Introduction

There are neither causes nor effects. Linguistically we do not know how to rid ourselves of them. But that does not matter.

—FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE
(trans. Kaufmann & Hollingdale)

Tu causes, tu causes, c'est tout ce que tu sais faire.

—Queneau's "Laverdure"

Causality is fundamental to human thought and activity. Our every action implies a grasp of its practical application, and elements of its principles are inherent in all our decisions. From traffic lights to birth control devices, our precautions affirm our belief that causation is not simply a notion, but a reality. The affirmation is hardly new. The first human fire builders were obviously aware of a predictable relationship between their actions and the results thereof, and early hominids, chipping away to sharpen one stone with another, must have envisioned the potential utility for the hunt of the spearhead in the making. Why stop with human beings? Some great apes select and wield tools. And who is to say that the osprey, diving upon a shallow-swimming fish, has not chosen its prey and fixed the angle of its dive with a conscious eye to the effects of its decisions? Everything points to causality as a conatus, a virtually instinctual link between mind and matter. Yet it has eluded objective observation and description, and no philosopher to date has provided a completely workable analysis of it, nor even an entirely satisfactory definition.

Undefined, it remains interesting. The coexistence of reasonable yet differing views on the subject signifies the coexistence of reasonable yet differing worlds. And in fact a multiple cosmos awaits us in novels, each a
"universe" with its own harmony arising from the character of the codes which inform it. The concept and the code of causality evolved over the period here under study (approximately the 1870s to the 1970s), and with them—perhaps because of them—evolved the structure of fiction.

Yet define we must, for the sake of minimal clarity. *Causality* is the name of the relationship between causes and their effects. (*Causation* designates the same thing, but it also admits of more particular application: one may speak of the causation of a specific event, as the "act of causing" it or as the complex of its causes.) But what is a cause? A primary difficulty in defining is the multiplicity and diversity of relationships subsumed in this most general of terms. The relationships we perceive between the gravitational force and "falling," between the presence of certain bacteria and "disease," and between a house fire and the flight of the occupants belong to different orders of reality and thought, their very distinctness militating against the choice of a common designation. Still, a most unscientific instinct persists in telling us they indeed have something in common.

Present-day philosophers still find the term meaningful enough to pursue debates about what *cause* signifies. But contemporary formulations, and my own definition for the purposes of this study, are best deferred, in favor of a rapid survey of selected historical philosophical opinion, which forms the context of current approaches.

Not surprisingly, a common factor in post-Enlightenment theories of causality is the required presence of a human observer. David Hume launched the "modern" arguments in *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1739), a book whose suspiciously anthropocentric title suggests the turn etiological analysis was to take. The first part of one of his two-part definitions (book I, part III, section XIV) affirms that we may define a cause to be

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\text{. . . an object precedent and contiguous to another, and where all the objects resembling the former are plac'd in a like relation of priority and contiguity to those objects, that resemble the latter. . . .}^1
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From this, and from the reasoning from which it emerged, we may judge that, for Hume, a cause must be (a) temporally prior to its effect, (b) spatially contiguous, in some way or other, to its effect, and (c) part of a class of similar pairs of events, in which the prior ones resemble each other and the subsequent ones also resemble one another. This definition astutely avoids the assumption of any discernible connection between cause and effect; we simply note that actual event A, is followed by actual event B, in con-
tiguity, that a similar A₂ is followed by a similar B₂, and A₃ by B₃, until we begin to suspect that causation is at work. Then we may predict that, for any Aₙ, we will observe a following Bₙ in the vicinity. Thus, without denying the potential “reality” of causation, Hume has nonetheless situated it in the mind of an implied human observer, endowed with memory and the ability to learn from experience, capable of classifying events, of discerning which are similar enough, and similar in pertinent ways, for categorization as examples of causality. If a tree falls in the forest, in the absence of a human observer, are there any causes for it? One may suppose there certainly will have been, when a human being discovers its demise. “Upon the whole,” says Hume, “necessity is something, that exists in the mind, not in objects” (Treatise, p. 165).

In the second segment of the definition quoted above, Hume adds “imagination” to memory as a human faculty capable of discerning causes. If we avoid plunging headlong into rivers without knowing how to swim, he indicates, it is not because we necessarily have previous experience with drowning. General experience—with solids and liquids, and with breathing—allows us to form a mental image of the outcome. In no case, however, is causation for Hume objectively observable, for it is not an entity (situated perhaps between A and B, where one would have to explain how it connects to A on the one hand and to B on the other): it is a mental classification of events. As for the possibility that some “power” or “energy” or “efficacy” is transmitted from A to B, that too escapes objective observation; indeed the use of such terms as synonyms of “cause,” for Hume, is purely tautological.

Hume cautions that, in making causal judgments, one must take care to remove from consideration “all foreign and superfluous circumstances,” although he fails to explain how we are to distinguish them. Furthermore, his formulation fails to filter out “sibling” effects, sequential effects of a common cause; his argument would allow one to reason, for example, that day causes night. But his principles remain influential, and certain of them are particularly useful for the study of fiction: that causation exists in the mind of an observer, and that it involves memory or imagination and classificatory judgment. For if causation exists in stories, it exists in the mind of the reader. Readers are the observers and final arbiters of causal relationships among narrated events. Even when a narrative text tells us that one event caused another, we are aware of the subjective, judgmental nature of the affirmation and may compare our notions of plausible causa-
Kant never defined causality in the _Critique of Pure Reason_ (1781, 1787), where the subject is little more than a detour on his road to other destinations, but his comments about our perception of causation in time are a source of critically useful principles. He sought to reestablish an “objective” link between cause and effect, but, because of his inherent idealism, his notion of objectivity actually posits a limited subjectivity, one unable to see sunny skies when it is raining, but able to draw the curtains and refuse to see anything meteorological at all. He describes our knowledge of phenomena in terms of a mental image or representation (Vorstellung): again the human “observer.” He notes (first division, book II, chapter II, section 3, second analogy) that these impressions occur in temporal succession, and that the order of succession is frequently determined (bestimmt). If the observer, however, selects the order, it is not determined. When we look at a house from top to bottom, no necessity causes the roof to preexist the foundation, for we might as well have observed the house from bottom to top or from side to side. But if we watch a boat drift down a river, we see it first upstream then further down; these mental images, according to Kant, could not have been received in the opposite order, and the change is therefore determined. In this sense, all our mental images derived from the reading of fiction are determined. But the Kantian distinction between “subjective” and “objective” succession presupposes perception of the distinction between present-future and past: what our Vorstellung tells us did in fact happen “objectively” is the only thing that could have happened. At the moment of mental image A (boat upstream), the future is indeterminate (p. 215), but when B occurs (boat downstream), it is the only possible outcome of A. Each present refers us to a correlative past from which it must, according to the “rule” that establishes its place in the succession, have sprung.

Obviously, this Kantian principle defines the reader’s, as well as the observer’s, present. What has been read in a given novel appears determined, while what remains to read appears indeterminate, whence the suspense, surprise, and so on we perceive as part of the reading experience. Readers know, of course, in fact that the story is determined all the way through, in the pages as yet unturned, but, at the watershed between “apparently determined” and “apparently indeterminate,” the reader defines his or her separateness from the story and its narrator. When a nar-
rative voice recounts a tale of events which supposedly occurred at some earlier time, it may be assumed that it knows the outcome when it delivers the first sentence: for the voice of the text, then, everything is determined. This dialectic establishes in large measure the reader's relationship of separateness with respect to the narrative voice: causal principles, once posited, work to determine the levels on which narratives exist, as textual evidence will reveal later on. On the other hand, if a narrator stands in médias res as she or he speaks, as in diary or epistolary novels, the relationship with the reader is profoundly altered. The future for the narrator remains indeterminate, just as for us, yet the unscanned pages lie immutable before us: to another consciousness, on a level beyond the narrator and us, causality seems to have played out its determining role. And the words stretch on toward the end, syntactically "determined" by their predecessors, often connected by (names for) action: the transitivity of linguistic narrative flashes across our minds, from the fluidity of the possible to the solidity of the "real," in Kantian time.

Causality is thus a quasi-instinctual perceptual grid that our minds, in reading as in living, may impose upon events, or mental representations thereof, for the purpose of explaining or perhaps predicting them. Nietzsche, therefore, attacks its validity as an intellectual tool, and it is with Nietzsche that the deconstructionists begin to take an interest in the history of etiological theory. In the collection of fragments and notes published under the title *The Will to Power* (1883–88), the philosopher maintains that there are no such things as causes and effects, that these terms designate a falsely perceived relationship, anthropocentric in origin, whereby we attribute intentionality to nature, seeing things as agents and patients. Furthermore, he sees our own perceptions, including pleasure and pain, as terminal phenomena, disconnected, atomistic, and causes of nothing. In this general context (if there can be context in an assemblage of fragments), one note evokes a chronological inversion (chronologische Umdrehung), by which causes reach our consciousness after their effects, despite their presumed chronological precedence. Feeling a pain in my leg, I reach down and discover a pin in my chair (Jonathan Culler's example): the perception of the effect has caused me to seek and discover the cause. The deconstructive neatness of the example resides in the disconnecting of causal logic (before-after) for the purpose of reinstating it, reinvesting it with the power to operate in the reverse order (after-before). Having denied the existence of causality to begin with, Nietzsche seems less eager than Culler to revitalize it. He merely observes that some fragment of the "real"
world of which we are conscious “is born” after an effect has impressed itself upon us and is thus projected as its “cause.” He does suggest that casting about for causes is a memory-based habit, the construction of a fiction that is familiar to us: that of an interpretable and explainable world in which we may feel more secure. Could this habit—or a perceived need for it—be a reinstated cause, which has crept in despite Nietzsche’s efforts? He concludes: “to be able to read off a text as a text without interposing an interpretation is the last-developed form of inner experience—perhaps one that is hardly possible—” (here the note breaks off). Can it be that our linguistic habits, acquired in reading, tend to spread to the interpretation of “reality”?

The metaphor binding a sequence of sense impressions to the reading of a text cannot fail to interest us in other ways. Most obviously, we are seeking a heuristic device for the interpretation of texts—a bad habit, but a tempting one, a delicious forbidden fruit that it is “hardly possible” to refuse, a habit that causality may make it possible for us to indulge “under erasure.” Then too, “cause” is a word, an element of texts, subject to the limitations of language. A “cause” is “that which produces an effect” (one of those remarkable definitions which owe their richness to the fact that they explain nothing), and nothing can therefore be called, truly or falsely, a “cause” until it has produced what we perceive as an “effect.” While we may seek to predict what will be a cause (“If you drop that glass, it will break!”) or propose a counterfactual (“If you had dropped that glass, it would have broken”), on the semantic level causes are radically simultaneous with their effects. And vice versa: the “pain” in the Culler example was an event, but it did not become an “effect” until its cause was perceived, unless we admit to the instinctual habit of seeing all events as caused. In any case, the semantic simultaneity, and the chronologische Umdreitung, define the reason why a narrative event, like the shooting of Madame de Rénal, creating causes out of what had been simply (antecedent) events, leads readers to reevaluate and restructure the readerly “past.”

Finally, the word “cause,” while masquerading often as the name of a particular relationship, in reality designates, as we have observed, a class of supposedly similar relationships. In an oft-quoted little essay, On Truth and Falsehood in the Extramoral Sense (1873), Nietzsche uses language to subvert language, calling particular attention to the problematics of the general and particular in words. Language is, he says, a metaphor for our sense impressions, yet we make of it the repository of truth. In fact, although no two leaves are alike, we apply the word leaf to them all, conveniently forgetting
the individual differences. Language thus leads us to believe that there is a fundamental Urform of leaf, of which all leaves are but inept copies. And so the leaves, which gave rise to the leaf, seem to us to be caused by it ("das Blatt ist die Ursache der Blätter," p. 313). Cause could, of course, mutatis mutandis, be substituted for leaf in the example. Does the existence of the abstraction cause lead us to infer the myriad of specific causes we perceive about us? I will argue rather that the unwieldy abstraction itself fills a need. If the perception of causes serves, as Nietzsche suggests, to aid in satisfying our craving for an explainable and partly predictable world, the generality called "causality" provides the essential unifying factor: not only does the world appear explainable, but it provides explanations according to the same, universal law.

No claim will be made here that causal reasoning is valid (on the contrary, its hypothetical nature is what makes it interesting), nor that the "universal law" is true. Across the period we will be studying, roughly from Zola to Robbe-Grillet, suspicions about the "universal law" begin to pervade the consciousness not only of philosophers, but of writers and readers of fiction. All are left with a language whose every transitive verb implies causation, in a world in which causation has become suspect. How changing narrative structures managed to weaken and ultimately eliminate the causal stranglehold of language over fiction will be explored in part II. Some of the reasons for the means chosen spring, in France, from the poetic and philosophical revolt of the late nineteenth century, which deserves brief mention here.

An important inhibitor to general public acceptance of Nietzschean attacks on causality was the perception that science—notably the experimental sciences, but also Darwinian biology—was moving from triumph to triumph with causality as its foundation. Denial of the causal relationship as a false mental construct seemed to fly in the face of sound empirical data. But the revolt occurred when the scientific principle was expanded to explain and predict the human personality. Hippolyte Taine was both the flagstaff and the lightning rod of the expansion, writing, for example:

Que les faits soient physiques ou moraux, il n'importe, ils ont toujours des causes; il y en a pour l'ambition, pour le courage, pour la vérisité, comme pour la digestion, pour le mouvement musculaire, pour la chaleur animale. Le vice et la vertu sont des produits comme le vitriol et le sucre, et toute donnée complexe naît de la rencontre d'autres données plus simples dont elle dépend.8
(No matter whether the facts are physical or mental, they always have causes; there are causes for ambition, for courage, for veracity, just as there are for digestion, muscular movement, and animal warmth. Vice and virtue are products, like vitriol and sugar, and every complex datum arises from the conjunction of simpler data on which it depends.)

The fact that Zola chose the “vitriol and sugar” part of the famous quotation as an epigraph for the second edition of *Thérèse Raquin* is indicative of the infusion of belief in the “universal law” in the general culture of the period. Taine’s view that we are all the result of *la race, le milieu, and le moment*, both physically and psychologically products of environment and heredity, was to be long influential and exemplifies the dominance of causal structures in the popular mentality.

Rimbaud, of course, objected, in his “lettre du Voyant” (a letter to Paul Demeny dated May 15, 1871), in which he refers to Taine, that poets could avoid being part of the causal chain by disrupting the functioning of their senses, through “all the forms of love, of suffering, of madness,” as well as “poisons”—doubtless alcohol and other narcotics. Environmental influences upon the mind must first pass through the senses; by untracking the sensory filter, Rimbaud declares, we attain that “monstrous” soul, in which the effects of external stimuli are no longer predictable.

The philosopher Henri Bergson, whose approach, though frustratingly intuitive, is often on the mark (it was he who, long before E. O. Wilson and the sociobiologists, described organisms as mechanisms invented by genes for the production of other genes), saw no need for such drastic measures. Each individual from birth is already differentiated in heredity and/or environment from all others, with a unique sensory apparatus; no external cause can produce the same effect in two individuals: we are unpredictable (pp. 131, 499). Bergson’s primary arguments against the mechanistic application of causal laws to the human mind may be summarized as follows: (1) The physical laws applicable to matter cannot be extended to the human consciousness, which is qualitatively different. (2) The human psyche is alive, dynamic, and spontaneous, not merely a measurable accretion of experience. (3) Language, which is essential to causal analysis, is inadequate to the description of states of consciousness, because words, at once too specific (my “jealousy” cannot be clearly dissociated from all the other emotions I feel concurrently) and too general (“my”
jealousy is not the same as "yours"), are unsuited to the task. (4) Causal diagrams are inadequate to the description of human consciousness, because they suppose that human time is comparable to space; space, in a diagram, preexists in its entirety, while time is constantly becoming. (5) While it is possible to guess an individual's behavior in specific circumstances, it is impossible to predict it with certainty, for one cannot "know" another's psychic state: of the two ways to seek to know it (intellectually, by words or diagrams—see 3 and 4 above—and experientially, by having lived the other's life), neither is feasible. (6) Causal logic is flawed, even in predictions about inert matter, insofar as it tends toward a relationship of identity between past and present (Essai sur les données immédiates de la conscience, in Oeuvres; see especially pp. 93–145).

Bergson's distinction between mechanistic, quantifiable causality, valid for the physics of the period (which I will term "rectilinear"), and psychological causation, unquantifiable, undefinable, and unpredictable (which I will try to show as surfacing in "nonrectilinear" forms) was to evolve. For Bergson, it was obviously joyous liberation; later, the essential difference between mind and matter was to be perceived as alienating the human consciousness from knowledge of material reality. Imprisoned at first in the machinery of material causality, humankind is more inclined of late to see itself as prisoner in the lonely recesses of entirely separate consciousnesses.

Science, meanwhile, went its own way. By 1913, Bertrand Russell was already pointing out that, insofar as causality is the "thought or perception" of an observer and not a property of matter, it is of no scientific value. Indeed, if experiments are replicable, that demonstrates the relative uniformity of nature, an inductive probability, rather than the existence of a "law" of cause and effect. He asserted that scientific observations and experiments made no use of causal concepts, that the relationships among phenomena are scientifically described in terms of differential equations, each reduced to its simplest terms, but without omitting any significant variable. Thus, while a particular occurrence may be a "function" of another variable or set of variables, it is improper to hold that such variables are its "cause." And so Russell called for the "extrusion" of the word cause from philosophical vocabulary.

The noun function, together with some of its mathematical underpinnings, made its way into critical vocabulary with the Russian formalists, as the name of a "variable" narrative unit. With some redefinition, it has
become a mainstay of structuralist terminology, where it designates those units that exist in consecutive and logical correlation, a close approximation of what I will be calling "causality." Like Russell, however, the structuralists have as their valuable and fruitful aim the discovery and description of the properties of matter (i.e., of the properties of narrative, \textit{sub specie realitatis}), and not the thought or perception of an observer. Thus Barthes and other structuralists, eschewing the term "causality" for excellent Nietzschean and Russellian reasons, must seek on theoretical principle to factor the reader out of their calculations. Yet, for practical purposes, there he or she remains: a unit is not an \textit{énoncé} ("utterance") itself, but "what it means";\textsuperscript{13} the connecting logic presupposes an observing and reasoning consciousness. An example from Barthes reveals the logic at work:

\begin{quote}
\dots si, dans \textit{Un coeur simple}, Flaubert nous apprend à un certain moment, apparemment sans y insister, que les filles du sous-préfet de Pont-L'Evêque possédaient un perroquet, c'est parce que ce perroquet va avoir ensuite une grande importance dans la vie de Félicité: l'énoncé de ce détail (quelle qu'en soit la forme linguistique) constitue donc une fonction, ou unité narrative. (P. 176)
\end{quote}

(. . . if, in \textit{Un coeur simple}, Flaubert informs us at a given moment, apparently without stressing the point, that the daughters of the assistant administrator of Pont-L'Evêque owned a parrot, it is because that parrot is going to be, later on, of great importance in Félicité's life: the expression of this detail [whatever linguistic form it may take] thus constitutes a function, or narrative unit.)

The revelatory "it is because" involves a readerly hypothesis about Flaubert, which, although it doubtless comes close to certainty once the story is read, remains dubious on first reading for some time after the initial reference to the parrot.

I shall examine a similar case in greater detail later, with respect to Zola's \textit{La Bête humaine} and the levels of narrative. I shall work consistently from concepts that incorporate an observing mentality, since one perforce is present, to see whether it might not be possible, by observing the ways in which narratives allow for readers' logic, to succeed after all in making a relatively objective statement or two about the properties of narrative per se.

Russell also criticizes the notion of "events," on which causal theories are based, as elusive. An \textit{event} is traditionally defined as a change, but
Russell sees change as process, with no finite boundaries. Where does the cause end and the effect begin? If we set arbitrary boundaries, declaring that the cause begins here and ends there, it will have no identifying unity, since between here and there some progression, some change, will already have taken place. Besides, for Russell as for Nietzsche, if events can somehow be arbitrarily defined, no two will be alike, so that subsumption under the headings of *cause* and *effect* contains an inherent error. In response to Russell’s first objection, this study will seek to remove change arbitrarily from those fictional events called *effects*, by simply selecting a point in the narrative and terming the state of affairs at that point an *effect*. Anything prior to that point in narrative time which fulfills the other criteria of causation may be called here a *cause*. As for the nature of those criteria and for Russell’s second objection, I will call on two more recent philosophers for help.

Causal vocabulary has continued to serve, of course, despite Nietzsche and Russell, in both philosophical and everyday discourse, and attempts continue to be made to define its practical meaning. When an expert testifies that a short circuit caused a fire in a house, what does she or he mean? Certainly not that, in the absence of the short circuit, the house could not burn, nor that every short circuit in it would lead to conflagration. J. L. Mackie (1965) devised an analysis of causation that purported to explain the use of causal vocabulary in such specific instances. A cause, he says, is an insufficient but necessary component of a condition which is itself unnecessary but sufficient for the production of the effect. In the example, the short circuit was not of itself sufficient to cause the fire: it had to occur in the presence of combustible material and in the absence of such precautions as a working system of fuses or an adequate sprinkler system. But it was a necessary part of the complex condition, since the other elements—nearby combustibles, inadequate fuses or sprinklers—could not of themselves have produced the blaze. The complex condition itself is unnecessary, since it need not have existed (if nothing else, the short circuit might not have occurred); when it did exist, however, it sufficed to produce the fire. Mackie terms this set of circumstances an “INUS condition,” from the initials of the key words: insufficient, necessary, unnecessary, sufficient. This system, which includes a mechanism for screening out other minimally sufficient causes that were present in a given instance but which did not, in fact, come into play, approaches a realistic definition of what most people mean when they say, “X caused Y.” Despite the generality of the term “cause,” it is used
with specific application (this house at this time), by a speaker whose identity and purpose for speaking are understood. This semantic approach includes quite properly the observer-reporter and evokes a kind of causal reporting more frequent in daily life and in fiction than the more general theories.

G. E. M. Anscombe, in a Cambridge lecture that does not mention Nietzsche, draws a concept of causality even more directly from language. “Causality,” she says, “consists in the derivativeness of an effect from its causes.” Thus she seeks to separate causation from the notion of “laws,” of necessity, and of universality. Even in human reproduction (“everyone will grant that physical parenthood is a causal relation”), she points to the derivation of the effect, by cellular fission, from the cause, rather than to a general principle based on repeated observation. For her, to say that B comes from A does not imply that every B-like thing comes from an A-like thing or set of circumstances, nor that, given B, there had to be an A for it to come from. In this way, she detaches causality from the Humean logic of comparison and brings it to rest among Nietzsche’s leaves. Without denying that general laws can sometimes be formulated, she nonetheless discovers the apprehension of causation in the isolated example; individual causes would exist, one supposes, whether consistent principles could be uncovered or not. As for Hume’s contention that causing itself is not objectively observable, she suggests that he has merely misdefined “observable.” We are unable to perceive the “efficacy” of causation? “Nothing easier: is cutting, is drinking, is purring not ‘efficacy’?” Causality as derivativeness is plainly discoverable by the senses. The senses may be mistaken, “false” causes assigned, but the (apparent) derivativeness of effect from cause remains obvious to the observer.

Anscombe hints that words are at the origin of the observer’s capacity to observe:

The truthful—though unhelpful—answer to the question: How did we come by our primary knowledge of causality? is that in learning to speak we learned the linguistic representation and application of a host of causal concepts. Very many of them were represented by transitive and other verbs of action used in reporting what is observed. Others—a good example is “infect”—form, not observation statements, but rather expressions of causal hypotheses.
Her assertion that our concepts of causality have their source in language returns us, perhaps closer than she would like, to Humean comparison with previous experience. For many of us derive most of our previous experience from words, some of it indeed from novels. The appearance of derivativeness comes aided by comparison. But her reference to causal hypotheses is of capital importance. I would insist further, if the senses are capable of assigning "false" causes, that all causal statements are hypotheses, for their truth value is relative.

Whether language is the origin of our causal perceptions or whether our causal perceptions, stemming from more primitive needs, are at the origin of language (I prefer this latter stance), there can be no doubt that our natural codes are infused with causality, notably in those "transitive and other verbs of action" which express cause. Such verbs are in part the language (if they did not exist, a natural language would not be a "language" as we understand it to be), and they require observer/reporters (and narrators in fiction) to express causation whether they "perceive" it or not. "She drank my wine" declares the derivativeness of the result: "She caused my wine to be drunk (with herself as agent)." Causality inheres in language. The element of naïveté in such philosophical analyses as we have pursued from Hume onward lies in the expectation that causal statements are intended to be "true." With causality locked into our discourse, however, in nonphilosophical, nonscientific parlance, observers, speakers, listeners, writers, and readers all perform their functions with far greater flexibility, remaining, more or less, on the near side of certainty, in the realm of the hypothetical.

While laying the groundwork for what is to come, the foregoing dialectic has brought us to the point at which we can attempt a definition of the central concepts. My approach to the notion of "events" has already been expressed. As for causality in fiction, for the purposes of this study, it is a readerly hypothesis about a relationship of derivativeness between two observed phenomena. Some might have expected or preferred that I close the definition with a narrower phrase, such as "between two narrated events." But readers may obviously perceive causation on other levels than that of the "events" of a story, and I hope exploration of these levels too will be useful in constructing a general theory.

More specialized terms, such as necessary, sufficient, and probable cause, will generally be avoided here. Of the three, only necessary cause has an
agreed-upon definition in the literature, and that is so restrictive as to make such causes rare indeed. A condition is those circumstances or sets of circumstances that allow a state of affairs to come into existence. (The causes for making a statement in French may be many and varied, but ability to speak French will always be a condition of the utterance.) I will include conditions among causes, making the distinction explicit whenever logic requires it.

Causal reasoning serves two practical purposes: predicting and explaining. Ability to foresee the consequences of a given course of action helps us calculate and select our behavior and achieve desired ends or avoid pitfalls. Explanations—causes perceived, according to the Nietzschean reversal, after the effect—tend to make us feel secure in a familiar, ordered world, as Nietzsche himself points out, and they may fill our memory with data (Hume) on which to found future predictions. If we can find no explanation for an event, we will doubtless prefer to presume nonetheless that one exists, somewhere beyond our powers of perception or intellection, rather than to envisage the possibility of a causeless event, whose very existence would threaten not only our power to predict but human foresight in general. Even "miraculous" remissions of incurable diseases may be explained by scientists as resulting from such statistically vague "events" as the patient's "positive attitude" or "will to live."

Philosophers and physicists make careful distinctions between causal "laws" and statistical "probabilities." In everyday speech, the distinction is, quite rightly, more blurred. Hume himself provides a general treatment of probability (Treatise, pp. 124–55), and sees causality only as the endpoint of a "gradation" of probability. In our more relativistic world, that endpoint itself remains hypothetical.

Though scientifically difficult to verify, the whole notion of human motivation, of which we all make constant use, is essentially causal in nature. With the exceptions of psychomotor reflexes and of the autonomous nervous system, however, there are no necessary causes in human behavior. Still, we make frequent predictions on the basis of what we deem to be probable causes (i.e., on the basis of hypotheses) in our decisions about how to treat others, guessing how large a salary offer will be required to entice someone to come and work for us, deciding whether jealousy games will attract our lovers to return or alienate them forever, or simply judging how another will react to a suggestion. Most of us are wrong often enough to make us wary, but without a causal assumption, based on learning and
other past experience, we would have no grounds whatever for choosing one line of conduct over another, all forms of behavior appearing to offer an equal chance of success in attainment of our goals. Ability to predict accurately from a causal assessment of probabilities may be a primary determinant in our success in business, courtship, childrearing, and other activities requiring us to base our actions on a prediction of their “effect” on others. It is also possible to assume that success is a matter of luck, randomly distributed. But that assumption would endow us with the frightening total freedom of the mad.

Why the causal concept is a useful device for textual analysis in fiction should now be apparent: it is a prime juncture between stories and people, between novels and readers, across most of the period here under discussion. Inherent in language, it inheres also in naïve human reactions to the environment, a comforting habit that can operate in reading as in other phases of life. Furthermore, causation, when it is imagined, appears as a temporal bond, connecting events in time; it also functions as an element of metonymy in certain fictional texts, thus marking a junction between the perceived linearity of human time and that of fiction, as well as between the grammar of stories and of language. Finally, the truth value of the causal concept has been placed in increasing doubt, as we have seen, across the period of this study. The response of textual strategies to this loss of faith evokes clearly the curious trail of the evolution of novel structure in France; application of the perceptual grid of causality uncovers that trail.

As a reader living at the end of the period in question, I see causation as a subjective pattern, as a model of some practical utility in the specific situations of everyday life, but meaningless as a scientific or philosophical generality. Earlier readers did not share this outlook, however, and the texts of their times reflect cultural codes that differ from ours. By revealing which texts accommodate it well or poorly, and why, the causal model helps describe the evolution of novel form between the 1870s and the 1970s. Causal statements are not, as I have pointed out, intended to be “true”; they are hypotheses. This study functions therefore as a hypothesis, with causation accepted “under erasure,” until contemporary texts find ways at last, despite the ingrained strictures of language, to do it in.

In part I, I demonstrate how causality, as readerly hypothesis, functions on the standard levels of narrative. Chapters one and five present the principles of analysis, in relation to certain previous studies, and the conclusions. The intervening chapters are illustrative analyses of relatively
“traditional” novels, whose texts allow causation to operate, with a few exceptions, in a straightforward and mechanistic way (the exceptions revealing the cracks already appearing in the causal edifice). The choice of such generally “rectilinear” examples simplifies the initial task. But it also provides for a diachronic comparison with the texts examined in part II. There, in a series of essays on more “modern” novels, I undertake to show through application of the same heuristic device how texts reveal increasing skepticism about causality, through new ways of facilitating, and especially of inhibiting, readers' causal inferences. Chapter ten includes a theoretical component on the role of causality in those Vorstellungen I am calling “mental representations,” as they occur in characters and readers, in preparation for the general conclusion on the interaction of reader and text in the creative act.

In the search for “typical” causal strategies, my corpus has become highly—perhaps excessively—“canonical.” It therefore reflects the heedless male-dominance bias of the period it treats and leaves unanalyzed the rich French-language literatures of Africa and the Antilles (where the dual narratee—colonizer/colonized—provides a differing reaction to the causal grid), and the important francophone texts of Canada. It also neglects the anticausal strategies of Céline, Bernanos, Duras, Queneau, and numerous others equally worthy of study. What it does provide is a minimal basis for comparison: with respect to it, future causal analyses can describe, explain, and extol fruitful etiological differences. This is, then, an introduction, in need of completion, if completeness is possible in a typological problem of this magnitude.

It is inevitable, as we approach the study of fictional causality, that someone will ask the metacausal question: why? Three of my purposes are straightforward; the fourth is more personal and diffuse.

First, these pages are intended to describe and illustrate a general theory of the operation (or nonoperation) of cause and effect in fiction. Second, through analysis of novels for the most part well established in the French canon, I seek to present a typology of standard causal structures, for future comparison with other literatures, and with other French texts. Little that is new can be said here about the “meaning” of the works in my oft-treated corpus, but the role causality plays in these texts as the armature of the plot, and sometimes too as theme, makes of them a worthy and interesting standard of comparison. Third, a description of the evolution of causal structures in French fiction from the mid-1870s to the mid-1970s
provides some measure of the relationship between changing ideas, notably concerning the truth value of causal assertions, and the changing techniques for organizing stories.

My fourth incentive has to do with lines and spaces. So much has been accomplished through the study of literature as space, as area, that an introductory approach to an element of the linear nature of stories seemed enticing. Peter Brooks, Gerald Prince, and others have broken important ground. But the paradigmatic axis, projecting the syntagmatic line onto a plane, was providing the primary basis for our understanding of prose fiction. Synecdochic comparisons of narrative units to the whole text in which they occur, as well as comparisons of narrative texts to a common matrix or model, were providing not only the finest insights into fiction as genre and into individual novels, but also creating our concept of what “understanding” is. A series as such seems to offer little to be understood: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16. Beyond the potential discovery of a “law” making it possible to predict the next term, and aside from an apparent openness on both ends, what does a linear series hold out for discovery? A spatial figure, however, with its inherent comparisons, provides instant meaning:

\[
\begin{array}{cccc}
1 & 2 & 3 & 4 \\
5 & 6 & 7 & 8 \\
9 & 10 & 11 & 12 \\
13 & 14 & 15 & 16
\end{array}
\]

Now there is a “whole,” to serve as the sum of its “parts,” and the understanding of internal comparabilities (e.g., 1:4:2:8:3:12:4:16) leads to a meaningful abstraction: 16 = 4². As Lucien Dällenbach’s *Le Récit spéculaire* illustrates, perception of specularity is in itself understanding.

Metaphor appears analyzable; metonymy does not. If nothing else, sympathy for the underdog moves me to point out that metaphoric expression itself is subject to the chronological linearity of language, and to attempt to show, in what follows, the importance of that fact. Spatial criticism often (not always) tends to describe books that have been read, thus annulling a critical distinction between reader and narrator in Kantian time, and forgetting that these books may differ in decisive ways from the same texts in the highly temporal act of being read. Is it possible, in criticism, to adhere entirely to a metonymic viewpoint? Probably not. Even
Peter Brooks evokes, for comparison, a Freudian transference model. But if comparison reveals what is “significant” in prose fiction, a linear approach uncovers what is “consequential,” and therefore fictionally “important.” **Meaningfulness** includes both significance and consequentiality, and the second attribute is not unworthy of discussion. So I try to hew to the line. It is tempting, for example, in describing causality, to allow diagrams to proliferate, replete with significant arrows. I have resisted the temptation as unwholesome (for my purposes) spatialization. But my resistance has not been completely successful; in that and in other matters, comparison gains its revenge in my text. Its subject thus does not complete the polysemic shift to become a truly championed Cause. But even as we pursue causality in its very absence, perhaps another more fundamental notion of “understanding” will emerge for the reader as an unstated aim.

**Notes**


16. Anscombe, p. 68.

17. A "necessary cause" is one for which three criteria apply: (1) if A obtains, then B always obtains; (2) in the absence of A, B never occurs; (3) at any time in the past at which A did not, in fact, obtain, if it had obtained, then B would have occurred.


