Narrative Causalities

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CHAPTER 6

SEQUENTIAL PERCEPTION:

James’s *The Turn of the Screw* and Balzac’s *Sarrasine*

Reproduced on the cover of this book is Josef Albers’s painting *Homage to the Square: Aurora.* In the Preface I describe Albers’s experiments which demonstrate that interpretations of pigment as color depend on the context in which the pigment is perceived: the color or colors next to which a given color is placed when viewed. Similarly, as we have seen, interpretations of the causes and consequences—the function—of a given event depend on the context in which the event is perceived: the events that chronologically precede and follow it in the set of sequential events in which it is encountered. In this chapter, to explore the effect of context, I look at two narratives in each of which some of the same events are perceived by certain characters, by other characters, and by readers—but not in the same sequence. In other words, these narratives offer a situation in which the same events are perceived and interpreted in contexts that vary. By comparing interpretations, we can analyze the effect of context.

Because narratives impart information sequentially (narratives are sequential representations), readers (viewers, listeners) learn about some events before they learn about other events. In other words, during the process of reading (viewing, listening to) a narrative, some information is always missing. As a result, inevitably, while we are reading (viewing, listening), we interpret the causes and consequences of events in a context in which some events—events that are chronologically prior, or subsequent, or both—are not yet known. When the set of events one knows about is incomplete, whether the missing information is temporarily deferred (not yet known) or permanently suppressed (not ever to be
known), one’s interpretation of the function of a known event may differ from what one’s interpretation would be if the deferred or suppressed information were available.

Because we acquire information sequentially in life as in narratives, throughout our lives there is always some information yet to be obtained, as well as some information we will never obtain. Both life and narratives mete out information sequentially. Narratives, however, come to an end, and can be considered retrospectively in their entirety. Thus in analyzing narratives one can distinguish between temporarily deferred and permanently suppressed information; in analyzing narratives one can test whether the distinction between deferred and suppressed information is as significant as intuitively it probably seems to most people. In this chapter I look at the epistemological effects of sequential perception, in narratives but with reference to the corresponding situation in life, initially by distinguishing between deferred and suppressed information, and then by considering how closely related the effects of sequential perception are in our lives and in our response to narratives.

In life, the set of events one knows about at a given moment depends in large part on a perceiver’s spatio-temporal position. One learns about events either through observing them, which requires one’s presence at the time and place where they occur, or through channels of communication that are open at the time and place where one is. Channels of communication are diverse: conversations, e-mail, a sixteenth-century manuscript written by a Bolognese nun, a recently published book on the history of Hong Kong. Which channels are open for a given individual depends in part on who the individual is—her interests, her visual acuity, what languages she speaks, how tired she is at the end of a particular day. But as important as these and other aspects of individuality are, none overcomes the exigencies of time and place. One can read a centuries-old document, for example, only if the original or a copy of it survives into one’s own time, and is placed within reading distance of one’s eyes. To watch a broadcast of the day’s network news requires being near a television set at the time of the broadcast or making prior arrangements for recording. This necessary correlation between the spatio-temporal position of a perceiver and the set of events that the perceiver can know holds, readers assume, not only for people in the world, but also for characters and for character narrators in realistic fictional narratives.

Because our spatio-temporal position determines to such a
degree which events we have information about at a given moment, it is not at all uncommon that the sequence in which we learn about events is different from the chronological sequence in which the events occur. Because the effects of a perceiver’s spatio-temporal position on the information that is received apply to characters in narratives and to character narrators, as well as to people in our world, characters and character narrators are also subject to instances in which information about events is temporarily or permanently missing. Moreover, for readers, the set of events that one knows about at a given moment in the process of reading depends not only on how much a narrator knows, but also on how much a narrator tells. Character narrators, whose information is restricted to what characters in their spatio-temporal position can know, and unrestricted narrators both have the power to withhold information that they possess. In Meir Sternberg’s terms, narrators may be omniconnunucative or suppressive (Expositional Modes and Temporal Ordering in Fiction, 260ff). Thus for readers, information may be deferred or suppressed in situations in which an unrestricted narrator or a character narrator does not reveal information, as well as in situations in which a character narrator does not (yet) have the information.

As we have seen throughout this book, readers (listeners, viewers) interpret the function of events on the basis of the information that is available at that moment. Missing information matters because it can lead us to interpret the consequences and causes of events differently than we would if we were in possession of the information—with results that in some situations are more serious than in others. In narratological terms, missing information, whether the information is deferred or suppressed, creates gaps—gaps in the representation and sometimes gaps in fabula. Gaps, in fact, provide windows through which the differences between a representation and its fabula are often easier to perceive than in other circumstances. By analyzing gaps in a representation in relation to gaps in the fabula that we construct in response, we can explore how we process information that we perceive sequentially.

My ideas about the effects of deferred and suppressed information have developed under the influence of two important books on gaps in narratives: Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan’s The Concept of Ambiguity—The Example of James (1977) and Meir Sternberg’s Expositional Modes and Temporal Ordering in Fiction (1978). Both theorists distinguish between temporary and permanent gaps
in information, and differentiate between the two types according
to whether the gaps are located solely in the representation or also
occur in the fabula (Rimmon-Kenan, 48; Sternberg, 51). Since a
chronological fabula (according to the definition I am using) is
made by readers (listeners, viewers) from information found in a
representation, a fabula can contain only those events that a rep-
resentation either explicitly states as having occurred, or provides
information to permit a given reader at a given reading to deduce
as having occurred.

In instances in which an event is suppressed (permanently miss-
ing) in a representation, there is a gap in the representation where
the information might have been included, and a corresponding
gap in the fabula at the location in the chronological sequence
where the event would have occurred. A gap in fabula occurs
whenever an event is permanently suppressed in a representation;
if a representation gives no indication that an event has taken
place, a reader will not include the event in the fabula she makes.
In instances in which an event is deferred (temporarily missing),
there are two gaps in the representation: one where the informa-
tion would have been revealed if it were not deferred, and anoth-
er where the information is later revealed (“a double chronologi-
cal displacement—both when opened and filled in”; Sternberg,
241). But there is no gap in the fabula because finally, when the
reader reaches the conclusion of the representation and places the
last events revealed into the chronological fabula she is assembling,
the previously missing piece is available to be included.

The idea that one can distinguish between temporary and per-
manent gaps through the presence or absence of a gap in fabula is
grounded in the Formalist/early structuralist view of fabula as a
material: a set of events from which a representation is made.
Because fabula (in this view) is conceived as finite (a finite set of
events), it can be assumed to be available as a totality for analysis.
Both Sternberg and Rimmon-Kenan move beyond this position. In
Rimmon-Kenan’s analysis of James, to which I will return later in
this chapter, she addresses the question of how a representation
reveals one—and in the instances she studies more than one—fab-
ula, thereby reversing the perspective from the Formalist view of
fabula as a material to be shaped into a representation, to a view
of a representation as revealing its fabula(s). Sternberg, as we have
seen previously (particularly in chapter 3), considers the effects for
readers of the placement in representations of (temporarily with-
held) expositional material, thereby addressing the relations
between a representation and a fabula from the perspective of the reader and also considering the effects of temporary gaps on the process of reading, as the set of events revealed to the reader gradually expands.3

Understanding fabula as a construct that readers (listeners, viewers) make opens the possibility of comparing how we create causal sequences in response to a narrative, to how we create causal sequences in response to events we learn about in our world. My interest in the epistemological effect of sequential representation extends beyond literary narratives to include all narratives—whether fictional or not—and also individual experiencing of the world. I assume that we experience the world, minute by minute and hour by hour, as if it were a narrative that we were reading (listening to, viewing), and that we interpret the events and situations that come to our attention by creating fabulas, which continue to develop and grow in response to new information. Theories about how historical events are understood, and how narratives that recount historical events affect interpretations of those events, influence my ideas about how narratives shape interpretations and about the process we engage in in interpreting events in the world.

From Hayden White’s work I develop an image of the sequence of events in our world (annals, chronicles) as a ribbon or string from which the historian cuts a segment for representation. As White perceives, the historian’s interpretation determines the placement of the cut. The placement of the cut guides readers’ interpretations by determining which events will be reported and what their chronological position in the reported sequence will be. According to White: “The same event can serve as a different kind of element of many different historical stories . . . The death of the king may be a beginning, an ending, or simply a transitional event in three different stories” (Metahistory, 7).4

In my terms, the function of an event—in White’s example, the death of the king—depends on exactly these determining factors: the set of events in the configuration in which the king’s death is perceived, and the chronological position of the king’s death in that configuration. Since White’s example provides information only about the chronological position and not about the other events in the configuration, one can only speculate about the causes and the consequences of the king’s death in each of the three positions, but the interpretive process White describes is the process by which we interpret the function of an event. At the
beginning of a narrative, the death of the king may be perceived as a function-A event that disrupts the equilibrium of a long and peaceful reign, or merely as a change of circumstances that will perhaps encourage a neighboring king to invade (function A). In the middle of a narrative, the transfer of power from one king to another may make little difference (the ongoing equilibrium or the ongoing function-A situation continues), or may provide an opportunity for a C-actant to make great changes for better or for worse. At the end of a narrative, the death of the king may confirm the wisdom of the plans for succession he has put into place (EQ, as the result of the king’s C-actant activity), or mark the conclusion of a long battle for power, perhaps between the king and a prospective leader viewed by the historian as preferable (EQ, as the result of the new leader’s C-actant activity).

In chapter 5 I argued that life is generally more difficult to interpret than narratives are because we are left to determine where we are in a narrative sequence without the guidance of novelist, playwright, or historian. In our own experiencing of the world, each of us takes on for ourselves the historian’s task: to decide which segment of the ribbon of life to consider as a related set of events. The philosopher Louis O. Mink, in “History and Fiction as Modes of Comprehension,” analyzes the ways we understand that events we perceive sequentially—in narratives and in life—are related. Mink defines comprehension as “an individual act of seeing-things-together” (553), or, more precisely, as a grasping “in a single act, or in a cumulative series of acts, the complicated relationships of parts which can be experienced only seriatim” (548). According to Mink, there are perhaps no more than three fundamental modes of comprehension. The one that is relevant to interpreting events in narratives and in the world is the configurational mode in which “a number of things may be comprehended . . . as elements in a single and concrete complex of relationships,” for example, as “a particular configuration of events” (551).

Mink’s ideas about how we understand sequentially perceived events as elements in a configuration are similar to and have helped me formulate my ideas about functions. To grasp a number of events as a configuration requires, I point out, two complementary and closely related processes: understanding both that and how events are related. The historian’s decision about which segment of the ribbon to examine reflects her understanding that the recounted events are related; the account the historian offers reflects her understanding of how the events are related.
Interpreting an event as a function requires making both decisions: \textit{that} a set of events are related, and \textit{how} a given event is related to the other events in the set. By defining the function of an event in relation to the configuration in which it is perceived, I am indicating, as I have throughout this book, that the function of events is contextual and depends on which events are included in the configuration in relation to which it is interpreted. As we have seen in example after example, whether we are comparing two or more accounts of approximately the same events or comparing the information that the beginning of a narrative gives us with the information we have at a later stage in the process of perception, interpretations of an event depend on the configuration in which the event is perceived and may change if the configuration expands (or decreases) in response to new information.

Mink also considers how understanding is affected by the temporal position of the perceiver in relation to the perceived event(s). Suggesting that anticipation and retrospection are different forms of cognition, Mink proposes that “the difference between following a story and \textit{having followed} a story is more than the incidental difference between present experience and past experience” (546). Summarizing, Mink argues that “it is not following but having followed which carries the force of understanding” (545n9). Similarly, when we interpret the function of an event, to be able to take into account its consequences we have to position ourselves—at least imaginatively—at a point that permits retrospective viewing. We interpret the function of an event, in fact, as if both the event and the configuration in which we perceive it were completed actions. We interpret events retrospectively, as if they had occurred, I am suggesting, because we interpret events in the same manner—as if retrospectively, in relation to the configuration in which we perceive them—whether or not they have occurred, and whether the place they have occurred or may occur is our world, a narrative world, or our imaginings of what may or may not occur at some future time.

To consider the effects for interpreting functions of the varying configurations that deferred and suppressed information can create—effects that I assume apply in our world as well as in the narratives we read (listen to, view)—I take as examples two literary narratives that offer the possibility of comparing interpretations of the same events from different spatio-temporal positions and in different sequences. The two narratives are \textit{Sarrasine} (1830) by Honoré de Balzac and \textit{The Turn of the Screw} (1898) by Henry
James. Both works present a frame narrative in which another narrative is told. This structure offers an embedded set of events (the events of the contained story), which is perceived from three locations: by characters in the contained story, by characters in the containing story, and by readers. Perceivers at the three locations are looking at the same events. Not every event, however, can be perceived from every location; nor are events revealed in the same sequence to perceivers at each location. Thus we can test the effects of both suppressed and deferred information by comparing interpretations by perceivers who receive information at different locations.

The opening section in *The Turn of the Screw* provides an introductory frame that remains unclosed; there is no parallel scene at the end of the novella. But the section gives information, to James’s readers as well as Douglas’s listeners, that the governess’s account of events at Bly does not contain, including information that the governess does not know at the time of the events that she describes. The framing scene offers its information through the double lens of two men whose interaction with each other indicates a mutual respect that reinforces, for readers, the authority of both as sources of trustworthy information. Specifically, a first-person narrator quotes and summarizes—and offers as factual data—prefatory remarks that his friend Douglas makes to the people to whom Douglas reads the manuscript that the governess entrusted to him decades previously, before she died.

The two men convince us, I think, at least as we begin to read, that they know how less sophisticated people, like the governess, think. She is twenty, the youngest daughter of a poor country parson, taking service for the first time. Her prospective employer, they tell us, “struck her, inevitably, as gallant and splendid, but what took her most of all and gave her the courage she afterward showed was that he put the whole thing to her as a favour, an obligation he should gratefully incur” (James, 153). The favor he asks is that she take complete charge of his deceased brother’s orphaned children, and under no circumstances consult him.

Given this information, most readers probably interpret the governess’s otherwise cryptic statement at the beginning of her manuscript about having “ris[en], in town, to meet his appeal” (158) initially in this way:
A the children are a heavy burden to employer
B employer asks governess to relieve this burden
C governess decides “to meet his appeal”
C’ governess sets out for Bly
G governess arrives at Bly
H governess takes charge of the children

According to this interpretation the governess is the C-actant who decides (function C) and then begins to act (function C’) to alleviate her employer’s function-A problem, which she is aware of because he asks her (function B) to relieve his burden.

Because Douglas has told his auditors, and thus readers know, that the governess will not see her employer again after she accepts the position, we may find somewhat pathetic her willingness to assist her employer in his desire so completely to shirk his responsibilities, particularly when she admits that she often thinks how charming it would be if he were to appear “at the turn of a path . . . and smile and approve. I didn’t ask more than that—I only asked that he should know” (175; James’s italics). The governess cannot know that he will never appear; it is the possibility that he may that sustains her infatuation.

The governess’s infatuation is the first premise of Edmund Wilson’s influential early study of the novella. Perceptively noting that the scene in which the governess wishes that her employer might appear immediately precedes the scene in which she first sees a ghost, Wilson proposes a causal relation between the two scenes. If the governess is sexually repressed, Wilson suggests (after reminding us that she is the daughter of a country parson), then her infatuation may have led her to have “conjured up an image who wears the master’s clothes but who (the Freudian ‘censor’ intervening) looks debased, ‘like an actor,’ she says” (“The Ambiguity of Henry James,” 91). Peter Quint, in this view, is the governess’s employer in neurotic disguise. The governess’s situation, as Wilson describes it, can be represented by these functions:

A father’s occupation ensures daughter’s sexual repression
a governess is infatuated with employer (lower-case a, indicating that she sees as disruptive an otherwise unchanged world)
A governess sees visions
Bneg governess is isolated at Bly, with neither white knights nor psychoanalysts nearby whom she can ask for help
Wilson’s worldview is not unlike that of the two men in the introductory framing scene. Although from ontologically disparate worlds, all three are sophisticated, perceptive, experienced men of the world in the worlds they inhabit. The governess’s view of her situation is very different from Wilson’s, and the difference is in this instance not the result of a specific piece of information that one has and the other does not, but in the governess’s very lack of experience. If she is sexually repressed, she is too naive to know it. If she needs an analyst, she is aware only that other people need her. According to her interpretation, immediately after the second time she sees Peter Quint, the children are in danger and she is their best available protector. The words she chooses indicate that interpretation: Peter Quint has come, she says, “not for me [but] for some one else” (184); she tells Mrs. Grose she will not leave the children to go to church because she is “afraid [for them] of him” (189, James’s italics). These functions represent her interpretation:

A Peter Quint has come for one or both children
C governess will try to protect the children
C' governess stays with the children instead of going to church

In the same scene, moreover, the governess establishes with Mrs. Grose the relationship that from the governess’s perspective seems to continue throughout the rest of the narrative. Just after she tells Mrs. Grose that she is afraid “of him,” she “made out in [Mrs. Grose’s face] the delayed dawn of an idea I myself had not given her . . . I thought instantly of this as something I could get from her” (189). Mrs. Grose begins to ask questions (function D), to which the governess responds (function E). By the end of the scene Mrs. Grose has identified the apparition as Peter Quint, and informed the governess that Peter Quint is dead (function F). In this instance Mrs. Grose provides new information that the governess does not have. In ensuing conversations Mrs. Grose sometimes offers nothing more specific than an opportunity for discussion, which permits the governess to say aloud what she has been thinking—but this too the governess seems to perceive as a form of assistance (function F) from Mrs. Grose.

To the governess at the time that the events are occurring at Bly, it seems to me, Mrs. Grose seems as trustworthy as Douglas seems to readers during a first reading. Both Mrs. Grose and Douglas seem credible for the same reason: just as Douglas knew the governess
while she was alive, Mrs. Grose knew Peter Quint and Miss Jessel. Many readers, I think, will see the following sequence of functions as a representation of the governess’s interpretation of the events at Bly at the time they occur, and perhaps even until the final scene:

A  ghosts threaten the children  
C  governess decides to protect the children  
C'  governess stays with the children instead of going to church  
D  Mrs. Grose asks questions  
E  governess answers Mrs. Grose’s questions  
F  Mrs. Grose provides information and discussion that help the governess  
H  governess acts repeatedly to protect the children

Unlike *The Ambassadors* (as we saw in chapter 5), *The Turn of the Screw* is one of the narratives by James that exemplifies structural ambiguity, the pattern that Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan identifies in which a representation reveals mutually exclusive fabulas. Specifically, in *The Turn of the Screw* she discerns: “Take the governess as a reliable interpreter of events, and you have one story. Take her as an unreliable neurotic fabricator of non-existent ‘ghosts of the mind’ and you are reading a diametrically opposed narrative” (*The Concept of Ambiguity*, 119).

For readers to be able to construct two fabulas from one representation, some of the scenes the representation includes will need to be open to being read as one event in one fabula and another event in the other fabula (the governess sees real ghosts; she fabricates ‘ghosts of the mind’). Moreover, where structural ambiguity exists, one or more events must fill one function in one fabula and a different function in the other fabula. The scene near the end of *The Turn of the Screw* where the governess and Mrs. Grose find Flora near the lake, and then the governess sees Miss Jessel on the opposite bank, offers an example. The governess says to Flora, “‘She’s there, you little unhappy thing . . . and you know it as well as you know me!’” (279), to which Flora responds by denying that she sees anybody or anything. Addressing the governess, Flora continues, “‘I think you’re cruel. I don’t like you!’” (281), and then asks Mrs. Grose to take her away from the governess. Finally the governess says to Flora, “‘I’ve done my best, but I’ve lost you. Good-bye.’” (282).

Both the governess’s and Flora’s interpretations of what is
occurring are revealed. As we have previously understood, the governess sees herself as a C-actant who is trying to protect the children from the ghosts she thinks have invaded their lives. The governess interprets her behavior in this scene as her major effort to vanquish Miss Jessel (function H), which fails (function I\textsubscript{neg}). Flora, on the other hand, interprets the governess’s behavior in this scene as cruel (function A), and asks (function B) Mrs. Grose to protect her from the governess.

For readers, if we have decided that the governess sees ghosts that are there, then we interpret this scene as she does: as a function H that concludes in an unsuccessful I\textsubscript{neg}. If we have decided that there are no ghosts, we can interpret this scene as Flora does: the governess’s ill-founded behavior has created a function-A situation for Flora, who asks Mrs. Grose to assume the C-actant role. The very same behavior can be read as a function H moving to an unsuccessful I\textsubscript{neg}, or as a function A moving to a function B. These are very different interpretations of the function of the governess’s behavior in this scene.

As Rimmon-Kenan perceives, ambiguity in *The Turn of the Screw* is in part an effect of the first-person narration: without independent confirmation the reliability of a character narrator’s perceptions and conceptions cannot be confirmed (*The Concept of Ambiguity*, 119). Second, in this novella as in the other narratives by James in which Rimmon-Kenan locates structural ambiguity, ambiguity arises, as she skillfully demonstrates, as the effect of an “equilibrium of singly directed clues [which support one hypothesis—e.g., there are ghosts, and contradict the alternative] and the presence of doubly directed clues [which simultaneously support both alternatives—e.g., the governess’s behavior in the scene at the lake]” (101). In addition, the ambiguity of *The Turn of the Screw* can be seen, by readers and Douglas’s listeners, as the result of permanently suppressed pieces of information that the introductory framing section has given us reason to assume will be revealed. The account the governess writes covers the period from her arrival at Bly to the death of Miles. The chronological fabula that readers construct, from information in the introductory section and in her account, extends from at least a couple of years before her arrival at Bly to many years thereafter. The framing section draws attention to the gaps in information in the periods both before and after the governess’s stay at Bly.

The gap that follows the governess’s account stretches from the moment when, in her words, Miles’s “little heart, dispossessed, had
stopped” (309), to approximately a decade later when Douglas, who is ten years younger than the governess (she is twenty when she goes to Bly), finds her at home when he “comes down the second summer” (149–50) from Trinity. In terms of scenic treatment, which we know mattered to James, the gap extends from a scene in which the governess is holding a probably dead boy, to a scene in which she is entrusted with the care of a living girl, Douglas’s younger sister. In terms of interpreting the final scene of the manuscript, James’s entire suppression of the events of the decade in question effectively presents Miles’s death as an *uninterpreted event*: an event to which no function has been assigned.9

We do not know what Miles dies of, and the diagnosis is important because the manner of death might indicate cause. Nor do we know the effects, if there are any, of his death; the configuration of events in which to interpret this event is incomplete. Moreover, interpretations of the event by characters in the narrative world are withheld. The governess’s manuscript stops without indication of how she interprets the final scene and her role in it. Nor are we given at that time or later any knowledgeable, authoritative view. We do not even know whether the person who entrusts Douglas’s sister to the governess is cognizant of the events of ten years before. Perhaps no one other than Douglas, who is very young when he meets the governess and finds her “most charming” (149), is in possession even of her version of the events at Bly. Retrospectively, we probably trust him (and the frame narrator who quotes him) less than we did on first reading, because of his failure to address the question that his listeners must surely have asked: please explain what happens to Miles.

Because the event comes to us uninterpreted, it encourages interpretations. Peter G. Beidler, who summarizes the critical history of the narrative, cites more than a score (*Henry James: The Turn of the Screw*, 141–44), including these four recurring possibilities: (1) Miles is not dead, or (2) Miles is not dead, and ten years later is called Douglas. (Our minds have a tendency, I suggest, to perceive uninterpreted events as if they have not occurred.) (3) The governess succeeds in getting Miles to confess (if we interpret the governess as the C-actant, we see this as function I, a successful concluding event); Miles thus dies free from Peter Quint’s control. (4) The governess suffocates Miles, or frightens him to death (if we interpret the governess as the C-actant, we see this as $I_{neg}$, an unsuccessful concluding event; the governess does not achieve her goal, and will have no further opportunities to try).
However one chooses to interpret this event, a knowledge of it instigates retrospective reinterpretations of previous events, probably including events at Bly that preceded the governess’s arrival. During our reading of the governess’s manuscript we see the events she sees from her spatio-temporal position. When we attempt to construct a chronological account of the events that occurred prior to her arrival, we become aware of how much information we do not have. We may also begin to think about how the events at Bly might appear to the children, from their spatio-temporal position. The children were sent to Bly, we remember, two years before the governess, and following the untimely death of their parents in India. The children would view their lives, I suggest, as one disruptive event after another.

A loss of both parents
A sent to a new place (Bly)
A either (1) the disappearance and death of Miss Jessel and Peter Quint, if the two have had a supportive relationship with the children; or (2) being controlled and then haunted by Miss Jessel and Peter Quint
A uncle has no patience for children; he disappears
A new governess arrives; they are now in the care of an inexperienced twenty-year-old and the illiterate Mrs. Grose
A Miles sent down from school (and no other arrangements for schooling are considered)
A the new governess sees ghosts—e.g., either (1) the children are possessed and the governess cannot save them, or (2) the governess’s mental disturbance leads her to see evil in her charges
B$_{neg}$ there is no one the children can ask for help
C, C’ the children court the governess’s good will by their incredibly beautiful behavior
I$_{neg}$ = A as beautifully behaved as the children are, the governess continues to think they are possessed
A little Miles dies or is murdered
A little Flora is hysterical
A? C’? Mrs. Grose carries off Flora—e.g., either (1) the final disruptive event [A], or (2) a last hope for Flora’s survival [Mrs. Grose as C-actant, trying to save Flora]
Although the events that the children and the governess see include many of the same events, the configuration of events in relation to which they interpret specific events is not the same, in part because the children’s spatio-temporal position leads them to interpret the events at Bly from the time they arrived, and with reference to their memories of why they were sent there. The governess on the other hand considers (and writes about) the events at Bly from the time she arrived, and with reference to her memories of why she accepted her position there. The two interpretations are obviously very different, and illustrate the effect of differing configurations on interpretations of the function of an event. When the configuration changes, interpretations shift.

Narratives guide readers to discern a particular configuration in relation to which to interpret given events. Readers are led to include in a configuration certain events and not others in ways that are illuminated by analyzing the gaps in representations in relationship to the gaps in the fabulas we construct in response. The gaps with which we have been concerned in *The Turn of the Screw* are for the most part permanent—gaps in fabula. There are so many gaps in the fabula because the representation reveals only a few events that precede or follow the governess’s summer at Bly, and those few events are spread over a long period of time. The fabula extends for decades. This particular fabula can nonetheless be conceived as one line. We can see this fabula as a single line because we are given enough information that we can arrange in chronological sequence, reasonably accurately, every event we learn about—from the arrival of the children at Bly to the frame narrator’s transcribing the governess’s manuscript.

Within this chronological line, the governess’s manuscript traces only a short segment, no more than a few months. This compression of duration in the governess’s text guides readers to assemble as a configuration the events that are available to the governess to assemble as a configuration; thus the governess and readers (at least on first reading) tend to interpret events in relation to the same configuration.

In *Sarrasine*, on the other hand, the gaps with which we will primarily be concerned, both in the framing narrative and the contained narrative, are temporary. The contained narrative, to which we will return, illustrates a gap-producing pattern of relations...
between the representation and the fabula that we did not see in *The Turn of the Screw*. The framing narrative, however, creates a temporary gap in much the same way that James's novella creates a permanent gap, through a representation that traces only a segment of a single chronological line.

As Roland Barthes has discerned, the framing narrative of *Sarrasine* exemplifies the narrative contract. The bargain in this instance is between the narrator (of both the framing narrative and the contained narrative) and his companion, Mme de Rochefide. The narrator will tell a story (the contained narrative, about Sarrasine and la Zambinella), and in return, his companion indicates, she will permit him a night of love. In Barthes's words: “Here, the [contained] narrative is exchanged for a body (a contract of prostitution); elsewhere it can purchase life itself (in *The Thousand and One Nights*, one story of Scheherazade equals one day of continued life); . . . in these exemplary fictions . . . one narrates in order to obtain by exchanging” (*S/Z*, 89).

A contract indicates that both parties to a transaction want to exchange something for something; both parties are motivated by141 Sequential Perception Kafalenos_CH6_2nd.qxp  3/24/2006  11:04 AM  Page 141 a desire (function a) to possess something. But a contract can be reached only when the two parties want different things—different things that the other happens to possess. For both parties the motivation is a function—a desire, but the object that is desired by each party is necessarily different. In *Sarrasine*, readers are ultimately given enough information to be able to recognize both characters’ motivating desires. But although Mme de Rochefide’s desire is chronologically subsequent to the narrator’s desire, we learn about her desire first, because of the sequence in which the representation reveals information.

As we begin to read the narrative, on a first reading, we discover initially Mme de Rochefide’s motivation. The narrator’s companion is fascinated by the painting she sees at the party to which the narrator has taken her: an Adonis, who, she says, is “too beautiful for a man” (Balzac, 232, *114*). When the narrator tells her that the portrait “was copied from the statue of a woman” (232, *117*), she asks whom it depicts, adding impetuously, “I want to know” (232, *119*). He responds: “I believe [je crois] that this Adonis is a . . . a relative of Mme de Lanty” (232, *120*). Readers interpret these statements, I suggest, according to the following functions:

a companion wants to know the identity of the model for the Adonis
B companion asks narrator who the model is
C narrator decides to tell her
C’ narrator begins to reveal information

These functions that I think represent readers’ initial interpretations probably also represent the narrator’s companion’s interpretation. Her interpretations of the further events that conclude the framing narrative are probably these:

G narrator arrives the next evening and is shown to the “small, elegant salon” (234, *148) where she receives him
H narrator tells story
I\textsubscript{neg} companion finds story unsatisfactory, tells narrator to leave

Readers, however, if they continue to think about the fabula of the framing narrative, may remember that the party takes place in a house that is familiar to the narrator but that his companion is visiting for the first time, and, if so, they may then consider that although the representation begins at the party, the fabula must contain an earlier event, in which the narrator invites the woman he brings: a woman he describes when he first mentions her in the story as “one of the most ravishing women in Paris” (228, *59). I suggest that the following functions represent the interpretation of the other party to the bargain, the narrator:

a narrator’s desire for Mme de Rochefide
C narrator decides to try to win Mme de Rochefide
C’ narrator invites Mme de Rochefide to a party
D his companion is fascinated by the Adonis
E narrator tells her the portrait was copied from the statue of a woman
F his companion’s interest empowers the narrator to trade the story she wants for a night with her
G narrator goes to the small salon where she receives him
H narrator tells story
I\textsubscript{neg} narrator’s story does not please; she tells him to leave

If we compare the interpretations I ascribe to the two characters, we see that the functions assigned to events are in some cases different. For example, Mme de Rochefide’s request for information
about the identity of the model for the Adonis is interpreted (I suggest) by her as function B and by the narrator as function F.

The differences in the two characters’ interpretations are the result of differences in the configuration in relation to which each is interpreting perceived events. For readers, the companion’s interpretation is the one we are apt to perceive first, because the representation introduces us initially to her configuration. Although the narrator’s desire (for Mme de Rochefide) chronologically precedes Mme de Rochefide’s desire (for a story), we are slower to recognize the narrator’s motivation, for several reasons.

First, the information that the narrator considers Mme de Rochefide “ravishing” and that it is he who has brought her to the ball is deferred in the representation until well after the reader’s curiosity about the de Lanty household is firmly aroused. Second, the two pieces of information about Mme de Rochefide are revealed (and she herself first appears) at the same point in the representation that the ancient decrepit figure whom the narrator’s story claims is la Zambinella is first seen. In fact, the first sign of Mme de Rochefide in the representation is her “stifled laugh” (227, *54) in response to the ancient figure—in comparison to whom we are thereby guided to see her initially as a subordinate character, as primarily a lens through which to show readers just how horrifying the old creature looks to her unaccustomed, young eyes.14 Third, the narrator’s desire for Mme de Rochefide (his function-a motivation, as I interpret it) is never explicitly stated in the representation, although the reader can deduce as a probability that if he finds her “ravishing” and has invited her to the ball, he has invited her because he finds her ravishing.

Nonetheless, like the events in The Turn of the Screw, the events of the framing narrative of Sarrasine can be conceived as a single chronological line. Although we can interpret the events according to two motivated sequences, Mme de Rochefide’s and the narrator’s, we can nonetheless arrange all the events we learn about in the framing narrative reasonably accurately in chronological sequence. In Sarrasine, in the framing narrative, the representation guides readers to interpret the situation initially as the companion does, by revealing the events of her configuration first. Readers are slower to understand the narrator’s interpretation because information about the events that the narrator probably interprets as his motivating function a, his C-actant’s decision, and his initial C’ action is in part deferred in the representation and in part left for readers to deduce and never explicitly stated. As a result, I suggest,
at least on first reading, we listen to the story he tells (the contained narrative) and consider its effect with our attention more directly focused on Mme de Rochefide’s desire than on the narrator’s.

In the contained narrative, the information that is deferred—that la Zambinella is not a woman but a castrato—is so central that the temporary withholding of the information motivates the primary action as well as interpretations by readers and the narrator’s companion. The young French sculptor Sarrasine, sent to Rome to study, naively enters an opera house in the Papal States, where he perceives in the prima donna an ideal beauty; she seems “more than a woman, this was a masterpiece” (238, *227). Naiveté, I suggest, is one type of restricted configuration. Sarrasine does not know that la Zambinella is a castrato, nor that in the Papal States no women are permitted on the stage. Thus he interprets her as the woman to whom he will devote his life.

a  Sarrasine falls in love with la Zambinella
C  Sarrasine decides to win her love (“To be loved by her, or die” [ibid., 238; *240])
C’ Sarrasine accepts an invitation to meet her (“I’ll be there” [ibid., 241; *289])
G  Sarrasine arrives at the mansion where the performers are assembled
H  Sarrasine tries to win her love
I_{neg} = A  he cannot succeed: she is a castrato; this knowledge motivates a new sequence
C, C’, H  Sarrasine tries to destroy the statue for which she was the model and to kill la Zambinella
I_{neg}  Sarrasine is killed by la Zambinella’s protector’s henchmen

Only near the end of the narrator’s story, when Sarrasine finally learns that the woman he loves is a castrato, is la Zambinella’s condition—and her interpretation of her existence—simultaneously revealed to Sarrasine, readers, and the narrator’s companion. Prince Chigi tells Sarrasine: “I am the one, monsieur, who gave Zambinella his voice. I paid for everything that scamp ever had, even his singing teacher. Well, he has so little gratitude for the service I rendered him that he has never consented to set foot in my house” (250, *470). In what Barthes calls this “whole little anterior novel” (S/Z, 186), we see revealed a set of prior events
and are permitted to glimpse la Zambinella’s interpretation of the life-altering event of his childhood.

A Prince Chigi’s “gift” of la Zambinella’s voice—i.e., the prince pays for surgery to castrate a boy soprano; the boy (la Zambinella) is far from grateful

B neg the surgery cannot be reversed; there is nothing for which to ask; there can be no resolution

From the perspective of la Zambinella, all later events are interpreted in relation to a configuration that includes his castration. The configuration in relation to which Sarrasine interprets events does not include information about la Zambinella’s castration until just before the end of the story and a few hours before Sarrasine’s death. The difference in the information each has available explains their different interpretations of ongoing events; their different interpretations motivate their actions, with grave results.

The information about la Zambinella’s castration can be kept for so long from Sarrasine because of his naiveté. The information is kept from readers (and from the narrator’s companion) by the perspective—the spatio-temporal position—that the narrator adopts to tell his story. The narrator tells the story through Sarrasine’s focalization; Sarrasine’s perceptions and conceptions are reported in the narrator’s words.15

The temporary withholding of information from the reader and the narrator’s companion is the effect in this instance of a relation between the representation and the fabula that The Turn of the Screw does not illustrate. In the contained narrative of Sarrasine, the events that are revealed cannot be conceived as a single chronological line. We cannot arrange all the events we learn about in an accurate chronological sequence. For the years in which Sarrasine is growing up in France and la Zambinella is growing up in Italy, we have some information about specific events in both characters’ lives, but no information about the temporal correlations between the events of one life and the events of the other life. We do not know, for example, whether la Zambinella was castrated before or after the Good Friday when Sarrasine carved an impious Christ; we cannot determine where to intercalate the events of one character’s life into the chronological sequence of the other character’s life.

In situations such as this, I suggest, we conceive two parallel lines: two young people in two different places undergo apprenticeships
that lead to mastery in their different art forms. I see these as separate lines, which become conjoined and can be thought of as one line only after the two characters meet, during the period when they interact. In chapter 1, I described the patterns that Todorov discerned in which multiple narrative sequences could be represented. A different telling of Sarrasine’s and la Zambinella’s stories might alternate between the two lines (scenes from la Zambinella’s childhood and apprenticeship alternating with scenes from Sarrasine’s childhood and apprenticeship); or could embed the story of Sarrasine’s childhood and training within la Zambinella’s story (perhaps at the point when Sarrasine’s presence in the audience begins to be noticed); or could embed the story of la Zambinella’s childhood and training within Sarrasine’s story much earlier than Balzac’s telling does (perhaps at the moment when Sarrasine first sees la Zambinella perform or first meets la Zambinella). But in Sarrasine the entire line that traces the events of la Zambinella’s life prior to the moment that Sarrasine hears her sing is withheld until much later (and even when reported is merely summarized). As we have seen, this pattern gives readers no clue that crucial information is missing. When the information a representation reveals leads readers to construct a fabula that includes more than one chronological line, that entire line can be temporarily deferred, even without anyone’s suspecting at the time that information is being withheld.16

We have now seen the two available patterns in which gaps can occur in the fabulas we construct as we read, whether the information to fill the gaps is temporarily or permanently missing. A tentative fabula that contains gaps is either a single line with missing segments (e.g., The Turn of the Screw, the framing narrative of Sarrasine), or two or more parallel lines, with at least one entire line missing (e.g., the contained narrative in Sarrasine). Either pattern reveals certain events and withholds others, and thereby guides narrator’s audiences, including readers, to include certain events and omit others in the configuration they are assembling.

As we know, narratives impart information sequentially and are perceived sequentially. Readers (listeners, viewers) interpret events as they are revealed in relation to the configuration they have assembled at that stage in the process of perception. The sequence in which events are revealed in a representation guides
the contents of the configuration that perceivers establish. As function analysis demonstrates, the power of the configuration to govern interpretation can be immense. Because of the effects of sequential perception on the configuration one establishes, and of the configuration on interpretation, any sequentially perceived representation of sequential events—any narrative—(necessarily, unavoidably) shapes interpretations of the events it represents.

Sternberg proposes that in literary narratives both the suppression of information and its subsequent disclosure “have to be quasi-mimetically accounted for, so as to avoid the reader’s indignation at being ‘cheated’ (this motivation of the temporal ordering usually taking the form of shifts in point of view, notably shifts from indirect or external to direct or internal presentation” (“Temporal Ordering, Modes of Expositional Distribution, and Three Models of Rhetorical Control,” 308). Similarly, Menakhem Perry perceives (as we saw in chapter 3) that “[e]xamples of ‘distorting the order of the fabula’ . . . are usually cases where the text does conform to a ‘natural’-chronological sequence [such as] the ‘natural’ sequence of an ‘external’ occurrence; the ‘natural’ sequence of a character’s consciousness; the sequence within a block of information transmitted from one character to another, etc.” (“Literary Dynamics,” 39–40).

Both theorists are analyzing narratives that are narrated (told, as opposed to shown). In both theorists’ examples, nonchronological narration is naturalized through focalization: the writer’s selection of whose perceptions and conceptions readers will be permitted to know. In The Turn of the Screw, as we have seen, gaps are the effect of the interplay between two focalizations: the governess’s detailed account of a few months’ events and the frame narrator’s much more general grasp of a few temporal signposts spread over a period of decades. In Sarrasine, the narrator’s focalization at the time the events are occurring (in the framing narrative) and the restriction to Sarrasine’s focalization (in the contained narrative) similarly explain gaps. Focalizers’ perceptions are limited by their spatio-temporal position in the narrative world, and by personal characteristics that guide them to attend more closely to some events than to others.

Whether focalization is restricted to one or another character, or a narrator occasionally reveals one or another character’s perceptions and conceptions, or a narrator’s own perceptions and conceptions are the only ones revealed, the information that is available to a reader (listener, viewer) as she progresses through a
narrated narrative depends on whose perceptions and conceptions are revealed from moment to moment. From the first pages of this book I have been claiming that events are functionally polyvalent, and that the function of an event depends on the configuration in which it is perceived and its position in that configuration. In this chapter I emphasize the effect of sequential narration and its complement, sequential perception. I am arguing that representations shape interpretations according to this causally linked sequence: (1) in narrated narratives, focalization controls which events are revealed and in what sequence in the representation;18 (2) in all narratives (whether narrated or staged), the sequence in which the representation reveals events guides the formation of a configuration; (3) in all narratives, the configuration shapes interpretations.

At the beginning of this chapter I discussed the effect of the spatio-temporal position of an individual in our world on the information available to that individual. The quasi-mimetic nature of the sources of information in narrated narratives that Sternberg discerns ("Temporal Ordering," 308) ensures that a reader's sources of information about events in a narrative world and an individual's sources of information about events in our world are not dissimilar. Where focalization, in narrated narratives, controls which events are revealed and in what sequence, in our lives our spatio-temporal position controls what we can know and when we can know it. Where, in narratives, the sequence in which the representation reveals events guides the formation of a configuration, in our lives the sequence of experiencing guides the formation of a configuration. Where, in narratives, the configuration shapes interpretations, in our lives too, the configuration shapes interpretations.

Individuals in our world, characters in narratives, and readers (listeners, viewers) of narratives establish configurations from available sequentially perceived information and interpret the function of events in relation to those configurations. Gaps matter because, as we have seen, the absence of information in a configuration affects interpretations of known events. But the distinction between permanent and temporary gaps applies only to fiction, not to life and not, I now argue, to narratives that report events in our world. As I noted in chapter 1, Marie-Laure Ryan
discerns and explains that fictional texts each refer to a world of their own, and cannot be validated externally because other texts do not share their reference world. Because there are no sources of information other than the novel, story, fictional film, etc., about the events in a fictional narrative, the gaps that have not been filled in by the end are permanent gaps.19

Nonfiction texts, on the other hand, Ryan perceives, “offer versions of the same reality” and can be validated by information in other texts that refer to the same reality: “The reader evaluates the truth value of the [nonfiction] text by comparing its assertions to another source of knowledge relating to the same reference world” (“Postmodernism and the Doctrine of Panfictionality,” 166). In other words, if we adopt Ryan’s perspective, as I do, an account of historical events can be complemented by other accounts of the same events. Moreover, events in our world do not come to a stop. Hayden White writes about the impossibility “of ‘concluding’ an account of real events; for we cannot say, surely, that any sequence of real events actually comes to an end, that reality itself disappears, that events of the order of the real have ceased to happen” (“The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality,” 26; his emphasis).

Since permanent gaps can be differentiated from temporary gaps only with reference to a point beyond which no further information can become available, all gaps in narratives about our world are temporary gaps—gaps that theoretically can be filled by other accounts of the same events (seen from other perspectives) and by accounts of later events. For individuals in our world too, all gaps are temporary gaps. Throughout the duration of consciousness there is always the possibility of obtaining additional information about events we already know about and of acquiring information about other events that have occurred and that continue to occur as time goes on. As we think about the effect of sequential perception in historical narratives and in our lives, the issue, then, is whether the effect of temporary gaps is (merely) temporary or whether temporary gaps have effects that endure. I argue that temporary gaps have permanent effects and that through analysis of our response to gaps in fiction we can perceive those effects.

It is easy enough to see that, for individuals in our world and for characters in narrative worlds (although less often for readers, particularly readers of fictional narratives), interpretations motivate actions, and actions change the configurations in relation to
which further interpretations will be made. For the character Sarrasine, for example, the distinction between deferred and suppressed information is irrelevant. The gap in Sarrasine’s information about castrati is temporary. But because there is this gap in his configuration when he meets la Zambinella, he falls in love with the semblance of a woman and adopts as his aesthetic touchstone for female beauty a being who is not female. The subsequent disclosure of the previously deferred information does not and cannot rectify the situation that Sarrasine’s previous ignorance has brought about. In our world too (and too often), configurations of events motivate actions that new information cannot undo.

From the perspective of readers, let us consider the case that White makes—that the historian’s selection of a segment of the historical record for representation unavoidably shapes readers’ attitudes toward represented events. White’s argument is supported by my concept of the configuration and its effect. An account (any account) represents some events and not others, and thereby guides the configuration that readers establish and in relation to which they interpret the function of the represented events. Nonetheless, as we have seen, after we have read one historian’s account we can turn to another’s. When we do so, do our interpretations of the causes and effects—the functions—of reported events suddenly change in response to the configuration that the second historian presents us? An open-minded reader, of course, attempts to pay attention to a well-reasoned presentation. But often, I am arguing, even as we add events that the second historian reports to the fabula we previously constructed, our interpretation of the function of events does not change. We continue to interpret the causes and effects of events just as we did in response to the configuration presented by the first historian.

Let us consider how this can be the case. Previous studies that suggest that temporary gaps in fictional narratives have a permanent effect approach the topic from several perspectives. For readers of fiction, it is well understood that temporary gaps color the experiencing of a narrative. Suspense, for instance, has been shown to be the result of temporary gaps that arouse desire and withhold satisfaction during the process of reading. Many of the emotions that readers feel in response to characters in fictional narratives endure even after the configuration of events that aroused those emotions expands to include information about how events in progress turn out.

Menakhem Perry traces an effect of the opening pages on read-
ers’ decisions about how to read the rest of the text: “The first stage of the text-continuum . . . creates a perceptual set—the reader is predisposed to perceive certain elements and it induces a disposition to continue making connections similar to the ones he has made at the beginning of the text. What was constructed from the text as the reading began affects the kind of attention paid to subsequent items and the weight attached to them” (“Literary Dynamics,” 50). As I read this passage, Perry is describing a process in which one of the ways that readers respond to the first pages of a narrative they are beginning to read is by adopting a set of principles according to which to determine what kinds of information, and how much information, to include in the configurations they are starting to establish. I think that the principle of selection that Perry discerns is important to explaining how readers, as well as listeners and viewers, establish configurations.20

Both Perry (53ff.) and Sternberg (Expositional Modes and Temporal Ordering in Fiction, 93ff.) have summarized and analyzed studies reported by psychologists who designed experiments to determine the effect on interpretations of the sequence in which information is perceived. These studies document the primacy effect: our tendency to accept as valid the information we are initially given, even when that information is contradicted later in the same message.21 During the process of moving through a narrative, we interpret events as functions. If the primacy effect influences readers (listeners, viewers) of narratives, and I concur with Sternberg and Perry that it often does, then, I propose, our initial interpretation of the function of an event may endure even after the configuration we have assembled no longer supports that interpretation.22

We have seen that, as we move through a narrative, initially we interpret the function of a given event in relation to the configuration of events we know about at the moment that the event is revealed to us. Then when the configuration expands to include information we continue to receive, we may reinterpret the function of the given event. Finally, when we reach the end of the narrative and construct a complete configuration—a final fabula—ideally we will interpret the function of the given event once again, this time in relation to all the information we have amassed.

But sometimes, I suggest, as a result of sequential perception, events simultaneously carry two or more conflicting interpretations as functions: the function we initially assign in relation to an incomplete configuration (or incomplete configurations), and the
function that the position in a completed fabula implies. Sometimes, even, we interpret an event according to the function that seems appropriate in an incomplete configuration and then retain that interpretation after we become fully cognizant of a larger configuration, in response to which we would immediately interpret the event as a different function if only we recognized the need to reinterpret. In both cases, I am arguing, the primacy effect guides us to retain our first interpretation of the function of an event after we possess the information to recognize that that interpretation is inaccurate. Also in both cases, I assume, we fail to recognize that our thought processes are illogical.

One way to explore the enduring effect of the configuration in relation to which we interpret the function of an event is to consider the sequence in which we forget the narratives we have read (listened to, viewed). I suggest that readers of this chapter join me in thinking about a novel or a film read or viewed several months or years ago, so that we can compare our present conception of it with our conception of it during the first days after reading or viewing it. Our grasp of fabula is most thorough and detailed during the period just after one finishes reading or viewing it. Our grasp of the completed fabula on readers’ and viewers’ interpretations of events as functions is thus at its strongest at that time.

The character Pierre Menard, in Jorge Luis Borges’s story that bears his name, proposes that a reader’s recollection of a book read long ago, which through the passage of time is “simplified by forgetfulness and indifference, can well equal the imprecise and prior image of a book not yet written” (“Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote,” 41). The “imprecise . . . image” that readers are eventually left with is often, I suggest, a function: an interpretation of a few (perhaps only vaguely remembered) events, often attached to a character as an interpretation—perhaps expressed in the form of a judgment—of that character’s actions. In instances in which a reader or viewer interprets an event in the completed fabula as a different function than she interpreted it in a previously revealed, incomplete configuration, we can consider which interpretation endures after the passage of time.

In my own experience, whenever I think of The Turn of the Screw (and if some months have passed since I last read it), I immediately envision the governess as innocent and vulnerable, and as valiantly devoting her youthful energies to C-actant activity that addresses existing problems: the children’s uncle’s “bur-
den,” the children’s needs. This view of the governess, which is always the first thing about the novella that I remember, is in stark contrast to my considered opinion, if I am pressed to decide, which is that the governess’s behavior causes a dangerous disturbance: she seriously damages one child and is responsible for the death of the other. I would not permit this governess to care for a young person for whom I was responsible. Now my view of the governess as ardently devoted to saving her charges is in accord with my initial interpretation of the function of her behavior and is thus reinforced by the primacy effect, whereas my negative judgment of the effects of her actions is supported—to the degree that any judgment of a narrative characterized by structural ambiguity can be supported—by the fabula(s) I have constructed when I reach the end of the novella.

Similarly, when I find in an article on Sarrasine the question of why the narrator would go home and write up this particular adventure,23 I realize that this excellent question is not one that I have ever thought to ask. As we have seen in the section above on Sarrasine, the object of Mme de Rochefide’s function—a desire (for information about the painting) is clearly stated in the representation well before readers are given sufficient information to deduce the narrator’s function—a desire (for Mme de Rochefide). Thus the representation guides readers to be more aware of and more interested in the fulfillment of her desire than his. For this reason, I suggest, I read the narrator’s story of Sarrasine as a function-H fulfillment of her desire (in addition to reading it as a wonderfully told story). Then, when I read the concluding pages, my attention is taken by Mme de Rochefide’s (in my reading) very ungracious response to the narrator’s attempt to please her: her self-pity, her too slight tolerance for intellectual discomfort, her abrupt dismissal of the narrator.

But I had not thought about why the narrator would choose to tell a story in which he fails to win the woman he desires, and fails moreover because the story he tells her does not please her. This gap in my thinking occurs even though I have constructed a fabula according to which the narrator tells Mme de Rochefide a story as his function-H attempt to win her. But although I have conceived and can describe two different causal sequences (one motivated by her desire, the other by his), the primacy effect, apparently, without my having been aware of it, has led me to respond to the narrator’s story according to the interpretation I initially gave it: as a function-H effort to satisfy Mme de Rochefide’s desire.
Since my attention is caught up by her response to the story, I fail to consider how the narrator feels in response to his function-I\textsubscript{neg} failure to please her.

Situations in which a first interpretation of an event as a function is in contradiction to the function of an event in a completed fabula are by no means limited to narratives in which the sequence of the representation diverges from the chronological sequence of fabula. As we have seen, all sequential representations reveal information piece by piece. Interpretations are made in relation to available information, and the information available to readers (listeners, viewers) during the process of reading (listening to, viewing) a narrative is necessarily less than the information they will have acquired when they reach the concluding moments.

The sequential representation in narratives mirrors the sequential experiencing of life. According to the definition made famous by Stendhal, a novel is a mirror that is carried along a path. In the nineteenth century, this definition drew the attention of critics and theorists who emphasized the word mirror, claiming that the Realist novel, in its details and in the kinds of characters and situations represented, served or should serve as a mirror of life. But let us instead shift the emphasis to the verb carried. I am arguing that narratives mirror life in that both mete out events sequentially; in response to both, we perceive events sequentially. This means that the shaping of interpretations of causality, which, as we have seen, is an effect in narratives of sequential representation, must be assumed to occur, and to the same degree, as an effect of sequential experiencing in life.

Life, moreover, in contrast to narratives, which conclude, offers continually varying configurations of events in relation to which we interpret, reinterpret, or—in response to the primacy effect—fail to reinterpret given events. Prejudice, for instance, can be analyzed in relation to the primacy effect: as a clinging to initial interpretations of the function of events in one or another of our entrenched stereotyping “master-narratives”—a prior interpretation that seems to block our ability to interpret real actions we have the opportunity to see played out by people whose race, gender, sexual preference, or religion is other than our own. What psychoanalysis hopes to accomplish, I suggest, can be seen as an effort to overcome the primacy effect: to change the function of a previously interpreted event or events by encouraging a reinterpretation in relation to the expanded configuration available to an adult patient and analyst.
Like the color of the pigments in Albers’s paintings, the function of events in narratives and in life is contextual. As Albers demonstrates, the color that we see when we look at a given pigment depends on the pigment adjacent to it. Similarly, the function we assign an event depends on the configuration of other events in which we perceive it. Whether a first interpretation of the color of a pigment affects subsequent interpretations, for instance, when one sees a familiar painting against a changed background or in a different light, I will not claim to be able to determine. But in response both to narratives and to life, I have argued in this chapter, the primacy effect sometimes leads us to interpret the function of events once—in response to the configuration in which they are presented initially in a narrative or are presented initially in our lives by our family, cultural circumstances, or education—and then to fail to reinterpret in relation to an expanded configuration.

The degree to which sequential perception shapes interpretations of causality in response to both narratives and life—and, arguably, even guides us through the primacy effect to retain illogical first interpretations—leads me to turn now to examples from what I think of as the narrative borderlands. Thus far in this book the examples I have chosen for analysis are narratives. I consider them narratives in that, in Roland Barthes’s terms, they are, like Sarrasine, “incompletely plural” or “moderately plural (i.e., merely polysemous)” (S/Z, 6), and, in my terms, because they conform to my definition: they are sequential representations of sequential events. In chapters 7 and 8, to attempt to gauge how extensive the effects of narratives on interpretations of causality are—where these effects begin and end—I consider separately, to the extent possible, the effects of sequential events and of sequential representation. In other words, in chapter 8, I investigate ways that information can be represented sequentially without determining readers’ interpretations of causality, and, in chapter 7, I look at how much—or rather, how little—information about sequential events we require to shape our interpretation of the function of an event.

To do this, in chapter 7 I look at representations of an isolated moment: both the lyric poem and the discrete image. The freedom to construct fabulas—and even to interpret the function—that a moment cut from the temporal continuum often offers demonstrates, by the contrast it presents to narratives, how significantly a narrative shapes interpretations by placing a given moment in one, and only one, sequence. Nonetheless, we will see both how readily language (the medium both of the lyric and of captions to
visual representations) specifies a prior or subsequent event or situation and that that is often enough to determine the function.

_The Turn of the Screw_, as we have seen, is ambiguous; in Rimmon-Kenan’s terms readers can construct in response to it two fabulas. Yet in my terms James’s novella is a narrative. Whether we regard the governess’s confrontation with ghosts as real or imagined, we can arrange in chronological sequence all the represented events including her (perhaps imagined) confrontations with ghosts. In chapter 8 I look at so-called novels that are quasi-narratives, or semblances of narratives: sequential representations in response to which attentive readers cannot construct a chronological sequence—a fabula—either because alternative sequences are equally likely or because it is impossible to distinguish which events occur in the characters’ world and which in other worlds (for instance, the world of a novel that a character is reading, of a painting someone narrativizes, of a character’s dreams), or to decide which elements of the narration are accurate representations of the characters’ world and which are hypotheses, lies, or other counterfactual accounts.27