is not only an issue played out on the level of the disease, but permeates the entire novel, establishing the tight limits of what appears to be a desirable and successful life and firmly locating illness in the context of modernity.

Interspersed with the narration of the progression of the disease, the narrator reveals fragments of Tim's life and career that are mostly compressed into short narrative reports, such as this one illustrating his job at the law firm: "And his view of Central Park was breathtaking. And he liked the people. And the money was great. And the success was addictive. And the pursuit was all-consuming. And the right-ness of place was never in doubt" (TU 37). Tim, in his role as the successful lawyer, is sucked into a vicious circle of repetition and mechanical movement<sup>71</sup> in which he is bound to lose control. This description illustrates not only dull repetition, but evokes a similar image as mentioned earlier: a train that continues to move and drags him along. Furthermore, the anaphoric enumeration speeds up the reading process and signifies compulsion in itself. On the most fundamental level, the narrative is hence turned into a cautionary tale about the dangers of an ambitious life in corporate America that demands that Tim excels as a lawyer and keeps up with the pace at his office. Despite the fact that he is allowed great latitude with his clients, his agency is ultimately confined by the corporation and its rules and constraints.

For Crossley, the separation of mind and body therefore marks an attempt to "save the self-image of humanity" (11). Agency can then only be achieved through the notion of a mind that is distinct from sheer matter which is subject to the laws of "mechanical causation" (57). In this vein, agency distinguishes the performance of actions from mere effects or reactions (cf. Dennett 20), and thus becomes indeed a pressing issue in the narrative. While Tim struggles to control his body and hence attempts to assume agency in the definition of his self and the mysterious illness, "the unnamed" as illness, however, is at first presented as a response to the protagonist's daily routine. The reader soon realizes that his compulsion is tightly intertwined

with his work life, since Tim is struck for the first time when he is in his office and later, too, leaves his clients behind: "He was preparing his witness and loving it. Then he walked out" (*TU* 84). Although there is no logical connection, the narrator establishes one through the use of the connector "then," thus tying together Tim's work routine and the onset of another episode of compulsive walking.

Such a sense of ambiguity, of being torn between the life at the office that he is entirely absorbed in and the need to leave its confines and routines, also figures prominently in the narration of the first onset of the protagonist's disease: "He told [his wife] that he had been forced out of the building and into the street. At 43rd and Broadway he hailed a cab, which he hoped would take him back to the office. After getting the cab to pull over, he reached out and opened the door. But then he walked on" (*TU* 5). Times Square, with its illuminated signs the icon of commercial Manhattan, tellingly becomes the site of the first bout of the protagonist's compulsion and reinforces the reading of the disease as a response to a corporate life, since this walk, like many others, leads Tim out of Manhattan. It is significant that the attempt to balance out the attack, illustrated by the symmetry between his passivity in the grammatical construction of the first sentence and the wish to be simply taken back to the office, is not successful.

"But then he walked on" signals a break. Nevertheless it should be stressed that it remains unclear to the reader whether this is the protagonist's conscious and intentional decision or whether he was again taken by force. On the one hand, Tim repeatedly takes off his suit and tie during his walks, shedding the markers of his social identity and breaking the connections to his work life. On the other hand, the narrator briefly sketches a time between his fits during which Tim is able to return to the office: "His return to the firm, his steadiness behind the desk, his palpable sense of day following uninterrupted day gave him faith that it would hold. . . . Elation followed by delicate readjustment" (*TU* 149). Not only does this make the protagonist's struggle more mysterious but the fact that the issue of agency is not resolved here creates a tension that is crucial to the understanding of the incoherence of the novel. This tension results from Tim's taking part in "the perpetuation . . . of uneventful everyday life" (*TU* 25), the

mechanistic routines of his work, and, at the same time, not being able to endure precisely this any longer. As the disease progresses and ceases to go into remission, Tim is determined that he cannot return to his home and family. "I can't have you pick me up, I'm still at war," he tells his daughter when she offers to bring him home, which illustrates that he has made the willful decision to complete the fight against "it" (TU 269).

He finally decides that the only way in which he will be able to outwit the other is to harness the distinction of civilized and brute which I have hinted at before. In a moment of clarity, he therefore walks into a bookstore and decides to buy a book that will teach him to identify birds, explaining that he needs to "[r]eveal nature's mystery and momentarily triumph over it. . . . That was something the other could never do" (TU 212). The thinking, learned mind is portrayed as above nature, can achieve mastery, and may ultimately be capable of gaining control, while "the other" is confined to a brute. The struggle for control, however, is not only played out on the level of content, but is further supported by the narrative situation:

"Law in its most general and comprehensive sense signifies a rule of action," he said, "which is prescribed by some superior and which the inferior is bound to obey." McDonald's is quick, tasty, and conveniently located. Everyone loves TV. Discharging semen is an unbeatable sensation. (TU 213)

This passage exemplifies that Tim attempts to triumph over the other by beating it with both sophisticated thoughts and enunciation. The abrupt change of thought highlighted through the punctuation represents their changing positions in the struggle. Moreover, the narrator underlines the split between Tim and the other by changing the narrative mode: While Tim's thoughts are uttered in direct speech, a mode that foregrounds a character's subjectivity, the other is denied an actual voice but is represented in a general narrative report.

Eventually, the protagonist is indeed able to win the protracted war against his body. In the final sentences of the novel, his death receives utterly positive connotations as "he realized that he was still thinking, his mind was still afire, that he had just scored if not won the whole damn thing, and that the exquisite thought of this eternal rest was how delicious that cup of water was going to taste the instant it touched his lips" (TU 310). In Cartesian tradition, the

protagonist's body is literally reduced to a corpse. Crossley argues that dualism may be seen as a way of rescuing the self, its human meaning, and its freedom from the "clockwork universe of pulleys, levers and forces" (62), from the routines and confines of the corporate rat race. Interestingly, in the moment of complete control – or of total breakdown – the triumph of the mind over the body is represented in terms of physical pleasure, of water touching Tim's parched lips, a depiction that evokes biblical associations and elevates the protagonist to a martyr. When the novel is thus read as a cautionary tale about corporate America, it suggests that a way out is only possible at the expense of a tragic ending.

With this sudden unity of the mental and physical, however, the dualism so carefully developed over the course of the story collapses and the self is finally presented as the unity of mind and body, killed through the willful separation of the two substances. In his *Meditations*, Descartes, too, realizes that

[b]y means of these feelings of pain, hunger, thirst, and so on, nature also teaches that I am present to my body not merely in the way a seaman is present to his ship, but that I am tightly joint and, so to speak, mingled together with it, so much so that I can make up one single thing with it. (qtd. in Dennett 79)

As a consequence, the unity of mind and body is in fact essential to the definition of the self. However, the novel illustrates that a powerful notion of the mind prevails which the protagonist employs to justify his actions and to construct a self along the lines of a functioning and healthy mind. The narrative hence professes that against the background of contemporary cultural norms and everyday routines, the mind as the entity which perceives, changes, and controls the external world is overrated to the extent that the body seems evanescent and its own story of the disease is neglected.

To conclude, a close reading of *The Unnamed* reveals that the Cartesian dualism employed in the novel and the incoherence that governs its structure and the understanding of the protagonist's condition have a defamiliarizing effect and evince the ontological insecurities of our age. The unnamed disease as an open signifier essentially undermines a definitive diagnosis, but opens up the discussion of issues of self, agency, and control – all with regard to

Tim's disease and his position as a model of the corporate American businessman. The normativity established through the narrator's account of Tim's life is to be seen as the first strand of control which outlines the limits of the acceptable, desirable, and successful. More confrontational are the two competing perspectives on the mental and physical state of the protagonist that serve as a means to assert control. Whereas Tim's doctors assume that, due to a lack of feasible and rational tests, his mind is the root of his problem, Tim himself attempts to construct an opposing concept of his compulsion, depicting his mind as sane, but trapped in a sick body. By gradually separating his mind from his body and even aligning this opposition along the lines of "civilized" and "brute," Tim eventually constructs his body as "the other," an enemy entirely removed from the substance of his thinking mind. Cartesian dualism driven to such extremes may be read as the final sense of disruption and incongruence in the story, for it skillfully undermines the recent reductionist concepts of the self that the sciences of the mind devise. In the 'Decade of the Brain,' a novel such as Ferris's insinuates, the relationship between body/brain and mind remains uneasy and contested. In defiance of neuroscientific advances, *The Unnamed*, like other neuronarratives, counters the attempts of the cognitive sciences to grasp the mental in terms of the physical.

According to Johnson, neuronarratives "rehearse the closing" of the divide between what C.P. Snow has called the "two worlds," the realm of art and the realm of science, since in the stories he studies, he finds that the gap may be briefly closed before the two fields diverge again in the end (174, 177). A dialogue between the disciplines, his reading clearly demonstrates, is impossible and does not even take place when the gap is momentarily closed, since the writer-protagonists are depicted as learning from the cognitive researchers, yet not vice versa (cf. 181). In the end, Johnson therefore reads the neuronarratives as their authors' attempts to "convince themselves of the potential value of narrative fiction" (172), a pessimistic view indicating that the rug is pulled out from under literary art and its representations of the human mind. However, despite the fact that contemporary fiction heavily engages in the terminology of the sciences of the mind, their techniques and discourses, a reading of Ferris's

novel shows that literature cannot be "corralled" by a neuroscientific version of 'brainhood' only, that literature has indeed "a mind of its own" (TU 44).

### Works Cited

- Allen, Austin. "Will Neuroscience Kill the Novel?" 20 Nov. 2012. Web. 12 Dec. 2012.  
<http://bigthink.com/book-think/will-neuroscience-kill-the-novel?page=all>>.
- Andrews, Molly. "Counter-Narratives and the Power to Oppose." *Considering Counter-Narratives: Narrating, Resisting, Making Sense*. Michael Bamberg and Molly Andrews (Eds.). Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 2004. 1-6. Print.
- Burn, Stephen. "Mapping the Syndrome Novel." *Diseases and Disorders in Contemporary Fiction*. T.J. Lustig and James Peacock (Eds.). London/New York: Routledge, 2013. 35-52. Print.
- Bush, George W. "Presidential Proclamation 6158." 1990. Web. 8 May 2013.  
<http://www.loc.gov/loc/brain/proclaim.html>>.
- Courtney, Hannah. "Distended Moments in the Neuronarrative: Character Consciousness and the Cognitive Sciences in Ian McEwan's *Saturday*." *Mindful Aesthetics: Literature and the Science of the Mind*. Chris Danta and Helen Groth (Eds.). New York/London: Bloomsbury, 2014. 173-188. Print.
- Crossley, Nick. *The Social Body: Habit, Identity and Desire*. London: Sage, 2001. Print.
- Crane, Mary and Alan Richardson. "Literary Studies and Cognitive Science: Toward a New Interdisciplinarity." *Mosaic: A Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature* 32.2 (1999): 123-41. Print.
- Damasio, Antonio R. *Descartes's Error: Emotion, Reason and the Human Brain*. New York: Avon, 1994. Print.
- Dennett, Daniel C. *Kinds of Minds: Towards an Understanding of Consciousness*. London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1996. Print.

- Emmott, Catherine. "'Split Selves' in Fiction and in Medical 'Life Stories:': Cognitive Linguistic Theory and Narrative Practice." in: *The Language and Literature Reader*. Eds. Ronald Carter and Peter Stockwell. London: Routledge, 2008. 244-254. Print.
- Ferris, Joshua. *The Unnamed*. New York: Reagan Arthur Books, 2010. Print.
- Fludernik, Monika, and Greta Olson. "Introduction." in: *Current Trends in Narratology*. Ed. Greta Olson. Berlin: de Gruyter, 2011. 1-36. Print.
- Fludernik, Monika. "Narratology in the Twenty-First Century: The Cognitive Approach to Narrative." *PMLA* 125.4 (2010): 924-30. Print.
- Foucault, Michel. *Psychologie und Geisteskrankheit*. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1998. Print.
- Greenfield, Liah. *Mind, Modernity, Madness: The Impact of Culture on Human Experience*. Harvard: Harvard UP, 2013. Print.
- Hasler, Felix. *Neuromythologie: Eine Streitschrift gegen die Deutungsmacht der Hirnforschung*. Bielefeld: transcript, 2012. Print.
- Herman, David (Ed.). *Narrative Theory and the Cognitive Sciences*. Stanford: CSLI, 2003. Print.
- Herman, David (Ed. "Cognitive Narratology." *The Living Handbook of Narratology* 2011. Web. 13 June 2014. [http://hup.sub.uni-hamburg.de/lhn/index.php/Cognitive\\_Narratology](http://hup.sub.uni-hamburg.de/lhn/index.php/Cognitive_Narratology)>.
- Johnson, Gary. "Consciousness as Content: Neuronarratives and the Redemption of Fiction." *Mosaic* 41.1 (2008): 169-184. Print.
- LeDoux, Joseph E. *Das Netz der Persönlichkeit: Wie unser Selbst entsteht*. Düsseldorf: de Gruyter, 2003. Print.
- Massey, Irving. *The Neural Imagination: Aesthetic and Neuroscientific Approaches to the Arts*. Austin: U of Texas P, 2009. Print.
- Mutua, Kagendo. "Counternarrative." *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Qualitative Research Methods*. Lisa M. Given (Ed.). Thousand Oaks et al.: SAGE, 2008. 132. Print.

- Ortega, Francisco and Fernando Vidal (Eds.). *Neurocultures: Glimpses into an Expanding Universe*. Bern: Peter Lang, 2011. Print.
- Perler, Dominik. "Strategischer Zweifel: Die Funktion skeptischer Argumente in der Ersten Meditation." *Rene Descartes, Meditationen über die Erste Philosophie*. Ed. Andreas Kemmerling. Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2009. 11-30. Print.
- Rose, Nikolas. "The Neurochemical Self and its Anomalies." *Risk and Morality*. Ed. Richard Ericson and Aaron Doyle. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 2003. 407-37. Print.
- Ryan, Marie-Lauren. "Narratology and Cognitive Science: A Problematic Relation." *Style* 44.4 (2010): 469-95. Print.
- Ryle, Gilbert. *The Concept of Mind*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973. Print.
- Schläger, Jürgen and Gesa Stedman (Eds.). *The Literary Mind*. Tübingen: Narr, 2008. Print.
- Schumaker, John F. *The Age of Insanity: Modernity and Mental Health*. Westport: Praeger, 2001. Print.
- Searle, John R. *The Rediscovery of the Mind*. 3rd ed. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992. Print.
- Stedman, Gesa. "Brain Plots. Neuroscience and the Contemporary Novel." *The Literary Mind*. Jürgen Schläger and Gesa Stedman (Eds.). Tübingen: Narr, 2008. 113-24. Print.
- Teichert, Dieter. *Einführung in die Philosophie des Geistes*. Darmstadt: Wiss. Buchges, 2006. Print.
- Vidal, Fernando. "Brainhood: Anthropological Figure of Modernity." *History of the Human Sciences* 22.1 (2009): 5-36. Print.
- Watters, Audrey V. "Defamiliarization: Shklovsky, Brecht, Debord." 2002. Web. 6 Oct. 2014. .

[1] Compare, for example, John F. Schumaker's study *The Age of Insanity: Modernity and Mental Health* (Westport: Praeger, 2001) and *Mind, Modernity, Madness: The Impact of Culture on Human Experience* by Liah Greenfield (Harvard: Harvard UP, 2013).

[2] For an introduction to cognitive narratology, please see David Herman's edited volume *Narrative Theory and the Cognitive Sciences* (Stanford: CSLI, 2003), as well as his essay on "Cognitive Narratology" in *The Living Handbook of Narratology* ([http://hup.sub.uni-hamburg.de/lhn/index.php/Cognitive\\_Narratology](http://hup.sub.uni-hamburg.de/lhn/index.php/Cognitive_Narratology)), Jürgen Schläger's and Gesa Stedman's volume *The Literary Mind* (Tübingen: Narr, 2008.), Irving Massey's *The Neural Imagination: Aesthetic and Neuroscientific Approaches to the Arts* (Austin: U of Texas P, 2009), Mary Crane's and Alan Richardson's "Literary Studies and Cognitive Science: Toward a New Interdisciplinarity" (*Mosaic: A Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature* 32.2 (1999): 123–41), Monika Fludernik's "Narratology in the Twenty-First Century: The Cognitive Approach to Narrative" (*PMLA* 125.4 (2010): 924–30), and, for a critical perspective, Marie-Lauren Ryan's "Narratology and Cognitive Science: A Problematic Relation" (*Style* 44.4 (2010): 469–95).

[3] This approach, LeDoux stresses, is not supposed to substitute psychological, social, moral, and aesthetic theories of the self; instead, in his book, he sets out to explain these theories employing his synaptic model (10). In a similar vein, historian and philosopher of science Fernando Vidal has coined the notion of the 'cerebral subject' to read personhood as 'brainhood.' In many ways, Vidal's work rests on LeDoux's and Rose's notions of the self but significantly extends their theories by studying the 'cerebral subject' in the context of modernity and discourses on individuality and agency (cf. "Brainhood: Anthropological Figure of Modernity." *History of the Human Sciences* 22.1 (2009): 5–36; Please also compare the now completed research project "The Cerebral Subject: Brain, Self, and Body in Contemporary Culture" at the Max Planck Institute for the History of Science and its publication *Neurocultures: Glimpses into an Expanding Universe*. Eds. Francisco Ortega and Fernando Vidal. Bern: Peter Lang, 2011).

[4] In this context, please see, for example, Hannah Courtney's "Distended Moments in the Neuronarrative: Character Consciousness and the Cognitive Sciences in Ian McEwan's *Saturday*," in which she asserts that the genetic determinism surgeon Henry Perowne proudly puts forth in the narrative is "deeply questioned" when he meets Baxter (177). Accordingly, readers are urged to question Perowne's beliefs "and thus the extreme, steadfast, unwavering scientific standpoint" (177) (in: *Mindful Aesthetics: Literature and the Science of the Mind*. Eds. Chris Danta and Helen Groth. New York/London: Bloomsbury, 2014. 173-188).

[5] Compare in this context John R. Searle's *The Rediscovery of the Mind* (3rd Ed. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992) and Antonio R. Damasio's *Descartes's Error: Emotion, Reason and the Human Brain* (New York: Avon, 1994).

[6] Compare especially Nick Crossley's *The Social Body: Habit, Identity and Desire* (London: Sage, 2001) and Gilbert Ryle's *The Concept of Mind* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973) for an extensive critical discussion of Cartesian dualism.

[7] The issue of mechanical movement is also reflected in the overall structure of the narrative. The first section which introduces the protagonist's condition is titled "The Feet, Mechanical" and already hints at the events that will soon unfold. The body is fragmented to include the only aspect that seems relevant for Tim's illness: his feet. Added for emphasis, the word "mechanical" connotes regular, non-human movement without conscious thought.



Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License