Narrative Causalities

Kafalenos, Emma

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CHAPTER 7

NARRATIVE
BORDERLANDS I:
The Lyric, the Image, and the Isolated Moment as Temporal Hinge

A function, in the vocabulary of this book, represents an event that changes a prevailing situation—an event that has consequences. Accordingly, to interpret the function of an event, one must either know something about its consequences or causes or rely, at least tentatively, on less factual data as a basis on which to speculate about the event’s consequences or causes. While a narrative, by definition, represents a sequence of events or a situation and an event that changes it, both the lyric poem and the discrete image represent an isolated moment: a snapshot, whether of a moment in a process or in a stasis. For this reason, the lyric and the image offer a site to explore how perceivers interpret the function of an event that attracts our attention when information about prior or subsequent events or situations is not, or not yet, available. An understanding of the process we engage in in interpreting the function of an isolated moment is pertinent to understanding how we interpret events in our world as well as in narratives. As we saw in chapter 6, our initial interpretation of many of the events we learn about, both in narratives and in the world, are necessarily made before we have sufficient information to construct a complete fabula. As a result, our initial interpretations are often wrong, and moreover, as I argued in chapter 6, may linger even after we have constructed a fabula that contradicts them.

I have claimed throughout this book that we interpret anything that happens that attracts our attention (in our world), or that is brought to our attention (through a visual or verbal representation of our world or of a fictional world), by interpreting the function of the event and constructing a sequential fabula or fabulas that
include the event. As we have seen, interpreting functions and constructing fabulas are complementary activities; each influences the other. A fabula that we construct guides our interpretation of the function of the events and situations that that fabula includes. But also, our interpretation of the function of events and situations guides our construction of a fabula that includes those events and situations.

In this chapter I analyze more closely how we interpret the function of an event that we perceive as an isolated moment cut from a context of prior and subsequent events. Specifically, I consider what kinds of information we use and how much information we require to establish the function of an isolated moment. To do this, I look at the process of interpreting functions in modes of expression that I see as situated at the borderlands of narratives: the lyric, the image, and, in chapter 8, novels written since the middle of the twentieth century that include images or verbal accounts of images, and are not narratives because they offer readers not one fabula but multiple and contradictory sequences of events, leaving readers unable to determine in what sequence and at what ontological level the reported events occur. In response to all three of these genres on the borderlands of narrative—the lyric, the image, and novels that are not narratives—I suggest, readers and viewers attempt to interpret the function of represented events, just as they do in response to narratives, but often with more varied responses.

In the context of my discussion in chapter 1 of what a narrative is, I drew attention to the difference in emphasis in otherwise similar definitions by Meir Sternberg and Gerald Prince. Considered in relation to the lyric and the image, both theorists’ ideas draw attention to situations in which the lyric and the image communicate somewhat like narratives. Sternberg sees as narrative’s defining characteristic the interplay between its two temporal sequences, the sequence of the representation, which we perceive incrementally, and the chronological sequence, or fabula, that readers (listeners, viewers) construct in response to a representation (“How Narrativity Makes a Difference,” 117). We perceive both the lyric and the image incrementally: the lyric in the sequence in which the words mete out information, the image in a sequence less precisely controlled by the artist or photographer. But what both communicate is not a sequence but a moment. A lyric, by definition, represents someone’s thoughts or feelings at a given time. The type of image with which I am concerned in this
chapter is a discrete representation (in any medium—painting, photograph, statue, etc.) of one isolated moment. Since both the lyric and the image offer a representation of only one point in time, neither mode can actuate the full interplay between two temporal sequences that narratives offer.

But the choice of the moment that is represented in the lyric or in the image, like the choice of the sequence in which events are represented in a narrative, guides viewers’ and readers’ interpretations. In a narrative, as we have seen throughout this book, the position of a represented scene (as the initial scene, for instance, or a scene that is placed after its consequences have already been revealed) can focus attention on the represented event in relation to specific prior or subsequent events. Similarly, the image and the lyric focus our interpretive forces on the represented moment rather than some other moment. Moreover, as I show in this chapter, the lyric and the image sometimes focus our attention on the represented moment in relation to a prior or subsequent event. In situations in which we can construct even a fragmentary fabula in response to a lyric or an image, the position of the depicted event or situation in the set of events in which we perceive it guides our interpretation of the function of the depicted event or situation, just as it does in a narrative. To emphasize this power that the represented isolated moment sometimes possesses to focus interpretations of the depicted moment in relation to prior or subsequent moments, we can think of a lyric or an image that possesses this characteristic as a “compressed representation” or “compressed discourse.”

Prince, who defines a narrative as a representation of at least two events, or of a state and an event that alters it, sees as narrative’s most distinctive feature that it represents a situation that from a given time to a later time undergoes change (Dictionary of Narratology, 58–59). His definition draws attention to the effect in a narrative of even a single event: that it can change the situation that previously obtained. A lyric represents an isolated moment. But language, which is the medium of the lyric, has the power to present precise information about a prior event that has caused a represented situation or a future event that, were it to occur, would resolve the difficulties of a represented moment. Because of the power of language, lyrics can—and often do—represent an isolated moment in relation to an earlier or a subsequent moment. Determining the function of an event does not require establishing a complete fabula. Often, information about even a single prior or
subsequent event or situation is sufficient to establish the function of a represented moment. The lyric, as we shall see, often provides exactly this information.

A visual representation too can convey information about events that are prior or subsequent to the depicted moment—through a depiction of a moment in an easily recognized set of actions, one of the familiar action schemata, or through iconography, which guides viewers to identify the depiction as an illustration of a moment in a known story. In these instances viewers interpret the function of the represented scene according to its position in a sequence of events, just as readers (listeners, viewers) of narratives interpret a given scene in relation to the fabula they have constructed.

Iconography offers one example of what Roland Barthes calls indices or indexical material. As we noted in chapter 5, Barthes distinguishes between two main classes of information in narratives: information about happenings (he calls these functions, but his use of the term is different from mine) and indexical information, or indices. As examples of indexical material Barthes lists notations of atmosphere, psychological data about characters, and “informants” that identify characters or places, or that locate characters or places in time and space (“Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives,” 93–96). Given Barthes’s description of indexical material in narratives told in words, indices in the visual arts would seem to include, in addition to the depicted elements that iconography teaches us to read as indicating a specific scene in a known story, elements that guide interpreters but with less specificity: such things as a dark sky, sun reflecting on calm waters, rich brocades or jewels, cows grazing, an arid landscape, forceful brushstrokes, a palette restricted to muted colors.

In instances in which viewers do not recognize a depicted scene as a moment in a known story or in a familiar action sequence, I suggest that indexical elements guide viewers’ interpretations of the function of the depicted scene. I have argued in another context (“Implications of Narrative in Painting and Photography”) that as long as the depicted scene includes some indication of a human or anthropomorphic being, viewers will often use indexical material to construct enough of a fabula to assign a function at least tentatively to the depicted scene, or to interpret the function of the depicted scene sufficiently to construct at least a tentative fragmentary fabula. Whenever we encounter events and situ-
ations outside a context of other events, we necessarily rely on indexical information to interpret functions and to construct fabulas—whether the event or situation we are encountering is in our world, or is represented in an image or a lyric, or in a narrative as an initial scene or in a scene that is introduced without information about its relation to other events. But, as we shall see, indexical information is a less precise guide to determining the function of a represented or observed moment than information about prior or subsequent events or situations is.

Both types of information that we use to interpret functions and construct fabulas—indexical information and information about a prior or subsequent event or situation—can be communicated both by the lyric and by the image. But the differences in the way that the lyric and the image convey these types of information are instructive. Lyrics, because their medium is language, can and often do directly state the persona’s interpretation of indexical information and even of the function of the represented moment, and can and often do specify temporal relations between the represented moment and some other moment, which is often sufficient information to establish the function of the represented moment. The image, in contrast, is more often open to divergent interpretations of the function of the represented moment—particularly in circumstances in which viewers rely only on indexical information because information about prior or subsequent events or situations is unavailable.

In these circumstances, viewing an image is not unlike witnessing an event in our world. When we must rely on indexical information, when information about prior or subsequent events is unavailable, and when no one’s words guide our interpretations, the scene we are viewing, depicted or real, can often be interpreted as an expression of one of several different functions. This characteristic that the image shares with events we witness in our world—that the function of the viewed scene is often open to divergent interpretations—can explain at least in part, I suggest, a striking phenomenon in the fiction of the last half-century: the number of novels that include visual representations and anecdotes that are interpretations of visual representations. My theory is that by incorporating visual material and interpretations of visual material, novelists have found a way to make the experience of reading novels more like the experience of living in our world.

Because the lyric and the image both represent an isolated moment and both can offer indexical information and information
about temporal relations, in order to differentiate between them I examine in the next section specific lyric poems, to show how precisely the lyric sometimes shapes interpretations both of the function of the isolated moment and even of a fabula in which the isolated moment occurs. Then in the following section I return to a discussion of the image. In chapter 8 I consider what the presence of images and descriptions of images in novels can show us about how we read images and how we read events in our world, and how our reading of images and events is related to constructing, as well as reading, narratives.

A lyric can be understood as an expression of the persona’s interpretation of the represented moment in relation to whatever configuration of events and situations is of concern to her or him at that moment—in other words, as an expression of the persona’s interpretation of the function of the represented moment. The words the persona speaks—the words of the poem—convey the persona’s interpretation of the function of the represented moment and at the same time guide readers to interpret the function of the represented moment in accordance with the persona’s interpretation. In fact, the information that a lyric provides is often exactly the information that a reader needs in order to be able to interpret the function of a situation or an event.

At least theoretically, lyrics can express any of the interpretive sites that functions name. If the significance of the moment, from the perspective of the persona, does not depend on an earlier event that has brought about the represented moment, or a subsequent event that would alter the represented moment, then the persona—and readers—usually interpret the represented moment as an equilibrium. Lyrics that are philosophical meditations often fall into this category. Other lyrics too express an equilibrium through indexical material and provide no information about a prior, ongoing, or subsequent event. Often, however, the persona describes the represented moment as the result of something that has happened, or as potentially altering a future situation or being altered by a future event. In response to lyrics that refer even to just one event, readers may construct a fragmentary fabula that includes the event and a situation that it has altered or could alter.

A fabula that includes one event and its effect often provides enough information to establish the function of the represented
moment. When that is the case, readers’ interpretations of functions are often reinforced by indexical material, and indexical material may inspire readers to construct extended fabulas that include additional events. Even in these imagined fabulas (assuming readers who are attentive to the information the lyric provides), the represented moment will express the same function it does in the lyric, and the chronological sequence will be unidirectional: the event will precede the situation it alters.

The four poems that I have chosen as examples of some of the ways that lyrics express functions were written prior to the twentieth century (so that gaps in information will not be perceived as Modern or Postmodern inventions) and in English (to avoid the added layer of interpretation in a translation). They all represent an isolated moment. In each, I consider how the poem indicates the persona’s interpretation and guides readers’ interpretations of the function of the represented moment. Specifically, I look at how much (and how little) information about events and their consequences these poems provide, to guide us in constructing a fabula or possible fabulas that include the represented moment.

William Butler Yeats’s “The Lake Isle of Innisfree” reports one event—the persona’s decision to go to Innisfree—which readers generally interpret as function C. I cite the first and third of the poem’s three stanzas:

I shall arise and go now, and go to Innisfree,  
And a small cabin build there, of clay and wattles made:  
Nine bean-rows will I have there, a hive for the honeybee,  
And live alone in the bee-loud glade. . . .

I will arise and go now, for always night and day  
I hear lake water lapping with low sounds by the shore;  
While I stand on the roadway, or on the pavements grey,  
I hear it in the deep heart’s core. (Lines 1–4, 9–12; in Williams, 413–14)

At the moment that the poem represents, the persona of Yeats’s poem is declaring himself a C-actant. He is announcing his decision (function C) to go to Innisfree. The move from decision (function C, the moment represented in the poem) to intentional action (function C’) has not yet occurred; the persona tells us he is going to “arise and go” but has not yet done so.

In chapter 4 I suggested that function C brings comfort both as
a thematics and as a hermeneutic device. As a hermeneutic device, function C serves as a lodestar, first because it is easily recognized, even when removed from a context of prior or subsequent events, and second because it guides us to locate our position in the ongoing causal logic. Once we have recognized that a function-C decision is occurring, we can use the C-actant’s decision to help us determine, on the one hand, the function-A or -a event that has created a situation that the C-actant hopes to ameliorate, and, on the other hand, the function-I resolution the C-actant hopes to achieve. In a full-scale narrative, the persona’s repeatedly stated decision to go to Innisfree would guide readers to expect to be told both why he wants to “arise and go” from his present situation and whether he reaches Innisfree and is pleased to be there.

But just as, in narratives, the interplay between the two temporal sequences can guide readers’ (listeners’, viewers’) attention to some, rather than other, events, lyrics too can focus our interpretive forces, as I suggested in the introduction to this chapter, on the represented moment rather than some other moment and on the represented moment in relation to one, rather than another, prior or subsequent event or situation. In a poem that represents a function-C decision, for example, the persona’s attention can be directed to the decision-making process itself (function C), to the motivating function-A or -a disruption, to the action to be undertaken (functions C’, H), or to the results of that action (function I) or the resultant equilibrium (EQ). Readers, at least initially, are guided by the persona and direct their attention to the interpretive site or sites that the persona is contemplating. In Yeats’s poem the resultant equilibrium, life in Innisfree as the persona conceives it, is the subject of nearly every line. In this way readers are guided to think about the persona’s decision in relation to the outcome he expects: the life in Innisfree that he imagines living.

With our attention focused on life in Innisfree, we use indexical information, first, I suggest, to understand why the persona wants to go there. From the indexical information that the poem provides (and without reference to extratextual information) we can determine that the persona conceives the place as removed from society and offering pleasures (the sounds of the water and the bees, but also potentially honey) as well as the necessities of life (shelter, water, a garden). Second, some readers will consider whether the persona will in fact go to Innisfree. As a thematics, function C provides indexical information. As I argue in chapter 4, function C comforts as a thematics by encouraging belief in the
efficacy of a C-actant’s motivated action. The repetition in the poem of the persona’s decision, coupled with his obvious satisfaction with the place to which he says he will go, will lead some readers to construct a fabula in which the persona reaches Innisfree and lives there peacefully.

Third, some readers may then recognize that the persona’s focus on going to Innisfree and living there distracts his attention, as well as ours, from his reasons for making the trip. Although the words of the poem tell us that the persona has decided to go somewhere, rather than to leave something, the poem includes indexical information (the grey pavements, for instance) that suggests that leaving may also be part of his motivation. In choosing to go to Innisfree where he will “live alone,” he may be escaping an urban environment—or so we may speculate. We may even consider that he may be leaving someone who has been important to him and with whom his relationship is, or has become, a source of pain.

Yeats’s poem reports the occurrence of only one event, the persona’s decision to “arise and go.” But when we interpret an event as the pivotal function-C decision, we are saying that we see it as a response to a function-A or -a event and as intended to restore an equilibrium. The persona describes what he envisions as a restored equilibrium, but not what the disruption is that motivates his decision. As we saw in chapter 5, some narratives never reveal a given event but do reveal its consequences. Since functions represent the consequences of an event, readers can interpret the function of unspecified events. An interpretation of an unspecified event is an empty function—a function that is empty because the event to fill it is unexpressed. In Yeats’s poem, the disruptive situation that motivates the persona’s function-C decision is an empty function. On the other hand, because we do not know whether the events occur that the persona’s decision motivates, we interpret those events as either positive or negative functions: positive functions to represent events that occur, negative functions to represent specified events that do not occur.

Most readers of the poem will construct a function analysis that looks like this:

\[
\begin{align*}
[A \text{ or } a] & \quad \text{motivating event or situation (an empty function, bracketed because it precedes chronologically the represented moment)} \\
C & \quad \text{persona decides to go to Innisfree} \\
C' \text{ or } C'_{\text{neg}} & \quad \text{persona does or does not set out}
\end{align*}
\]
When information about an event and the changes it can bring is available, as it is in Yeats’s poem, we rely on that information, I suggest, to interpret the function of the event and thus its position in a causal schema: a function analysis. But where information is lacking about events that express given functions in the schema we are constructing—for instance, in Yeats’s poem, the function-A or -a event that motivates the persona’s decision to leave—we use indexical material, as we saw above, to guide us in filling in the gaps to which a function analysis draws attention. Because indexical material by its very nature is somewhat amorphous, we must expect great variation from perceiver to perceiver in the events they select to fill in these gaps.

Readers who choose to construct a fabula that includes events in addition to the persona’s decision will select varied events or situations to express the motivating function-A situation, and will envision a concluding situation in which the persona is happily ensconced on Innisfree, or there but less happy than he expects to be, or unable to get there. Individual readers may construct several fabulas, even fabulas that contradict each other. In all the fabulas that (attentive) readers construct, however, the persona’s decision will express function C, and the chronological sequence will be unidirectional: the motivating function-A or -a event will be followed by the persona’s decision, which will be followed by his successful or unsuccessful journey to Innisfree.

Robert Browning’s “Home- Thoughts from Abroad” is similar in thematics to Yeats’s “The Lake Isle of Innisfree.” Both depict pastoral scenes that the persona longs to experience. But whereas the represented moment in Yeats’s poem shows the persona expressing a function-C decision to go to a pastoral situation, the persona in Browning’s poem is nostalgic for a pastoral situation previously experienced. I cite the opening and the concluding lines:

Oh, to be in England
Now that April’s there,
And whoever wakes in England
Sees, some morning, unaware,
That the lowest boughs and the brush-wood sheaf
Round the elm-tree bole are in tiny leaf . . .

And though the fields look rough with hoary dew,
All will be gay when noontide wakes anew
The buttercups, the little children’s dower,
—Far brighter than this gaudy melon-flower! (Lines 1–6, 17–20; in Williams, 257)

The persona’s desire to be elsewhere is a typical expression of a function-a situation. Where he is, is by no means dreadful; he is after all holding a flower. But his situation is not to his present taste; like the prince in “The Pea Test” who one day decides that he wants a bride (see chapter 2), the persona of Browning’s poem wants to be somewhere other than where he is. He wants to be “there,” in England in springtime. 7

Whereas Yeats’s persona, as we saw, is represented at the moment of announcing his decision to go to the place where he wants to be, but not yet putting that decision into action, Browning’s persona is represented as expressing his desire to be elsewhere but not (or not yet) deciding to go there. In Yeats’s poem, as we saw, the persona is located at function C, and his attention—and thus readers’ attention—is focused on the place he wants to go to (the potential function-I resolution). In Browning’s poem the persona is recognizing that there is a pleasure he lacks (function a) and focusing on a prior situation: springtime in England as he has previously experienced it. That England is his home is information provided by the title. Given this much information, most readers, I suggest, will construct a fabula that includes, in addition to the present and prior situations, an event that causes the change from the earlier situation to the present one. (Brackets indicate interpretations of events that precede chronologically the represented situation.)

[EQ] persona experiences spring in England
[A] persona departs from England
a persona is nostalgic for England

The familiarity with the gradual progress of spring in England that the persona exhibits is indexical information. It confirms what the title specifically states, that England is the persona’s home and
that he has lived there. The indexical material thus supports, but is not necessary to, the construction of the fragmentary fabula sketched above. In Browning’s poem as well as in Yeats’s poem, indexical material provides a source of interest. It helps readers understand why the personas want what they want, and, as a result, guides readers to identify aspects of the personas’ personalities. In this way indexical material can support readers’ speculations about why, for instance, Browning’s persona left England to travel to a place where the flowers seem to him gaudy, whether he is going to make a C-actant decision to return to England, or, as we saw, whether Yeats’s persona will reach Innisfree.

But a lyric, because the medium is language, can specify that an event has occurred, is occurring, or may occur. Even one event brings change; it causes consequences. Because functions represent events that change a prevailing situation, information in a lyric about a previous or potential change indicates the function of the represented moment. In Yeats’s poem, as we saw, the represented function-C event, because function C is pivotal, is sufficient to ground a unidirectional sequence. In lyrics like Browning’s, indications of change allow readers to interpret the function of the represented moment and, by doing so, to establish the position of the represented moment in a sequence that is both causal and unidirectional. Indexical material cannot alter the sequence. Browning’s persona was once in England and now is not in England; Yeats’s persona now wants to go to Innisfree and later will or will not do so.

We saw that readers of Yeats’s poem may construct a number of different fabulas, even contradictory fabulas, but that all those fabulas will include the persona’s decision and in all those fabulas the persona’s decision will express function C. Similarly, readers of Browning’s poem may choose to imagine extended fabulas, and all these fabulas will include the represented moment—the persona’s longing for England—and the represented moment will express the same function as it does in the poem: a motivating function—a situation. For instance, Browning’s persona longs for England and decides to return there; Browning’s persona longs for the landscape of his youth but never returns to England. As varied as the imagined events may be, readers who are attentive to the information provided in the poem will include the represented moment in the fabulas they construct, and place it in the same position in a causal sequence in which it appears in the poem. In other words, the represented moment will express the same function in the fabulas readers construct that it does in the poem. Just as information
about prior or subsequent events or situations guides interpretations of the function of a given event or situation, once the function of an event or situation is established, that interpretation guides speculation about prior or subsequent events. In this way, even a single represented situation or event, as long as information about change indicates its function, both suggests possible fabulas and restricts the variety of fabulas that readers can construct.

In Christina Rossetti’s “A Birthday,” as in Browning’s poem, information about a prior event establishes the function of the represented moment. But where Browning’s poem includes information about the prior situation in the title and the opening line, in Rossetti’s poem the event is revealed only at the end of the stanza, probably guiding many readers to rethink their initial interpretation of the function of the represented moment. I cite the first of two stanzas that both conclude “my love is come to me”:

My heart is like a singing bird  
Whose nest is in a watered shoot:  
My heart is like an apple-tree  
Whose boughs are bent with thickset fruit;  
My heart is like a rainbow shell  
That paddles on a halcyon sea;  
My heart is gladder than all these  
Because my love is come to me. (lines 1–8; in Williams, 317)

As I read Rossetti’s poem, the joy of the opening lines is indexical information that suggests that the represented moment is an equilibrium. But the one event that is revealed at the end of the stanza—the beloved’s return—guides readers to interpret the represented moment as the successful resolution of a function-a situation. In other words, whereas for the first seven lines we interpret the situation as an ongoing, more-or-less permanent equilibrium with neither beginning nor end, the eighth line informs us that the represented moment is instead an achieved equilibrium: an equilibrium that is the effect of a prior event (the beloved’s return) and finite in duration (it began when the beloved returned). For most readers, information about the beloved’s return gives meaning to the persona’s happiness. In my terms, information about the one event is sufficient to allow readers to envision the represented moment in a causal chain and construct a fabula. (Brackets indicate interpretations of the initial situation and the subsequent events that precede the represented moment.)
In Rossetti’s poem as in both Yeats’s and Browning’s poems, the information that an event has occurred determines not only the function of the represented moment but its position in a unidirectional fabula. Readers who speculate about why the beloved left, how long the beloved had been away, whether the persona knew when, or that, the beloved would return, and so on, may choose to construct fabulas to guide their speculations. Readers may also include in the fabulas they imagine subsequent events in the life of the persona after her beloved returns: their happiness or unhappiness together, conflicts that may arise, and so on. As varied as the fabulas that readers imagine may be, all will include the persona’s happiness as subsequent to and a consequence of the beloved’s return.

By temporarily withholding information about the beloved’s return, Rossetti utilizes the power of language to present a represented scene either as an isolated moment or in relation to another temporal period. In this case the poem guides us to interpret the represented moment initially as the generalized pleasure of an ongoing equilibrium, without foreseeable beginning or end. Then in response to the last line of the stanza, we understand, with a delight that is perhaps not unlike that of the persona, that the moment of happiness that the poem represents is an achieved rather than a less believable, apparently unchanging equilibrium.

In contrast, “She Walks in Beauty,” by George Gordon, Lord Byron, does express an apparently enduring equilibrium throughout. I cite the first and last of the poem’s three stanzas:

She walks in Beauty, like the night
Of cloudless climes and starry skies;
And all that’s best of dark and bright
Meet in her aspect and her eyes:
Thus mellowed to that tender light
Which heaven to gaudy day denies...
And on that cheek, and o’er that brow,
So soft, so calm, yet eloquent,
The smiles that win, the tints that glow,
But tell of days in goodness spent,
A mind at peace with all below,
A heart whose love is innocent! (lines 1–6, 13–18; in Williams, 125)

The poem depicts an ongoing but unvarying state; there are no storms, no extremes even of dark and light; nothing happens. Or rather there is no finite action, only the ongoing action that the persona interprets as “days in goodness spent.” Like the empty function with which fairy tales often end (“and they all lived happily ever after”), days spent “in goodness” offers an interpretation without specifying the activities that are being interpreted. Given this information, we can nonetheless imagine activities in which the woman the persona describes might happily engage, and other activities she will happily avoid. To do so we rely on the indexical information the poem provides.

But in the absence of information about even one singulative event, if we attempt to construct a fabula we must do so without the information about sequence that even just one event with consequences can provide. Even with the gaps in information in the poems by Yeats, Browning, and Rossetti that we may use our imagination to fill, the fabulas we construct are unidirectional. Yeats’s persona decides to go to Innisfree and then does or does not do so. Browning’s persona was previously in England and now is not in England. Rossetti’s persona was once without her beloved who now has returned.

But the woman Byron’s persona describes may be calm and at peace because the persona has come to see her and she is pleased (persona arrives; woman expresses pleasure). Or she may be calm and at peace because the persona is leaving and she looks forward to time spent alone or with someone else (persona leaves; woman expresses pleasure). Or she may be calm and at peace because soon she is to go to boarding school and she knows that the experience will enrich her life (woman is at home, then woman is at school). Or she may be calm and at peace because she has just returned from boarding school and is pleased to be at home (woman is at school, then woman is at home).

When no information about an event that changes a situation is available to guide our interpretations of the position of an event in
In his comparative study of visual art and literature, Gotthold Ephraim Lessing famously declares that, since a visual artwork “can use but a single moment of an action, [the visual artist] must therefore choose the most pregnant one, the one most suggestive of what has gone before and is to follow” (Laocoon, 92). As analyses throughout this book indicate, what has gone before or what is to follow is exactly the information one needs to interpret the function of an event or situation.

Lessing’s study takes its title from the ancient sculpture known as the Laocoon. The statue represents Laocoon, a priest in Troy during the Trojan War, struggling to save himself and his two sons against serpents that are wrapped around their bodies. Viewers familiar with Laocoon’s story, including Lessing, approach the statue knowing that for the three mortals no escape is possible. Virgil, who offers one of the surviving versions of the legend, explains that the “outcome [had] been fated by the gods” (Aeneid,
II, 75–76, p. 31). But viewers who approach the statue without knowing the legend will nonetheless probably be able to interpret the situation as Lessing does—with the exception perhaps of the outcome, although even the outcome is strongly implied by the representation. The Laocoon provides an example of a visually represented isolated moment that gives viewers the necessary information to be able to interpret the function of the represented moment and to construct a fabula.

Like Yeats’s poem, the Laocoon guides viewers to recognize the position of the represented event in a causal chain. In Yeats’s poem the words the persona speaks inform readers that he is making a function-C decision, and, in response, readers construct a causal chain in which first some situation prompts the persona’s decision and then his decision, if it leads to successful action, guides him to Innisfree. In the statue, the position of the men and the serpents informs readers that Laocoon is struggling to disentangle the serpents that have wrapped themselves around the two smaller human bodies and his body. In response, viewers interpret Laocoon’s behavior as motivated action undertaken in reaction to the serpents’ attack. Because of the degree to which serpents’ bodies and humans’ arms and legs are intertwined, virtually all viewers will interpret the action as fully under way (function H), long past an initial physical act (function C’) that indicates that a decision is being put into effect. (Brackets indicate interpretations of events that precede chronologically the represented moment.)

[A] serpents attack
[C] Laocoon decides to do what he can
[C’] Laocoon begins to try to disentangle the serpents
H Laocoon struggles with all his strength
I or I_{neg} Viewers responding solely to the statue will assume that, unless intervention occurs, Laocoon will soon succumb. Viewers familiar with the literary accounts know that, since the serpents have been sent by one of the gods, no intervention will occur.

As Lessing understood, a visual representation can provide sufficient information about a motivating situation or a hoped-for outcome to allow viewers to interpret the function of the represented moment and to construct a unidirectional fabula. In fact, the Laocoon would seem to give us more information than Yeats’s poem does about both the motivation and the outcome of the represented
event. For viewers of the statue for whom the legend is familiar, the
depiction of three human bodies, one larger than the other two, in
conjunction with the serpents, is sufficient to identify the humans as
Laocoön and his sons and thereby reveal the events prior and sub-
sequent to the represented moment. For viewers not familiar with
the legend, the depicted moment is an event in a recognizable action
schema. The presence of the smaller humans along with the fully
adult central figure guides understanding that the serpents have
attacked the people, rather than that the man has chosen to fight
snakes to demonstrate or test his prowess.

Viewers who construct a fabula through iconography and those
who do so by recognizing a familiar action schema all see a repre-
sentation of Laocoön at a moment when he is struggling with all
his force. A visual artwork that gives viewers information to con-
struct a fabula has the same power that a lyric has to focus read-
ers’ attention on one, rather than another, moment in the
sequence. Just as Yeats’s poem focuses readers’ attention on the
persona’s function-C decision-making, the statue focuses viewers’
attention on Laocoön’s function-H struggle. To gauge how great a
power this is, we can consider how different our response to
Yeats’s persona would be if he were shown to us on Innisfree car-
ing for his bean-rows, or to Laocoön if the statue depicted a pair
of serpents crawling toward fleeing humans, or showed the ser-
pents entwined on bodies no longer able to stand upright. The
visual artist, like the poet, expresses an attitude to a character, a
situation, or a set of events through the selection of the moment
to be represented as well as through indexical material.

The Laocoön guides viewers to construct a fabula that includes
several consecutive events. As Browning’s and Rossetti’s poems
show, however, information about just one event and its conse-
quences (or potential consequences if the event is in the process of
occurring or has not yet occurred) is enough to allow perceivers to
identify the function of the represented moment. Similarly, visual
artworks may represent an event that has changed a prior situa-
tion or that has the potential to bring change, or a situation that
has been changed by an event or that is about to be changed.
“Narrative” paintings, for instance, generally offer a recognizable
action schema that, perhaps in combination with indexical mate-
rial, provides enough information about an event and its (poten-
tial) consequences to enable viewers to interpret the function of
the represented moment. In these instances the fabula we con-
struct may be fragmentary but is nonetheless unidirectional. The
event precedes its consequences. In any extended fabula we choose to imagine in response to the artwork, the depicted event precedes its consequences.

Like Byron’s poem, however, visual representations sometimes provide no indication of events that are prior or subsequent to a represented situation, or of the causes or consequences (or potential consequences) of a represented event. Indexical material may provide information about the mood, as it does in Byron’s poem, or even the identity of a depicted place or personage. But without information about causes or consequences, even if we interpret the visual artwork as an equilibrium we cannot see it as an achieved equilibrium. Nor do we have reason to assume that any one event is more likely to disrupt it than any other event.

Mark Twain writes in *Life on the Mississippi*, in a passage that J. Hillis Miller cites, about his response to a painting that to his eyes depicts a scene that offers no indication of a prior or subsequent event. Miller cites the passage to show that, for Twain, words are more informative than images (Miller, *Illustration*, 61–62). I cite the passage as a demonstration of how a nineteenth-century novelist responded, at least in this one instance, to a visual representation. Twain is describing a painting he was taken to see during a visit to New Orleans:

a fine oil-painting representing Stonewall Jackson’s last interview with General Lee. Both men are on horseback. Jackson has just ridden up, and is accosting Lee. The picture is very valuable, on account of the portraits, which are authentic. But, like many another historical picture, it means nothing without its label. And one label will fit it as well as another—:

- First Interview between Lee and Jackson.
- Last Interview between Lee and Jackson.
- Jackson Introducing Himself to Lee.
- Jackson Accepting Lee’s Invitation to Dinner.
- Jackson Declining Lee’s Invitation to Dinner—with Thanks.
- Jackson Apologizing for a Heavy Defeat.
- Jackson Reporting a Great Victory.
- Jackson Asking Lee for a Match.

It tells *one* story, and a sufficient one; for it says quite plainly and satisfactorily, “Here are Lee and Jackson together.”
The artist would have made it tell that this is Lee and Jackson’s last interview if he could have done it. But he could n’t, for there was n’t any way to do it. A good legible label is usually worth, for information, a ton of significant attitude and expression in a historical picture. (Twain, Life, 448 [chapter 44])

From Twain’s comments we understand, first, that he values visual representation as a source of indexical information (the picture is valuable because the portraits are authentic), but not as a source of information about the position of the represented moment in a sequence; and, second, that “meaning” (“it means nothing without its label”), in his view, entails positioning an event in a sequence. The first two labels in the list Twain offers do position the represented event in a sequence.

These two labels, which propose that the painting depicts the first and the last interview between the two generals, take on added resonance when read as a pre-echo of Hayden White’s comment that the “death of the king may be [told by a historian as] a beginning, an ending, or simply a transitional event in three different stories” (Metahistory, 7). Twain already understands what White explains more theoretically: that the meaning of an event depends on the set of events in the configuration in which it is perceived and its position in that configuration. In my terms, as I proposed in chapter 6, these are exactly the factors that determine the function of (in White’s example) the death of the king or (in Twain’s example) the interview between the two generals. For both the novelist and the historian, the meaning of an event depends on its consequences and causes: its function.

White’s comments about a (generic, unidentified) king and Twain’s comments about Lee and Jackson both refer to historical personages. The events in the lives of historical personages (of anyone in our world, whether famous or not) occur in only one sequence and are not reversible. Although interpretations of the function of a historical event can change, because these interpretations depend on the configuration of prior and/or subsequent events in which the event is perceived, the sequence in which historical events take place is unidirectional. As a result, a depicted historical event is inherently less open to interpretation than a depicted event for which no information about its causes and consequences is available.

In fictional worlds, events can occur in whatever sequence a
Let us suppose that Twain is looking at a painting of two unidentified men on horseback, one of whom is asking the other for a match. According to one scenario, the men are traveling in opposite directions but stop to talk while they both smoke their pipes. Enjoying each other’s company, they decide to take their noon-time meal together at a nearby tavern. According to a second scenario, two men who have stopped at a tavern for a noon-time meal sit at the same table and fall into conversation. After the meal, when they have climbed back on their horses, one asks the other for a match. Enjoying each other’s company, they continue their conversation while they both smoke their pipes. Then they separate, riding off in opposite directions.

In one scenario, the first event chronologically is traveling on horseback, which is followed by pipe smoking, and then a meal. In the other scenario, the first event is a meal, which is followed by pipe smoking, and then traveling on horseback. In the first scenario, the men’s pleasure in their conversation while they are smoking causes them to share a meal. In the second scenario, their pleasure in their conversation during the meal they share causes them to continue to converse while smoking. Like Byron’s poem, a visual representation of two men on horseback, one of them speaking to the other, can be interpreted as a hinge. We can read it as an event in a reversible sequence. When a sequence is reversed, the causal relations among events shift accordingly. Since the function of an event is an interpretation of its consequences or causes, the function of events that in one case precede and in another case follow a hinge event or situation will vary according to which of the two sequences perceivers are interpreting. Many visual representations of an isolated moment, like Byron’s poem, give no indication of prior or subsequent events and can be read as hinge situations in a reversible sequence.

Twain, who is of course responding to a painting depicting historical figures, does not interpret the depicted scene as a hinge event in a reversible series. But the labels he lists position the event at moments in the trajectory of the two generals’ lives that differ in ways important to novelists: sequence (First Interview between Lee and Jackson, Last Interview between Lee and Jackson), consequence (Jackson Accepting Lee’s Invitation to Dinner, Jackson Declining Lee’s Invitation to Dinner), and cause (Jackson Apologizing for a Heavy Defeat, Jackson Reporting a Great Victory).

Twain’s labels are perhaps most remarkable when read as a doc-
ument of the novelist’s propensity for narrativizing—animating a fixed scene to create a narrative that includes the scene. I have argued throughout this book that whenever our attention is caught by something that happens, in our world or in a representation, we begin to interpret its function by considering its possible causes or consequences. If we are responding to a visually represented scene—and if we express our interpretations in words—we are engaging in ekphrasis.

Ekphrasis is the re-representation in words of a visual representation. Both a verbal description of a visual representation and a verbal account that narrativizes, or animates, a represented isolated moment are considered examples of ekphrasis. But in literature, as James A. W. Heffernan shows by analyzing examples of ekphrasis from Homer to John Ashbery, narrativizing a visual representation is a procedure that recurs at every period from Homer’s time to our own. In the famous early example of Achilles’ shield (Iliad, Book 18), Heffernan comments, not only does Homer tell the story of how the shield is made, rather than describing how it looks when completed, but he “animates [individual images on the shield, for example the cattle], turning the picture of a single moment into a narrative of successive actions: the cattle move out of the farmyard and make their way to a pasture (“Ekphrasis and Representation,” 301).

Twain’s labels narrativize the painting of Lee and Jackson on horseback. Through ekphrasis—that is, using words—Twain offers with each label a sequence of events that includes an isolated moment in which Jackson and Lee are together on horseback. What I find notable in Twain’s account, however, is the proliferation of stories in each of which the represented moment occurs. On the one hand, Twain is of course demonstrating the fertility of his novelist’s imagination. On the other hand, he is a nineteenth-century novelist who offers these plural and contradictory accounts of a depicted event in the context of a comparative analysis of verbal and visual representation, rather than in a novel. In the next chapter we will look at novels written after the middle of the twentieth century in which plural and contradictory stories—or at least fragments of fabulas—proliferate in response to visual artworks, whether the artwork is recounted through ekphrasis or visually depicted.