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CHAPTER 3

NONCHRONOLOGICAL NARRATION:

Poe’s “The Assignation” and Browning’s “My Last Duchess”

In the first half of the nineteenth century, the effects of Romanticism include a new interest in the variety of human experience and in the strong emotional response that uncommon and extraordinary events can elicit—directly, in someone who experiences them, and indirectly through aesthetic representations, both visual art and narrative fiction. In narratives of the period, the emotional effect for readers is sometimes enhanced by nonchronological representation: the recounting of events in a sequence other than chronological sequence. Nonchronological narration in the nineteenth century is usually realistically motivated; a character narrator recounts the events either in the sequence in which he or she learns about them or retrospectively, from the temporal perspective of the character’s “now.” A function analysis of these narratives can show that the sequence in which we learn about events affects our interpretation of their causes and consequences. When new information forces us to rethink a reported situation that we thought we understood, our response is often strongly emotional. Since it is very common in our world that we learn about events when something noteworthy occurs, rather than when the first provocations that led to the occurrence began, investigating the effects of nonchronological narration provides, in addition to information about the effects of narrative techniques developed at the period, guidance in understanding the effects of the sequence in which we learn about personal and political events in our lives.

As we saw in chapter 1, the narrative sequence as Tzvetan Todorov defines it extends from one equilibrium, through a period of imbalance, to a new equilibrium. This shape can be per-
ceived, in its entirety or in part, in representations as well as in fabulas. As a result, the same set of functions can name the stages of the narrative sequence in representations and in fabulas. The possibility of using one set of terms to analyze both trajectories is the direct result of the principle that underlies the definition of the function. Because a function expresses an interpretation of an event in the sequence in which it is perceived, a given event can be interpreted as a function in any sequence in which the event occurs. This principle permits comparisons not only between two or more representations of the same fabula, as the analysis in chapter 2 of two versions of a fairy tale indicates, but also between a representation and the fabula it reveals, and between a segment of a representation and the segment of fabula it reveals.

Since events are functionally polyvalent, and their function depends on their consequences, readers often change their interpretation of the function of an event as they read, page by page, and acquire further information. For example, when we read the beginning of a narrative, we recognize that an absence or lack (of a parent, spouse, position, money, etc.), to which a character or a narrator draws attention, may indicate that a recent reevaluation of the seriousness of the lack will motivate a narrative sequence. In my terms, function a (lower-case) represents an absence or lack that readers interpret as a motivating situation. But as we read on, we may discover that the absence or lack, rather than serving as the primary motivation, may do no more than enable the occurrence of a disruptive event that will motivate a narrative sequence. In this case, we label the disruptive event function A, and shift our interpretation of the prior situation from the primary motivation (function a) to a merely preparatory state of affairs.

In narratives in which the sequence of the representation is different from the chronology of fabula, readers’ interpretation of the function of individual events will be guided by the sequence in which the events are arranged. Thus the event that seems the primary motivation and is interpreted as function A (or a) in the representation may be entirely different from the one that is interpreted as function A (or a) in the fabula. To explore this phenomenon, I have chosen for analysis two nonchronological narratives from the first half of the nineteenth century: Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Assignation” (1834) and Robert Browning’s “My Last Duchess” (1842).
As we read Poe’s “The Assignation,” we follow the perspective of the narrator as he perceives events, interprets events as functions, and reinterprets events as he (and readers) continues to learn more about what is happening. In this story the narrator who tells the story is also the *focalizer*, the character whose perceptions and resulting conceptions readers are permitted to know.¹ When we reach the end of the story, we construct its fabula and again reinterpret events as functions, this time in the chronological sequence of fabula. Menakhem Perry recognizes that representations that depart from “the ‘natural’ sequence of an ‘external’ occurrence” generally follow one of two patterns: “the ‘natural’ sequence of a character’s consciousness, [or] the sequence within a block of information transmitted from one character to another” (39–40). Poe’s story illustrates both patterns. Structured according to the sequence of the narrator’s perceptions, the representation incorporates, when the narrator reads it, a text written by the protagonist that offers information essential to constructing a fabula.

In the second paragraph of the story the narration moves from a generalized invocation to a fully depicted scene that takes place at a specific time—the “third or fourth” meeting between the first-person narrator and an unnamed man who has “fallen in the flames of . . . youth” (Poe, 193)—and provides indications of the scene: Venice, the Grand Canal, midnight, the narrator in a gondola. The equilibrium of the peaceful evening is disrupted by the scream of a woman’s voice, which the narrator (together with most readers) immediately interprets as a function-A event. The narrator leaps to his feet—in order to rescue the woman who screamed, readers probably assume. The narrator’s and many readers’ first interpretation of the initial events can be represented by these functions:

EQ the calm of the canal at midnight
A woman screams
[C] narrator decide to rescue woman (narrator is C-actant)
C’ narrator leaps to his feet

According to this function analysis, the woman’s scream is a disruptive event that will motivate a narrative sequence (function A); the narrator makes the C-actant decision to go to the woman’s rescue (function C; bracketed because the event is revealed only by its effect: the narrator’s movement); the narrator leaps to his feet as his initial act (function C’).
For readers who have interpreted the narrator’s leap to his feet as the beginning of action by him to rescue the woman (function C’), the next event in the representation blocks this interpretive sequence. When (or because) the narrator leaps to his feet, the gondolier drops his oar into the canal and in the darkness cannot recover it. Instead of gaining power (function F) to alleviate the function-A situation, the narrator loses even the ability to steer the gondola (F_neg). The narrator and the reader recognize simultaneously that the narrator’s plan to rescue the woman (to perform the role of the C-actant and alleviate the function-A situation indicated by her scream) cannot succeed, and that their interpretation of events as functions has created the beginning of a narrative sequence that has reached an impasse and cannot continue to a successful conclusion: A [C] C’ F_neg. Readers who perceive the futility of the narrator’s initial act may expect the entrance of an additional character, one who is better qualified for the role of the C-actant.

As the gondola drifts in the canal, the narrator discovers the reason for the woman’s scream: she is the Marchesa Aphrodite, and her child has fallen into the canal. As a result, the narrator and the reader shift their interpretation of the initial events. The opening scream is not function A but function B. The child’s fall is the disruptive event that will motivate a narrative sequence; I bracket it to indicate that it precedes chronologically the first scene in the representation (the scream).

EQ the calm of the canal at midnight
[A] child falls into canal (bracketed because it precedes the initial scene)
B Aphrodite screams for help

After a number of swimmers search for the child in vain, and while Aphrodite’s husband, the Marchese Mentoni, strums his guitar, a man the narrator calls “the stranger” dives into the canal and emerges, next to Aphrodite, carrying the still-breathing child. The narrator and most readers immediately conclude that the stranger is the C-actant, who has just performed the primary C-actant functions (C, C’, H). We probably assume that equilibrium has been restored, since the child has been saved.

EQ the calm of the canal at midnight
[A] child falls into canal (bracketed because it precedes the initial scene)
B Aphrodite screams for help
[C] stranger decides to save the child (bracketed because revealed by C')
C' stranger dives into canal
H stranger saves child
I stranger returns child to mother
EQ new equilibrium

For the narrator and probably for many readers, this interpretation of events as functions seems accurate. The narrator’s conviction that he has understood the situation correctly is revealed, in fact, by the surprise he expresses as he narrates the next several events: the child is taken not by its mother but by someone else who carries it off; Aphrodite blushes; her words to the stranger are unexpected: “thou hast conquered—one hour after sunrise—we shall meet—so let it be!” (197).²

Although the reader, like the narrator, may have expected a scene in which the new equilibrium is reinforced—Aphrodite, for example, could have caressed the child with delight and profusely thanked the stranger—neither the reader nor the narrator anticipates further events that would alter their present interpretation of the functions of the events they have perceived. When the narrator arrives at the stranger’s apartment early the next morning, at the stranger’s request, the narrator seems to expect—and thus we expect—to receive information that will fill out and elucidate the pattern of functions that has already been revealed. Along with the narrator, in the room to which he is shown in the stranger’s Palazzo, we examine the art objects, find an underlined passage in a book, and read a poem written in English in the stranger’s hand. When the stranger proposes a toast, drinks, and collapses, and when a servant enters to announce that Aphrodite has died of poison, we discover with the narrator that the stranger too is dead. At that moment, for the narrator, in the words with which the story concludes, “a consciousness of the entire and terrible truth flashed suddenly over my soul.” Readers who are reading the story for the first time are often, when they finish the story, nearly speechless with surprise and confusion. For readers, illumination equivalent to the narrator’s generally requires extensive rereading and analysis.

When the effect of Poe’s ending dissipates sufficiently to permit reflection, we understand the double signification of the word assignation in the story’s title: the agreement to meet (Aphrodite’s
cryptic “one hour after sunrise” [197]), and the meeting itself (to which the participants of the double suicide expect it to lead). Knowing that we have now been given the concluding events in a finite sequence, we begin to reevaluate our interpretations of events as functions. An analysis of what is probably many readers’ initial understanding of the causal relations among the reported events, immediately after reading the story for the first time, might look like this:

EQ  the calm of the canal at midnight  
[A] child falls into canal (bracketed because it precedes the initial scene)  
B  Aphrodite screams for help  
[C] stranger decides to respond to Aphrodite’s need (bracketed because revealed by C’)  
C’  stranger saves child  
F  stranger acquires empowerment (when Aphrodite agrees to the assignation)  
G  stranger arrives at the place and time where H will occur  
H  stranger and Aphrodite poison themselves  
I  success of suicide: both die  
[EQ] new equilibrium: the expected reunion in death (bracketed because it is subsequent to the concluding scene)

Because the child’s fall is positioned at the beginning of the narrative, and is the only clearly disruptive event until the final moments of the story, we retain that event as function A. Our reading of the stranger as the C-actant remains unchanged as well. But since we now know that the stranger’s primary undertaking is a joint suicide to achieve eternal union with Aphrodite, we interpret the suicide as function H. Retrospectively we understand that Aphrodite’s agreement to the assignation is the empowerment (function F) that permits the double suicide to occur, and we retain the stranger’s retrieval of the child from the water as his initial act (function C’), because it is the first act we see him undertake. Function A and the concluding equilibrium are bracketed because the events that they interpret do not occur within the temporal limits demarcated by the initial scene and the concluding scene in the representation.

One reason that readers generally respond to the double suicide at the end of the representation with surprise is that it is only at the end of the story that we are forced to recognize that the narrator’s
focalization and voice are temporally separated. The focalization (the narrator’s perceptions and resultant conceptions) is located at the time when the events he watched were occurring, while the voice (the narrator’s recounting of the events) is located at the later time of his retrospective narration. The temporal gap between focalization and voice permits the narrator to express amazement, which enhances our own.

But the fact that we have not anticipated the double suicide is only one element in the strong effect Poe’s story generally creates on first reading. The sequence of functions that represents our interpretation immediately after reading the story reveals a logical gap. The suicide does not save the child; function H does not alleviate function A. The shock with which we respond to the final event is created primarily by this gap; we cannot understand how the child’s fall into the canal can have caused the double suicide. The placement of the child’s fall at the beginning of the representation is what leads us to interpret that event as the function-A disruption that will motivate the rest of the narrative sequence. The effect of Poe’s story is in large part created by the sequence in which the events are recounted.

Once we recognize the inadequacy of the child’s fall to motivate the double suicide, we rethink (and reread) the story to find the fabula it reveals. Within the representation, in which the order of events is determined by the sequence of the narrator’s experience, we find an embedded representation like that which Perry describes as “the sequence within a block of information transmitted from one character to another” (39–40): the poem the narrator finds in the stranger’s apartment, handwritten in English, with the word London inscribed on the page but crossed out (sous rature). A focalization framed by a focalization, the poem provides readers with a momentary glimpse of the relationship between the stranger and Aphrodite, through the stranger’s focalization and at an earlier time: a glimpse that offers an opportunity to discover elements of fabula not otherwise revealed. The first four stanzas of the poem, which Poe published separately under the title “To One in Paradise” (Philip Van Doren Stern, 204n), invoke a beloved and describe a “dream too bright to last.” The final fifth stanza, which appears only in the story, reads:

Alas! for that accursed time
They bore thee o’er the billow,
From Love to titled age and crime,
And an unholy pillow—
From me, and from our misty clime,
Where weeps the silver willow! (204)

Reading the poem as the primary source of information about events that precede the child’s fall, we construct a fabula that we interpret according to the following sequence of functions:

- EQ the stranger and Aphrodite are happy together in London
- A  Aphrodite is carried over the waves to Venice to marry the Marchese Mentoni
- C  stranger decides to attempt reunion with Aphrodite
- C’ stranger follows Aphrodite to Venice
- D  stranger is tested: Aphrodite screams for help
- E  stranger passes test: saves child
- F  stranger acquires empowerment: Aphrodite agrees to assignation
- G  stranger arrives at the place and time where function H will occur
- H  double suicide
- I  success of suicide: both die
- EQ new equilibrium: the expected reunion in death

The last four functions and the concluding equilibrium of this fabula analysis (from F to EQ) are filled by the same events as the last four functions and the concluding equilibrium (from F to EQ) of our probable initial understanding immediately after we finish reading the story for the first time. In both analyses, the stranger is the C-actant. But whereas, when we read the representation for the first time, the event we interpret as the motivating function A is the child’s fall, once we have constructed the chronological sequence of fabula the event we interpret as function A is the forced separation of Aphrodite and the stranger. As a result, in the fabula, the stranger’s decision to attempt reunion with Aphrodite is the event that fills the C function. Moreover, now that we have constructed a fabula, we shift our interpretation of Aphrodite’s scream, which we initially read as function A (the disruptive event), and then as function B (a call for help), to function D, the first function of the donor sequence. In the fabula, Aphrodite’s scream functions as a test (function D), to which the stranger responds successfully (function E), thereby gaining the power (function F) to accomplish the primary conflict (function H, the
double suicide). By providing words to talk about interpretations of causal relations, functions enable analysis of readers’ shifting interpretations in response to the further information a narrative provides as it continues.

In addition, a function analysis of a nonchronological narrative permits comparing the shape of the two trajectories: the fabula and the representation. Looking again at the analysis above of the fabula of “The Assignation,” we see that the fabula traces one complete narrative sequence. The fabula includes every function except function B, as it moves through an entire narrative sequence from an initial equilibrium to a disruptive function A to a new equilibrium. Looking again at this analysis of the fabula, we can also see that the segment of the fabula that the representation traces—from Aphrodite’s scream in the opening scene to the double suicide of the conclusion—is less than a complete narrative sequence; the representation traces the part of the fabula that moves through the six functions from function D to function I.

The exposition in a narrative, as Meir Sternberg has shown, extends from the beginning of the fabula (Expositional Modes, 13) to “that point in time which marks the beginning of the fictive present” in the representation (21). In “The Assignation,” Aphrodite’s scream marks the beginning of the fictive present. For the scene that marks the beginning of the fictive present and the end of the exposition, Sternberg perceives, “[t]he author’s finding it to be the first time-section that is ‘of consequence enough’ to deserve full scenic treatment turns it, implicitly but clearly, into a conspicuous signpost, signifying that this is precisely the point in time that the author has decided, for whatever reason, to make the reader regard as the beginning of the action proper” (20).

What Poe has done in “The Assignation,” by selecting the scene that begins with Aphrodite’s scream as the first to receive full scenic treatment, is to guide readers to perceive everything that is chronologically prior to Aphrodite’s scream as exposition—even though the chronologically prior events include the events that in the fabula constitute the primary motivating event (function A) and the initial actions of the C-actant (functions C and C’). Poe’s placement of the scene in which the child nearly drowns as the first scene that receives scenic treatment is, of course, the reason that, as we read, we interpret the child’s falling into the canal as a function-A event that motivates everything that follows.

For a writer to choose to deviate from “the straight chronological order of presentation” is, as Sternberg observes, “clearly an
indication of artistic purpose” (33). In nonchronological narratives in which a scene that occurs late in the chronology of fabula is presented as the opening scene in the representation, the differences in duration between a fabula and its representation have been described since Aristotle’s Poetics as a temporal proportion: the less than twenty-four hours that the trajectory of the representation of, for example, Oedipus Rex traces, to the years required for the events of the fabula to unroll. Sternberg’s recognition that the exposition of a narrative can be delimited only with reference to both the fabula and the representation enables his analyses of the aesthetic effects of the ways in which elements of fabula are distributed in a representation (Expositional Modes), but also permits a comparison of the two trajectories that reveals the specific events in a fabula that a representation relegates to exposition. A function analysis permits us to perceive the causal effects—the function—of the events in fabula that a representation consigns to exposition, and to specify the instances in which the positioning of an event in a representation leads us to interpret it as one function in the representation and a different function in the fabula. These instances of functional polyvalence are among the artistic effects that a compressed representation can produce.

In reading “The Assignation,” even after we have determined that the child’s fall into the water is not the function-A event that motivates all that follows, the scene in which the child is in danger and then rescued retains a heightened quality in our memories that reflects the causal implications of our initial interpretation. In considering the story retrospectively, we remain able to envision this scene in detail—in a way that we cannot envision the chronologically prior events, including the enforced separation in London of Aphrodite and the stranger—and the initial scene remains tinged in our minds with the strong emotions with which we initially perceived it.

The emotional effect of the functional polyvalence of an event, in instances in which we interpret a given event as one function in the representation and a different function in the fabula, is perhaps strongest immediately after we have concluded our reading and completed the process of constructing a fabula, and gradually fades as we forget both the effects of the representation and the represented events. But the emotional effect of the representation endures, I propose, until the representation is forgotten, and can be reactivated by rereading. By shaping readers’ interpretations of the function of events, a representation can elicit a strong emotional response.
In Poe’s “The Assignation” and Browning’s “My Last Duchess,” nonchronological narration is naturalized in different ways: in Poe’s story by recounting the events in the sequence and at the time that the character narrator watches them occur, and in Browning’s poem by recounting the events retrospectively from the temporal perspective of the character narrator’s “now.” The focalizer in Poe’s story does not know as the story progresses how the events will turn out, whereas Browning’s Duke knows exactly what has occurred. In “The Assignation,” the focalization that permits the narrator’s expression of surprise at the story’s conclusion, in conjunction with the sequence of the telling that effectively veils the causal events in fabula until a careful second reading, creates for readers the same shock that Poe’s narrator experiences when he discovers that the stranger is dead. Readers of “My Last Duchess” are also made to experience surprise, but primarily from the contrast between the seeming serenity of the opening scene and the violence that we slowly learn has brought about the present situation and that poisons the ongoing negotiations. If readers of the poem identify their response with that of anyone in the poem, that character is the Count’s messenger, the narratee to whom the Duke is speaking, who readers may assume shares our shocked response.5

Browning’s poem opens, as I read it, by suggesting a stable, calm equilibrium: the Duke is ensconced at his family seat, entertaining the narratee, the Count’s messenger, by showing him the Duchess’s portrait. The locus of the event places the Duke against the backdrop of his inherited wealth, and in a social situation in which his confidence bespeaks his entrenched power in the represented world. Browning creates this equilibrium through the selection of the time and place—the segment of fabula—that the opening lines of the poem depict. The meeting between the Duke and the narratee, which is the one scene represented in the poem, is the final event in the fabula that readers slowly construct; thus the Duke narrates a retrospective account of events he has witnessed. The juncture of voice and focalization, which is assigned to the Duke and—unlike Poe’s narrator—at the time at which he speaks, lends credence to the Duke’s words.6

But the Duke’s focalization, in two passages early in the poem, contains other focalizations: the unvoiced response of the narratee (and previous viewers) to the Duchess’s portrait, and the portrait
itself, which is the visual representation of the painter’s perception of the Duchess. Because a contained focalization can be colored by the focalization through which it is perceived, a contained focalization cannot confirm—but may subvert—the focalization that contains it. In the poem, the first of the contained focalizations may lead readers to wonder what possible expression anyone could read on the faces of viewers of the painting as seeming, in the Duke’s words, “as they would ask me, if they durst, / How such a glance came there” (Browning, lines 11–12). Readers who question, in this passage, the validity of the Duke’s interpretation of the represented world are prepared, when the Duke’s account turns from responses to the painting to the painting itself, to doubt the accuracy of the Duke’s ascription of the depicted lady’s painted charms to her pleasure in the painter’s compliments, and to distrust his judgment (perhaps reached under the influence of the painted woman’s fixed smile) of his wife as having had “A heart . . . too soon made glad” (line 22).

At this point in the representation, as I read the poem, the equilibrium of the opening moments has been undermined sufficiently that most readers, during the following section in which the Duke continues to speak disapprovingly of the Duchess’s behavior (lines 23–34), will decide that the motivating situation (function a) for the Duke is his perception that his wife smiles too readily at other men—a disruption that is intensified for readers who suspect that the Duke’s interpretation of his wife’s behavior may not be accurate. For readers, the knowledge of already having read more than half the poem (34 of 56 lines) reinforces an interpretation that the depicted situation, rather than an event yet to be revealed, is function a.

It is just at this moment that the poem turns to the Duke’s ruminations on whether it is appropriate to “stoop . . . to make your will / Quite clear to such an one” (lines 34, 36–37), a passage that represents in the present the Duke’s mental process of deciding (function C) whether and how to respond to the disruptive function-a situation. As shocking as the resultant events remain, even after repeated readings, the sequence of functions they fulfill is absolutely logical. Eight words, “I gave commands; / Then all smiles stopped together” (lines 45–46), reveal the events that fill three functions: function C’ (the commands), function H (the murder; the word is not spoken but the event is understood because of its result), and function I (the successful alleviation of the function-a situation: the Duchess no longer smiles at other men).
The Duchess’s no longer being alive, however, is doubly interpreted by the Duke: as the successful resolution of the initial disruption (function I in the first narrative sequence), and as motivation to remarry (function a in the second narrative sequence, which the poem reveals only through the marriage negotiations). The two sequential sequences of Browning’s representation can be interpreted by these functions:

EQ the apparent serenity of the scene
a Duchess’s (painted and real) smiles disturb Duke
C Duke decides not to be disturbed
C’ Duke gives commands
[H] Duke’s henchmen murder Duchess (revealed by Duchess’s being killed)
I Duchess is dead: she no longer smiles

I = [a] Duchess is dead: Duke lacks a wife (revealed by marriage negotiations)
[C] Duke decides to marry (revealed by marriage negotiations)
[C’] Duke approaches Count (revealed by marriage negotiations)
H Duke negotiates marriage contract with narratee

If we remove the brackets that indicate the suppression of an event in the representation, these two narrative sequences also represent the poem’s fabula. This congruence of functions in the representation and the fabula occurs because the causal events are revealed in the poem in chronological sequence. Browning accomplishes this—while placing the Duke’s retrospective account within the concluding event of the fabula—by moving directly from the final moments of the fabula to the first event of the fabula, through the metonymical shift from the painted Duchess (lines 1–12) to the process of painting her (“How such a glance came there” [line 13]). As a result of this strategy, only the situation of the initial equilibrium is different in the representation than in the fabula. In the fabula it represents a state of affairs prior to the Duke’s concern that his wife smiles too freely; in the representation it is a product of the Duke’s confidence, during his meeting with the narratee who is the Count’s emissary, that his negotiations to marry the Count’s daughter are about to reach a successful conclusion.
But the initial equilibrium as Browning constructs it is highly effective, because the Duke’s supreme confidence that the opening of the representation portrays increases, in retrospect, the abhorrence with which readers regard the Duke at the poem’s conclusion. In contrast, imagine the sympathy for the Duke one might feel if the poem began with a scene from an earlier, happier time in their marriage in which the Duchess smiled at the Duke, and he was pleased. But Browning portrays the Duke in the opening scene as coldly confident, rather than loving, and further intensifies readers’ dislike for the Duke by delaying the revelation that the Duke is responsible for the Duchess’s death, adding the element of surprise to enhance our disapproval. Browning postpones this information by extending the events of the first two functions (functions a and C of the first narrative sequence) for 44 lines (more than 75 percent of the 56-line poem). The Duke’s commands are revealed in line 45, and the events of the seven functions that complete the first sequence and represent the second (from the first C’ through the second H) are compressed within the final 12 lines. By extending and compressing information about the events that so forcefully require readers to reinterpret the opening scene, Browning, like Poe, guides first-time readers to experience a strong mixture of surprise and shock.

Although the second sequence is technically left open, stopping at function H, my response to the poem’s conclusion is that the Duke’s power and confidence in the marriage negotiations that the representation portrays (the scene that in fabula fills function H) are such that the sequence must reach successful completion (function I): the Duke will marry the Count’s daughter, he will again have a Duchess. If other readers respond as I do, then by suppressing an account of the marriage, Browning increases his readers’ dislike of the Duke by making us write for ourselves the abhorrent but inevitable conclusion. In addition, although the restriction of focalization to the Duke permits the suppression of some data (for example, how the Duchess dies), the Duke’s own proud acknowledgment of his crime and its motivation leaves readers in a position to determine that, even if his interpretation of the Duchess’s behavior is accurate, his motivation is insufficient for his crime. Although readers’ shocked response to Browning’s poem, as to Poe’s story, is in part an effect of the events reported—the double suicide in Poe’s story and the murder of the Duke’s wife in Browning’s poem—the emotion we feel is guided and intensified.
by the sequence and the tempo in which events are revealed in the representation.

As I hope to have demonstrated in the sections of this chapter devoted to Browning’s poem and Poe’s story, the distinction between fabula and representation is essential to analyzing the effects of the sequence of the representation. The two trajectories that I call the representation and the fabula were identified and named in the early 1920s by the Russian Formalists. 

Since then, narrative theorists and readers who have been introduced to narrative theory have generally recognized that whenever we read a story or a novel or a historical account, or watch a film, or listen to a child’s account of something that happened in the playground, we construct in our minds as a first step in the interpretive process a chronological account: a fabula. If information about sequence is not immediately available, we read on to find it, or, if the account is about our world, we turn elsewhere for information. With our children we ask questions to try to establish sequence: for instance, “Who started the fight?”

The two trajectories of narrative, as I conceive them, are as interdependent as the signifier and the signified. Like the two parts of the verbal sign—the signifier (the sound of the word) and the signified (a concept attached by agreement to the sound)—of the two trajectories of narrative only one—the representation—has material form (written language, oral speech, or gestures, which we can see or hear or view). Because the fabula, like the signified, exists as a concept in readers’ or listeners’ or viewers’ minds, and cannot be seen or heard or viewed, its existence is less obvious than the existence of a representation is, and has at times been questioned.

Most famously, Jonathan Culler has argued that the relationship between a representation and its fabula is hierarchical, and thus subject to deconstruction through a demonstration that the hierarchy can be reversed (“Story and Discourse in the Analysis of Narrative,” 183). Postulating that narratology gives priority to fabula, he contends that the priority implies “a hierarchy [of the fabula over the representation] which the functioning of narratives often subverts by presenting events not as givens but as the products of [the representation’s] discursive forces or requirements” (172). As an example of what he sees as an event produced
by “discursive forces,” Culler points to the gap that exists in the fabula of Sophocles’ *Oedipus Rex* because Oedipus does not ask the surviving witness whether Laius was murdered by one or many. Although, Culler concludes, readers are convinced of Oedipus’s guilt:

> our conviction does not come from the revelation of the deed. Instead of the revelation of a prior deed determining meaning, we could say that it is meaning, the convergence of meaning in the narrative discourse [representation], that leads us to posit this deed as its appropriate manifestation.

(174)

First, Culler’s postulate that narratology gives priority to fabula is questionable. Ontologically, as we have seen, a representation has a material form that a fabula lacks. Temporally, a representation is prior for readers to the fabula it gradually reveals. Second, the “convergence of meaning” that implies that Oedipus murdered Laius does not make the deed occur; it makes it significant. An effect does not cause a prior event. An effect indicates the significance of a prior event—its function—by placing it in a sequence in which the prior event can be interpreted according to its consequences. The “discursive forces” of the representation that Culler discerns do not alter the principles of causality; they guide perceivers’ interpretation of the function of the event in question by indicating the event’s consequences. The “discursive forces” of the representation guide interpretations of the function of an event, as we have seen in this chapter, largely by controlling which elements of fabula a reader (viewer, listener) knows and does not know at each moment as a representation unrolls.

In an important study of negation and difference in narrative representations, Gerald Prince establishes three categories of discrepancies between the set of events included in a narration and the set of events that take place in the represented world (“The Disnarrated”). These categories can also help to explain how events included in a representation may not occur in its fabula, and how events that occur in a fabula may not be included in its representation. Of the three categories that Prince discerns, two—the *unnarratable* and the *unnarrated*—include elements of the represented world that are suppressed in the narration. The *unnarratable* “comprises everything that according to a given narrative cannot be narrated or is not worth narrating” (28; Prince’s emphasis).
In a given narrative, the focalization—which in the definition I use is an element of the representation—may offer reasons that a given event in the fabula will not be narrated. In the function analysis above of Poe’s representation, the stranger’s decision to respond to Aphrodite’s need (function C) is placed in brackets, because it is revealed only by its effect, the rescue of the child. The decision cannot be narrated because it is not in the purview of the focalizer; although it is suppressed in the representation, its effect reveals it, to the narrator and to readers, as an event in fabula. In Browning’s poem, the Duchess’s murder is suppressed in the representation because the Duke chooses not to describe it, but it is revealed as an event in fabula through the cessation of her smiles. Similarly, Oedipus’s murder of Laius is unnarratable—except by Tiresias, whose vision exceeds the limits of human sight—because the surviving witness is too frightened to speak, or, if he should speak, to be believed.

The questioning of the surviving witness, on the other hand, which is Culler’s focus, falls under Prince’s third category, the disnarrated: “events that do not happen [in the narrative world, but] are nonetheless referred to (in a negative or hypothetical mode) by the narrative text” (30; Prince’s emphasis). Oedipus’s hypothetical questioning of the surviving witness about Laius’s murder creates an aesthetic effect. The idea that Oedipus should question the witness is proposed just after the middle of the play, at a moment when Oedipus and the audience are so certain he killed Laius that, unless some element to postpone closure is introduced, the play will end. By the time the witness arrives, Oedipus’s guilt in the murder of Laius is subsumed by his guilt in his relationship with Jocasta. Further testimony about the murder would be anticlimactic, in addition to lacking credence because of the witness’s fear.

The act of reading (or viewing, or listening to) a narrative includes, in addition to identifying events as they are revealed, a process of creating hypotheses about the causal relations among the revealed events and other events that may be revealed as one continues to read. The power of a representation to guide interpretations of functionally polyvalent events lies in large part in the sequence in which it dispenses information to readers. Functions provide a vocabulary to analyze the provisional fabulas and segments of fabulas readers construct from the set of events that are discernible at any moment in the process of reading, and to trace the shifting interpretations of the consequences of events that
readers formulate as they move through a representation page by page. In this chapter I have considered primarily the emotional impact that nonchronological narration can elicit. When I return to the issue of nonchronological narration in chapter 6, it will be to emphasize the epistemological effects of the temporary gaps that all nonchronological narratives create and the permanent gaps in many narratives, chronological as well as nonchronological.