Narrative Causalities

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Josef Albers’s *Homage to the Square: Aurora*, which is reproduced on the cover of this book, is one of the paintings of squares superimposed on squares by which Albers demonstrates that perceptions of color are influenced by context. In experiments beginning at Black Mountain College in 1949 and continuing during the 1950s at Yale, the artist showed that a given pigment will be seen sometimes as one color and at other times as a surprisingly different color. To experience this effect when we look at one of Albers’s paintings, we pick a square other than the innermost or the outermost. Then we look at an area of that square that is adjacent to the next square inside. We see one color. Then we shift our focus and look at our same square but this time at an area that is adjacent to the next square outside. This time we see a different color. The pigment of a given square is the same throughout, but the color we perceive when we look at the pigment depends on whether we are seeing it in relation to the pigment of the outer square or of the inner square.

Albers proves that interpretations of the color of a pigment depend on the context in which the pigment is perceived. Similarly, interpretations of the causes and effects of something someone does or something that happens depend on the context in which the action or happening is considered. In narrative studies, something someone does or something that happens is referred to as an *event*. Like interpretations of the color of a pigment, interpretations of the causality of an event are contextual and depend on the other events in relation to which the event is perceived.

Narratives determine the context in relation to which we interpret the events they report. When we read a novel, scan a newspaper account about events in our world, watch a film, or listen to a friend who is telling us about her problems at work, we are receiving information sequentially about sequential events; we are reading or viewing or listening to a narrative. A *narrative*, according to the definition I use (which I discuss in more detail in chapter 1), is
a sequential representation of sequential events, fictional or otherwise, in any medium. As we shall see in the chapters that follow, both sequences—the sequence in which we receive information and the chronological sequence in which the events are reported to have occurred—contribute to the formation of the context that a narrative establishes.

The sequence in which the events are reported to have occurred not only positions individual events chronologically in relation to prior and subsequent events. Because narratives reach an end and conclude, the set of events that a given narrative reports is finite. This chronologically ordered, finite set provides the context in relation to which we interpret the causes and consequences of individual reported events. Because all narratives establish a chronologically ordered, finite set of events, all narratives unavoidably shape readers’ (listeners’, viewers’) interpretations of the causes and effects of those events. This shaping of perceivers’ interpretations of causality, which is the effect of the context that a narrative provides, occurs, I will argue, whether the writer or speaker intends to guide causal interpretations or not.

Furthermore, because narratives are represented sequentially, we receive information increment by increment. In other words, the context a narrative provides—and in relation to which we interpret the causes and effects of revealed events—changes and expands as information about subsequent and sometimes about prior events is revealed. The sequential representation of events in narratives, along with the concomitant sequential perception of events for readers (viewers, listeners), can have varied epistemological and aesthetic effects, which will be considered in detail in the chapters that follow. In response to most narratives, I suggest, almost as soon as we begin to read (or listen, or watch), we start to analyze the causal relations among the events we have learned about thus far. That is to say, our first interpretations are made in relation to a context that is necessarily more limited than it will be after we read on. Some narratives, as we shall see, guide us to retain our first interpretation until information that is revealed only in the concluding words or moments forces us to recognize that that interpretation was incorrect. Other narratives shape and reshape our interpretation, leading us from a first interpretation of the causes and effects of an event to another interpretation and yet another interpretation. Sometimes, I will argue (particularly in chapter 6), in the interaction between a given narrative and a given reader (listener, viewer), our first interpretation of causality
becomes so firmly fixed in our minds that we retain that inter-
pretation even after we have received additional information that
would lead us, if only we recognized the need to reinterpret, to a
new interpretation.

A function, as I use the term, names a position in a causal
sequence. The ten functions I define in chapter 1 provide a vocab-
ulary to talk about interpretations and reinterpretations of causal
relations between a given event and other events that the inter-
preter considers related. I use functions, for example, to record
readers’ interpretations as they develop and change (or fail to
change) during the process of reading, to compare interpretations
among characters, between characters and narrators, and between
readers and characters or readers and narrators, as well as, more
generally, to show how the context in which an event is perceived
affects interpretations of its causes and consequences.

Moreover, we process events we observe in our world in the
same way we process events reported in narratives—by interpret-
ing their causes and consequences in relation to other events we
consider related. Thus a vocabulary of functions can name and
compare interpretations of real-world events, interpretations of
events in narratives that report real-world events, and interpreta-
tions of events in literary narratives. In addition to exploring one
source of the power of literary texts, function analysis serves two
real-world purposes: first, to show that the different contexts in
which events are viewed can lead people (in our world), as well as
characters (in a fictional world), to quite different interpretations
of the causes and effects of a given event; and, second, to demon-
strate how seriously any telling, by establishing one rather than
another context, unavoidably guides readers’ (viewers’, listeners’)
interpretations of the events it reports. The real-world danger to
which my analysis draws attention is that as readers (listeners,
viewers) of narratives, we may not recognize the extent to which
the reports through which we learn about events can shape—and
are shaping—our interpretation of the causes and effects of those
events.

A constant thread throughout this book is the epistemological
question of what we can know—but in a slightly reformulated ver-
sion. I focus on epistemology in relation to narratives, which are
the source of most of the information we receive. I ask what we
can know if a narrative is the source of our information—or, in
other words, how the information we receive through narratives is
shaped by the representation through which we receive it. To
address this question I draw widely from the rich store of presently available narrative theory—a corpus that my study is designed to complement. Although I am equally interested in the effects on interpretations of narratives about events in our world as of literary narratives, I take most of my examples from literature, mainly because of the advantage for epistemological analysis of fictional worlds for which (with notable Postmodern exceptions) all information is contained between the covers of one book.

This project began more than a decade ago when I developed a vocabulary of functions for talking about interpretations of causality. Using that vocabulary to analyze responses to narratives, I became increasingly aware both that context shapes interpretations of causality and that narratives determine context. As a result, this book demonstrates both a methodology (the vocabulary of functions as a tool for analysis) and the results of one application (my own) of that methodology. As closely related as the methodology and the findings are in the chapters that follow, they can be conceived separately, and each, I think, can be incorporated into other projects and developed without reference to the other.

The chapters are arranged approximately in the sequence in which I have identified ways of using functions to analyze narratives, which is also the sequence in which I find ways to use functions to show, on the one hand, how open events are to plural interpretations of their causes and consequences—for characters in their world and for us in our world—and, on the other hand, the degree to which context determines interpretations of causality. I choose this sequence as the clearest demonstration of my argument that narratives unavoidably shape interpretations of the events they represent. Even so, this book is designed to enable readers, after they read chapter 1 (and perhaps with reference to the Glossary at the end of this book), to turn to a chapter on a topic that attracts their interest. Thus chapter 1 presents the basic theory underlying all the later chapters.

After introducing in chapter 1 the vocabulary of functions and the idea of functional polyvalence, I present in chapter 2 a first test case: a comparison of two versions of a fairy tale that guide readers to two different interpretations of which characters’ actions bring about the happy ending. In chapter 3 I look at Poe’s “The Assignation” and Browning’s “My Last Duchess”—both influenced by Romanticism and both told in a sequence other than chronological sequence—to investigate the strong emotional
effects for readers that nonchronological narration can elicit by guiding readers initially to misinterpret causal relations among the reported events.

In chapter 4 I argue that information about a character’s decision to try to ameliorate a situation brings comfort—both as a thematics and as a hermeneutic device—to readers (listeners, viewers). My examples in this chapter are Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, Racine’s *Phaedra*, and James’s *Daisy Miller*. Then in chapter 5 I take as my examples narratives that deny us these forms of comfort: James’s *The Ambassadors* and Kafka’s “Before the Law.” In this chapter I trace the many interpretations of causality that we try out as we progress through these two twentieth-century narratives, drawing attention to how difficult the process of interpreting where we are in a causal sequence can be—for readers of certain modern stories and novels, and also for characters in fictional worlds and for people in our world—without the guidance that the familiar shape of traditional narratives provides.

Returning to the issue of nonchronological narration in chapter 6, I examine two narratives in which, within a frame story, another story is told: Balzac’s *Sarrasine* and James’s *The Turn of the Screw*. In both narratives some of the same events are perceived by characters, character narrators, and readers—but not in the same sequence. Thus readers’ and several of the characters’ interpretations of these events are made in relation to contexts that vary. A comparison of these interpretations shows the effect of sequential perception on context, and of context on interpretations of causality, as unequivocally as Albers’s experiments demonstrate the effect of context on interpretations of the color of a pigment.

The power of sequential perception to shape interpretations of causality, in our response to life as well as to narratives, leads me to turn to what I think of as the narrative borderlands, to explore separately, to the extent possible, the effects of sequential events, in chapter 7, and of sequential representation, in chapter 8. To do this, in chapter 7 I look at representations of an isolated moment, both the lyric poem and the discrete image, and find, on the one hand, that information about just one prior or subsequent event provides sufficient context to determine our interpretation of the function of the represented moment and that language (the medium of the lyric and of captions to the image) easily specifies that one event. A moment fully cut from the temporal continuum, on the other hand, is open to divergent interpretations of its causes and consequences—even to the extent that it can sometimes be
interpreted as a hinge in a sequence that, like a palindrome, can be read as beginning at either end. But while a palindrome reads the same in either direction, causality is dependent on sequence. When a sequence of events is reversed, our interpretation of the function of the events—their consequences and causes—changes too.

In the concluding chapter I turn to novels from the second half of the twentieth century that, according to my definition, are not narratives; the events they represent cannot be ordered in chronological sequence. Because I want to consider what novels can teach us about how we read images and how we read discrete events in our world, I choose for analysis in chapter 8 novels that include visual representations, or anecdotes that are interpretations of visual representations, of an isolated moment. Drawing attention to a recognized phenomenon—the many novels published in the second half of the twentieth century that include images or descriptions of images—I speculate that by incorporating visual material and interpretations of visual material, novelists have found a way to open the experience of reading novels to widely divergent interpretations of causality. In this way, these and other novels that are not narratives offer an experience that is closer than narratives offer to the experience of living in our world.

Jack Zipes and Erik Christian Haugaard have graciously granted permission to publish in the CD-ROM version of this book their translations of (respectively) Grimms’ and Andersen’s fairy tales. I thank them. Earlier versions of chapters 3, 5, and 6 have previously appeared in print under these titles: “Functions after Propp: Words to Talk About How We Read Narrative” in *Poetics Today* 18.4 (Winter 1997): 469–94; “Lingering Along the Narrative Path: Extended Functions in Kafka and Henry James” in *Narrative* 3.2 (May 1995): 117–38; and “Not (Yet) Knowing: Epistemological Effects of Deferred and Suppressed Information in Narrative” in *Narratologies: New Perspectives on Narrative Analysis*, edited by David Herman and published in 1999 by The Ohio State University Press. The suggestions made by readers prior to the publication of each article were very useful to the development of my ideas. I have also benefited from and appreciate the responses (the casual comments, the discussions, the e-mail correspondences) from readers of these articles once they were published and from conference attendees who listened to the
many papers where I first tried out ideas that appear in this book.

In addition to generations of students at Washington University in St. Louis (and at the St. Louis Conservatory of Music until its unfortunate demise), who have helped me to work out in the classroom my ideas about functions and many of my ideas about narratives, I am greatly indebted to a number of people who have listened to and contributed to my ideas. Let me name—and express my great appreciation for their careful reading and thoughtful, invaluable comments—David Herman, Brian McHale, Peter J. Rabinowitz, Meir Sternberg, and my colleague at Washington University Nancy Berg, all of whom read earlier versions of one or several (or even all eight) of these chapters.

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