Naghmeh Varghaiyan & Karam Nayebpour

Storytelling as an Act of Remembering

Episodic Memory in Post-Millennial Irish Narrative

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In memory of Fati Sedighzadeh, an excellent mother

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Preface

Storytelling is as old as human beings. Our mind processes the world through stories; they make the world meaningful for us. As a natural innate skill and disposition, storytelling connects us to other times as well as to other people. We re-experience our past lives and experiences through recollecting and retelling them. The past is an ever-flowing and a never-dying river in human consciousness. Any single piece of our memories is a constituent part of this river. By our acts of remembering, we continuously and intermittently become connected to this river of consciousness. Therefore, remembering is an integrated part of our mind. Similarly, it is a salient property of fictional minds too. The past is a defining element for characters' sense of identity in narrative fiction.

The fact that our sense of identity is continuously formulated as stories ensure its continuity from the past to the future. Memory plays an important role in the construction, presentation, and processing of stories. If read from this perspective, more than anything else, (narrative) literature is about remembering, retrieving, recollecting, retelling, and re-experiencing. Fictional characters mostly share with their audience their memories themselves and about others too. Based on what they remember, they comment on themselves, on other people, and related events. Storytelling is, therefore, a dialogic activity since through it the characters enter a sincere dialogue with themselves and with others.

Storying the past based on experienced and invented memories lies at the heart of the narratives analysed in the present book. *The Sea* (2005) by John Banville, *The Gathering* (2007) by Anne Enright, and *Milkman* (2018) by Anna Burns are post-millennial Irish narratives in which remembrance of the things past is indexed to the first-person narrators' sense of identity. In its three parts, this book tries to show how the remembering of eventful episodes from the past has some emotional and cognitive advantages for the storytellers.

Naghmeh Varghaiyan & Karam Nayebpour
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INTRODUCTION

"[S]uppose I wholly lose the memory of some parts of my life, beyond a possibility of retrieving them, so that perhaps I shall never be conscious of them again; yet am I not the same person, that did those actions, had those thoughts, that I was once conscious of, though I have now forgot them?"
(John Locke 342)

"Memory is the most important epic faculty of all."
(Walter Benjamin 62)

"[M]aybe retellings have over-rounded it into a story."
(Julian Barnes 62)

Irish voice is loud and sharp in English and world literature. The distinctive qualities of Irishness are best represented in Irish literature practiced by Irish writers within the borders of Ireland. The country, in Liam Harte's words, "has, since the late nineteenth century, produced a roll call of distinguished literary novelists and short story writers whose collective contribution to world literature has been far out of proportion to the country's size and population" ("Modern" 3). The inquiring, ironic and satiric nature of the Irish voice has been an integral part of English literature since Jonathan Swift's *A Modest Proposal* (1729).

In terms of the concerned narrative issues in Irish literature, a gradual change has occurred since the modernist era of literature. The formative influence of Samuel Beckett and James Joyce on Irish novelists' formal and thematic practices is a universally acknowledged fact (Harte, "Modern" 3)[1]. By widely using modernist narrative techniques, in a similar way to Joyce, contemporary Irish novelists mainly represent the problem of self/identity through the narration and/or remembrance of things past. In other words, the

[1] In his conversation with Mike Murphy, the contemporary Irish writer John Banville holds that "The 'two great novelists' of the century have been Joyce and Beckett. Joyce put everything in and Beckett threw everything out. [...] What novelists like myself try to do is put everything in, then throw it out, and deny it, and do both things at the same time" (qtd in Fibrate 60).

implementation of narrative techniques and strategies widely used by the modernist writers, such as internal focalization, allow contemporary Irish novelists to recount their memory-driven narratives by focusing on the long-term impact of some particular events in the past on the central characters' minds, and sense of subjectivities.

Post-millennial Irish fiction, according to Susan Cahill, brought a "new fictional renaissance" (603). This literary revival[2] was one aspect of the overall innovation in Irish society. "One of the key concepts of the millennium," as Cahill highlights, "was the idea of the new. The opening years of the century revealed an Ireland that, in many ways, was radically different to the country of just twenty years earlier. Here was a changed nation […] that bore little similarity to the conservative, inward-looking society of previous decades" (604). Along with socio-cultural changes, "the opening two decades of the twenty-first century," argues Cahill, "have witnessed an extraordinary renaissance in Irish fiction, featuring novels that are stylistically experimental, ethically engaged, and pointed in their social, cultural, and political critiques" (618).

In *The Sea* (2005) by John Banville, *The Gathering* (2007) by Anne Enright, and *Milkman* (2018) by Anna Burns, the narrators, on the one hand, recount, retell, imagine, or re-experience some traumatic events in their past and, on the other hand, they present the long-term effects of the represented and/or reconstructed events on their sense of identity at the time of narration. In other words, the examined narratives are both about the objects of experience in the past as well as the identity of the experiencing subjects at the time of narration. The deeply traumatized narrators break their silences about some momentous events in their past after a long time. In this sense, they follow the Irish literary tradition since, as Anne

[2] Such a sociocultural change resonates with Ezra Pound's (1885—1972) slogan 'Make It New' which, according to Bledsoe "compels the writer to create out of the material of art work that is distinctively innovative. The artist must break with the formal and contextual standards of their contemporaries in making works fundamentally individual. These 'new' modern works cannot be wholly autonomous, however, as they must consider the aesthetics of the past in the context of the present moment."

Enright states, "Traditionally, Irish writing has been about breaking silences" (qtd. in Jordan). Besides that, what the contemporary Irish writer Colm Tóibín in his interview with Lisa Guidarinias argues is also true about the analysed narratives, "There is a lovely strangeness about Irish writing, an unpredictability, and a way of handling solitude and dark themes."

Recounting remembered acts through internal focalization provides the writers, in T. S. Eliot's terms, with an "objective correlative"[3] to represent the emotional aspect of their art. Similarly, the episodic recounting acts in the examined narratives provide the narrators with an effective tool to tell the story of what happened to them in the past, and also what they think and how they feel about it at the time of narration. Thus, in the three analysed narratives, the act of remembering, which in Astrid Erll's words is "always an 'anachronic process'" (214), has potential to evoke similar emotions in the reader. The goal of remembering in them is mostly therapeutic. As Kathleen Costello-Sullivan states, "many more recent contemporary Irish novels redirect their energies away from past trauma and toward a narrative recreation of the process of recovery, with a refocus on recuperative potentialities" ("Trauma" 408). The theme of recuperation also runs through the acts of memory in the examined narratives wherein the narrators' remembering and retelling acts are interwoven with their performance of them.

The three post-millennial Irish narratives in this study are prototype examples which represent the way literature has the potential to deal with personal wounds and transform traumatic experiences into memorable stories through retelling them. They are narratives of and about memory. The plotlines in these narratives turn around the positive effects of storying the traumatic episodes.

The traumatic past, damaged selves, dysfunctional families, lack of individual autonomy and the conflict between self and other

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[3] According to Eliot, "The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an 'objective correlative'"; in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked" (145).

are among the shared themes in these narratives. Above all, their joint primary concern, which is also the main subject of the present book, is their focus on the central narrator-characters' acts of remembering and their sense of identity. The remembering narrators have retained some traces of their autobiographical memories. They reconstruct their sense of identity through the process of remembering some parts or episodes from their histories. The remembered acts of their past are framed by their more experienced selves at the time of narration.

Memory, in Endel Tulving's and Fergus Craik's definition, "is usually thought of as the ability to recollect past events and to bring learned facts and ideas back to mind" (v). Memory also plays a defining role in human identity. In other words, as Grmusa and Oklopcic emphasise, "our memories—our reinterpretations of past experiences, cultural contexts, and national his-stories—frame our identity and constitute our subjective selfhood" (1). In its sense of recollecting ability as well as formation or construction of identity, memory, in *The Sea*, *The Gathering*, and *Milkman*, is a personified basic narrative element. It is represented as an organic entity which is not lost through time. Rather, it changes into the central part of the characters' identity. The three narratives are thus the narrators' narratives of identity which mainly depends on the narration and remembrance of the past events as much as on the interpretation and evaluation of them.

The main reason behind the narrators' strong desire to tell their stories is to find a way to go beyond the restricting impact of the past. The unavoidable need for remembering is a significant shared quality in the analysed narratives where some episodes from the past are continuously in the process of recreation in the narrators' minds. The remembering first-person narrators try to vividly recollect and recount mostly the painful events in their past lives. A traumatic event lies at the centre of each of their personal (hi)stories. By focusing on their trauma-afflicted old selves, the narrators share with us their thoughts and feelings about what happened in their far past and how they interpret this after a long time. To do so, they necessarily tell us a story because "Remembering an event," as David C. Rubin highlights, "is telling a story" (11).

Representation or narration of memory in narrative fiction plays a significant role in the construction of individual characters' identity, the story worlds wherein they inhabit, and the narrative plots. From this perspective, literature is considered a lucrative source of memory-related theories since "literary fictions disseminate influential models of both individual and cultural memories as well as of the nature and functions of memory" (Neumann 333). "Memory and processes of remembering," in Bright Neumann's words, "have always been an important, indeed a dominant, topic in literature." Neumann draws our attention to the "Numerous texts […] concerned with the mnemonic presence of the past in the present." Such texts, according to Neumann, "re-examine the relationship between the past and the present, and […] illuminate the manifold functions that memories fulfill for the constitution of identity." The memory-oriented literary texts, as Neumann argues, "highlight that our memories are highly selective, and that the rendering of memories potentially tells us more about the rememberer's present, his or her desire and denial, than about the actual past events" (333). The narrators' mental states at the time of narration in *The Sea*, *The Gathering*, and *Milkman* act as the driving force of their storytelling activities through which they at least partially come to terms with their highly fictionalized past.

Memory is an indispensable part of human history. To put it in other words, "History," in Ilan Stavans's words, "is the living manifestation of memory, its theatre" (82). Memory played a significant role in ancient times, which functioned based on myths. Similarly, memory has been playing a meaningful role in modern times, which is mainly constructed based on science. In María Jesús Martínez-Alfaro's and Silvia Pellicer-Ortín's words:

> It is no wonder that Mnemosyne, the personification of memory in Greek mythology, should also be the mother of the Muses, inspiration to artists and poets and also goddesses of knowledge. A significant part of contemporary literature could be said to be presided by Mnemosyne, as many writers engage with the call to remember and to play aesthetically with memory and the frictions attending memory work. (15)

Accordingly, "the composition of a narrative text," as Stavans holds, "is a mnemonic act by the very fact that it involves *mneme* and *anamnesis*: it includes immediate and ancestral records, both innate and acquired" (emphasis original, 88). Thus, possibly it would not be wrong if one would claim that all narratives are about and/or are constructed by memories. In Charlotte Linde's words, "A narrative most typically is understood as a representation, or a construction, based on a sequence of events in the past, that communicates something from the memory of the narrator" (2).

Of all the three main types of memory in psychology—episodic, semantic (or propositional), and procedural—it is the first one, or "the memory of a specific personal event or a sequence of events" (Linde 2) which is usually presented in narrative. Being synonymous with autobiographical memory in Tulving's definition, "Episodic memory is concerned with unique, concrete, personal experiences dated in the rememberer's past" (*Elements* v). Remembering is an integral part of episodic memory, or in Tulving's words, "The basic unit of episodic memory is an individual act of remembering that begins with the witnessing or experiencing of an event or episode and ends with its subjective remembering (recollective experience)" (*Elements* 11). The three narratives analysed in this study primarily represent the individual processes of some experiential memories as they happened at particular times in the past. In other words, the stories we read are the result of the characters', narrators', recollectors', or storytellers', in Tulving's words, "subjective awareness of remembering" which is "One of the most compelling and salient characteristics of remembering of past events" (*Elements* 10).

It is Tulving's contention that humans are capable of mentally travelling back in time because of their sense of subjective time ("Episodic" 2). The subjective experience of memory is a primary narrative concern in *The Sea*, *The Gathering*, and *Milkman* where the presented narrative situations and events are based on the narrators' pure and conscious act of remembering and/or re-experiencing some specific events at particular times in the past. The narrators' acts of remembering are combinations of their recollections, retrievals and recalling. Since a complete retrieval is not possible, a

full-scale replica of the original events is presented. Hence, the narrators' sense of identity is interwoven with their conscious narration of individual and collective memories. Through remembering, storying, and constructing memories, they endeavour to fill in some defining blank or confusing parts in their past lives. The void parts, to which they do not have direct access, include some fundamental information about their past lives.

"Storytelling," according to Astrid Erll, "is per definition an act of 'memory'" (213), and since "memory can only be reconstructed in time" (King 2), the first-person narrators in *The Sea*, *The Gathering*, and *Milkman* try to reconstruct their behaviour in the past through imagining some experienced personal events and retrospective narration of them. "The rediscovery of the past and its recreation in full detail," as Nicola King holds, "is a popular narrative trope" (65). "Memory and narration," in Andrea Smorti's words, "are both linked to the life and history of human culture" (19). The narrators' autobiographical memories also include "cultural-collective, often national" memories too (Erll 212). Hence, Smorti's argument about the similarities between narrative and autobiographical memory, which "[a]ccording to most definitions […] is the ability to consciously remember personal events" (Berntsen and Rubin "Understanding", 333), and which also holds true for the analysed narratives in this study. According to Smorti:

> Autobiographical memory and narrative are […] deeply interconnected and share common social roots. They are part of the second signal system, because both the memory of an event (in the form of an image, sound, voice, smell) and its narration through words are similar to signs or symbols that stand in place of the original object. In this way, they make the past in the present experienceable. (20)

Rather than considering "autobiographical memory as a subset of memory," Rubin underscores that "autobiographical memory is better considered as an expansion of memory" (5). Rubin also states that verbal narrative (words and/or stories), imagery and emotion are three main components of autobiographical memory (2-3). "Accuracy of memory" is also, as Rubin states, a "general issue" or "paradox" (4) in autobiographical memory. Furthermore, Rubin

draws our attention to the constructed nature of autobiographical memories: "autobiographical memories are constructed. This does not mean that they are either accurate or inaccurate, but that they are not encoded, stored, and retrieved as wholes but rather are created at retrieval using components like the narrative, imagery, emotion division" (4). Thus, remembering has an experiential function in storytelling. Similarly, presentation of memory, according to Astrid Erll, plays a significant role in terms of the narrativity level in a single narrative. In other words, "it is in fictional representations of remembering that the manifold possibilities of narrative discourse best come to the fore" (213).

"Literature," according to Astrid Erll and Ansgar Nünning, "can virtually be described as a way to present individual memory" (282). In their essay, "Where literature and memory meet: towards a systematic approach to the concept of memory used in literary studies," Erll and Nünning discuss the nexus between memory and literature under three headings: The Memory of Literature, Memory in Literature, or Mimesis of Memory, and Literature as a Medium of Collective Memory. According to them, "Narrative texts in particular demonstrate forms that show a special affinity to memory" (282). They particularly highlight the function of memory in first-person narration:

> [I]t is not surprising that the narrative distinction between an experiencing and a narrating 'I' already rests on a (largely implicit) concept of memory: namely, on the concept of a difference between pre-narrative experience on the one hand, and on the other hand a memory which forms the past through narrative and retrospectively creates meaning. The occupation with first-person narrators is thus always an occupation with the literary presentation of memory. (282)

The mode of narration in the narratives analysed in this study is the first-person retrospective point of view. By adopting a superior perspective, the narrating I in each narrative recounts some painful/eventful traces of his/her memories to gain a deeper understanding of his/her experiencing I or self. Thus, the narrative construction in these narratives is based on the narrators' narrativization of the related memory. Their storytelling is heavily based on the operation of their consciousness. Likewise, Erll and Nünning

consider the different processes of consciousness representation in narrative as "a further example of the ability of literature to represent memory, as it can bring conscious and unconscious processes of individual remembering to light through specifically fictional privileges" (282).

The Sea, *The Gathering*, and *Milkman* are mimeses of memory since the narrative acts represented in them are in fact memory practices. By considering "writing as a mnemonic act," Renate Lachmann argues that "When literature is considered in the light of memory, it appears as the mnemonic art par excellence. [… It is] culture's prominent (yet not only) representative of recording." In other words, "Writing," according to Lachmann, "is both an act of memory and a new interpretation, by which every new text is etched into memory space" (302). Likewise, "narrative," in Jens Brockmeier's words, "is crucial among [the] practices of memory" (26) as it "is capable of playing a number of different (cognitive, social and emotive) roles at the same time" (27). "[N]arrative's distinctive capacity," according to Brockmeier, is "to give shape to the temporal dimension of human experience" (27). Similarly, the narrators in the examined narratives try to make sense of their experiences by storying them. To do so, they recount their troubling autobiographical memories which, according to Alan Baddeley, refer "to the recollection by subjects of their earlier lives" (13) and are, in Dorthe Berntsen's and David C. Rubin's words, "crucial for a sense of identity, continuity, and direction in life" ("Introduction" 1). The narrators in these narratives are witnesses of a mostly forgotten order. Thus, they try to restore the painful order mainly in order to understand the nature of their own and the other characters' behaviour at that time. The main shared point in their stories is traumatic episodes. In other words, it is their open wounds that are bleeding the red ink into their autodiegetic narratives. However, the acts of recollection in their narratives mostly end in development, maturity, and self-awareness.

The line or border between fact and fiction, or imagination, is blurred in *The Sea*, *The Gathering*, and *Milkman*. To put the same idea in different words, the narrators' act of storytelling is a coproduction of their memories and imaginations. It helps them to defeat

time and have a continuous sense of identity too. "Memory and imagination," in Kerry McSweeney's words, "collaborate to produce a narrative reconstruction of a life, in which individual episodes are seen to be parts of a continuum and the subject's continuity in time is shown" (93). The narrators' remembered memories are partly their (re)constructed memories too. Their remembering minds are the storehouses of what they remember, what they think they remember, and what they fabricate based on what they do not remember or what they have forgotten. They go through this process in order to define their identity at the time of narration. However, they do so based on their sense identity at the time of the remembered events. Accordingly, their memories are a constructive process through which they try to solidify and/or unify their identity via remembering and forgetting. Their memory is in line with Brady Wagoner's definition of the term, "Memory is not a thing, substance, or faculty for storing the representations of past but, rather, a process or activity of using the past to meet current needs for action" (5).

A remembering narrator is the most important element in the homodiegetic-autodiegetic narratives in *The Sea*, *The Gathering*, and *Milkman*. In other words, the first-person narrators are themselves the main participants in the events they narrate and are the protagonists in the storyworlds too. As self-conscious narrators and skilful storytellers, they try to (re)configure their personal histories.

Another shared property among these narratives is their similar focus on the representation of the autodiegetic narrators' memories. The long distance between the time of experience and the time of narration in all these narratives ease the evaluation process of the narrated events, for themselves and for the reader too. The three narrators are contemplators too in the sense that, while recounting their stories, they are meditating on the nature of their memories.

The triad of memory, identity, and time is the configuring structure based on which the narrators' acts of storytelling function. In their search for the truth and a personal sense of identity, remembering allows the narrators to defeat time by making a bond between their behaviour in the past and their evaluation of them in

the present time. As a result of this process, they mostly come to terms with their experiences in the past. The fact that "Memory," as Nicola King holds, "can create the illusion of a momentary return to a lost past" (11) is also true about the primary point of remembering for the narrators. The interpretive nature of the narrators' remembering of the past takes place in terms of their present mentality. By "consisting more of holes than of bricks" (Albright 23), their remembered selves mostly remain an incomplete project. As Daniel Albright holds, "Literature is particularly suspicious of the remembered self" (21). Hence the represented remembered selves are entangled with a sense of oblivion, "The great writers are not only expert in memory; they are also expert in oblivion" (Albright 23). The remembered selves are, therefore, disorganized entities. As it is true about remembering in autobiographical narrative, memory "is only a metaphor, a dim surrogate for past time that can never be recovered, never embodied, never made to sit still" (Albright 39). The remembered selves in the examined narratives in the following three chapters are loose as they coincidentally include features from both the present and the absent or the present and past times. The narrators, however, try to achieve a unified and coherent sense of self or identity by the end of their acts of remembering.

Chapter Two analyses the two aspects of episodic memory in John Banville's *The Sea*. On the one hand, the narrator uses his act of remembering as a medium of his being and as an effective tool to fight against his mental and emotional problems. He feels lonely, detached and disappointed. Thus, he uses remembering as a remedy for his mental breakdown. As is argued, he uses storytelling to cure his melancholy as well as to examine the nature of remembering itself. While forgetting for him is synonymous with annihilation, remembering is equal with existing and being. Thus, as argued, memory in general and remembering in particular have ontological functions in *The Sea*. The narrator uses remembering as the only medium which connects him to some iconic events and people in his past life. However, his entire storytelling activity shows how remembering is always an incomplete act mixed with fabrication,

construction, or imagination. Thus, it is the combination of the remembered or recounted memories with the constructed or fake ones which helps the narrator to come to terms with his past and to find some new possibilities for his life in the future.

In a similar way to the case in *The Sea*, remembering also, as Chapter Three argues, turns around a traumatic memory in Anne Enright's *The Gathering*. Enright's narrator scrutinizes her brother's suicidal death for the possible traces of what has brought about her own depression and mental breakdown. Since she does not have direct access to a great part of her and her family's past, she relies on her imagination so that she might find meaningful association among the apparently disconnected and irrelevant pieces. Despite the fact that she partially comes to terms with most of her life in the past with the help of her acts of remembering, this retrieving and constructing of memories fails to help her forgive Lamb Nugent for abusing her brother as the evilness of Nugent's actions extends beyond the scope of time in the past.

Reading Anna Burns's *Milkman* as a narrative of memory, Chapter Four studies the function of acts of remembering in this narrative. Unlike the shared concern and approach in *The Sea* and *The Gathering*, where the narrators' accounts are highly fictionalized, memory in *Milkman* is represented as a reliable tool which faithfully registers personal and socio-cultural histories and realities. Thus, remembering in *Milkman* provides the narrator with an opportunity for re-experiencing a painful period in her life in the past. With her mature perspective, she narrates in order to evaluate and interpret her own behaviour during the Troubles on the one hand and to understand both her younger self and those around her in the past on the other hand. Establishing her distinctive sense of identity and identifying her strategies to survive the deadly threats of a problematic society are the two main payoffs of the narrator's acts of remembering and storytelling activity in *Milkman*.

The narrators in *The Sea* and *The Gathering* are writers, and in *Milkman*, a storyteller. All three narrators are experienced, knowledgeable, and conscious characters who try to go beyond their disturbing memories. Their pasts are made up of fragmented pieces of memories. By narrating them, the narrators try to organize their

memories because, as Smorti says, "memory becomes more and more structured in a narrative way" (70), and "Creating stories plays an irreplaceable role in understanding oneself" (119). Thus, the narrativization of the narrators' memories on the one hand facilitates their understanding of some fundamental issues in their past; on the other hand, it helps them to fill the voids in their memories through storying them. In other words, whenever the narrators' memories fail to provide them with first-hand access to the past events and/or situations, they use their storytelling skill to construct a related memory which makes the truth accessible to them. The construction of memory plays an important role in the narrators' understanding and acceptance of the past. Thus, their identity or selfhood is constructed through remembering and representing their memories. However, their *anamnesis*[4] fails to end in their desired truths regarding their self-identity. In other words, in the examined narratives, travelling in time through remembering does not end in divine revelation and/or relief.

Having analysed the issue of memory in Eliot's, Proust's and Woolf's works and by drawing on Freud's essay "On Transience," Evelyne Ender draws her conclusion that "the memory garden is our subjective creation; our imagination, desire, and affections determine the salience, significance, and beauty we ascribe to chosen elements of the surrounding world. As the culmination of these different aesthetic and psychological impulses, autobiographical memory becomes our bulwark against the forces of destruction and mortality" (179-180). Likewise, the narrators in the three examined narratives rely on their episodic or experiential memories as shields against their mental complications. They are both recounting and performing their acts of remembering. Through their storytelling activities, the narrators try to re-experience some iconic events in

[4] According to Jens Brockmeier, "For Plato […] the notion of anamnesis (recollection) implied that memory is the golden path to the highest intellectual and spiritual truths a human being could know. True recall could lead one's soul back to its origin, to that divine state of knowledge and being one had experienced before birth. Those unable to recollect what they had known prior to drinking of the waters of Lethe (forgetfulness) were condemned to live out their lives in the shadowy world of the mundane without ever reaching any insight into their fundamentally spiritual and divine nature" (16).

their past lives so that they can counter their negative effects, such as disappointments and depression, at the time of narration; so that they can reframe their identities. As argued in the next chapter, the narrator's acts of remembering in *The Sea* help him to reframe his negative thoughts about some troubling episodes from his life in the past.