Causal Options in 
_Histoire_ and _Narration:_
_Zola’s L’Assommoir_

On voit également que cette description du discours s’oppose à l’histoire de la pensée. Là encore, on ne peut reconstituer un système de pensée qu’à partir d’un ensemble défini de discours. Mais cet ensemble est traité de telle manière qu’on essaie de retrouver par-delà les énoncés eux-mêmes l’intention du sujet parlant, son activité consciente, ce qu’il a voulu dire, ou encore le jeu inconscient qui s’est fait jour malgré lui dans ce qu’il a dit ou dans la presque imperceptible cassure de ses paroles manifestes. . . .

(It is also apparent that this description of discourse works against the history of thought. There again, a system of thought can be reconstituted only on the basis of a defined total body of discourse. But that body is so treated that we try to rediscover, behind the utterances themselves, the intention of the speaking subject, his conscious activity, what he meant to say, or also the subconscious interplay that came to light in spite of him in what he said or in the almost imperceptible crack in his actual words. . . .)

—MICHEL FOUCAULT

If Gide is capable of having his narrators muddy the causal waters by selective use of specific vocabulary, surely Zola, with his penchant for impartial narrators (“le romancier n’est plus qu’un greffier qui se défend de juger et de conclure”—“nowadays the novelist is merely a scribe, who refuses to judge and to conclude”)¹ and for mechanistic determinism (“Un même déterminisme doit régir la pierre des chemins et la cerveau de l’homme”—“One same determinism must govern the stone in the road and the brain of man”),² will give us a measure of how clear and direct causal chains can be. One senses that rigorous causal laws are at work in his novels, as R.-M. Albérès declares in his introduction to the _Oeuvres complètes_ edition of _L’Assommoir_; he finds that our greatest pleasure in rereading _L’Assommoir_ is in entering a literary world with its own laws, and he adds:
La loi naturelle y est dure, la loi sociale y est cruelle, la psychologie y est conditionnée et laisse peu de place à la liberté ou même à la responsabilité. Mais ce n’est pas un monde sans lois. Ce monde est atroce, non pas un monde absurde. Zola est l’anti-Gide. . . .

(In this world natural law is hard, social law is cruel, psychology is conditioned, leaving little room for freedom or even for responsibility. But it is not a lawless world. It is an atrocious world, but not an absurd world. Zola is the anti-Gide. . . .)

The atrociously lawful world of *L’Assommoir*, and its language, will serve well as our points of departure in search of pre-Gidean causal contrasts. And perhaps *La Bête humaine*, in which certain events appear to determine others with a rigor like that of the railroad tracks leading trains from Le Havre to Paris, is one of the best examples in all Zola of causal exigency: a trip down its ineluctible rails will provide, in chapter four, another, quite different view of Zola’s deterministic landscape.

Yet neither work is wholly deterministic. If the extradiegetic narrators are relatively objective in their causal judgments (and even there one may find room for argument), the inferred authors leave gaps and weaknesses in the causal chains of the *histoires* themselves, especially in *L’Assommoir*, through which critical questions can arise. Students of naturalism have long been pointing out that there are (at least) two Zolas—one “scientific,” a believer in deterministic causality, and the other mythic, if not mystic. A glance, for example, at *La Faute de l’abbé Mouret*, in which myth absolutely overwhelms *mimesis*, is all it takes to find the eternal behind the linearly temporal. It lurks as well behind the “cracks” in the causal strands of *L’Assommoir*. And, while its plot is bonded by physical causation, *La Bête humaine* raises cogent, rational doubts about our ability to observe causes. The differences we will uncover with respect to Gide are therefore less likely to reveal bipolar opposition (presence/absence of causation) than differences of degree, differences of kind, and differences of the position of the reader in relation to both *histoire* and *récit*.

The narrator of *L’Assommoir* (written in 1875–76, first published in serial form in 1876–77) exhibits bourgeois prejudices, notably with regard to the supposed improvidence and laziness of the poor, which critics have not hesitated to attribute to Zola himself. Yet the narrator is not Zola, not only for the obvious ontological reasons, but for linguistic ones: he lapses (or rises), with disconcerting frequency, into the vernacular of the working
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He also slips with ease into free indirect discourse and out of it, so that it can be difficult to judge whether the language of the underclass is defining him or some character on the scene. Gervaise is planning her saint's-day banquet:

Cette année-là, un mois à l'avance, on causa de la fête. On cherchait des plats, s'en léchait les lèvres. Toute la boutique avait une sacrée envie de nocer. Il fallait une rigolade à la mort, quelque chose de pas ordinaire et de réuss. (P. 750)

(That year, for a month in advance, they talked about the feast. They looked for recipes and licked their chops over them. The whole shop was damn well ready for a high old time. They needed to laugh till their sides split—not your ordinary party, but one that really came off.)

The narrator speaks, but he just might be rendering in her words the thoughts of some laundress in the shop. Later on, the narrator describes the party:

Et le vin donc, mes enfants! ça coulait de la table comme l'eau coule à la Seine. Un vrai ruisseau, lorsqu'il a plu et que la terre a soif. Coupeau versait de haut, pour voir le jet rouge écumer; et quand un litre était vide, il faisait la blague de retourner le goulet et de le presser, du geste familier aux femmes qui traient les vaches. Encore une négresse qui avait la gueule cassée! (P. 767)

(And what about the wine, kids!—flowing on the table like water in the Seine. A real stream, after a rain, when the land is thirsty. Coupeau poured from high up, to watch the red jet foam, and when a liter was empty, he clowned around, holding the bottle upside down and squeezing the neck, like a milkmaid squeezing a cow's teat. One more dead Indian!)

The potentially thirsty earth sounds like a narrator's image, but the rest seems to echo the thoughts of some half-inebriated guest. On the one hand the indeterminacy of the narrative voice, and on the other its identification with the laboring class it describes, tend to create some doubt as to the reliability of the causal data it provides. Without calling into question the narrator's desire for objectivity, one may entertain questions about his ability to understand the forces at work. If he is identified, by his language, as a member of the working class, he may be limited to a working-class
viewpoint. This notion in no way contradicts his apparent addiction to bourgeois stereotypes of the poor, for the novel also suggests that members of the underclass have readily accepted certain middle-class attitudes, as we shall see. The integration of the narrator into the class he describes tends to reinforce the idea that the poor have assimilated a low opinion of themselves; it also makes the narrator more nearly intradiegetic, like Gide's. And, as with Gide, when readers can begin to suspect that their interpretation of events might not coincide with the narrator's, the inferred author and the histoire gain increased influence over the nature of the interpretation.

Appendix B is intended to facilitate further general comparison with Gide on the level of the récit. Most obviously, with respect to the percentage of occurrences of causal expressions, the two samples look remarkably alike; linguistic similarities far outweigh the differences. Zola's narrator does appear proportionately less wary in the use of causal conjunctions. Furthermore, he and (other) speaking characters mask causality in temporal terms even more than do Gide's. Coupeau brings Lantier home to Gervaise, for example, and little Etienne recognizes his long-lost father: "quand il aperçut Lantier, il resta tremblant et gêné," (p. 783); "when he caught sight of Lantier, he stood there trembling and embarrassed." Clearly the sight of Lantier is the cause of the trembling and embarrassment. But this construction may be less an effort to obscure causality than to reproduce the patterns of everyday speech, in a novel in which the working-class idiom predominates. In that sense, the "when" is to be read literally, and the reader is presumed to catch the causal undertones, almost as if by parataxis. Indeed, the relatively frequent use of parataxis in L'Assommoir suggests a kind of causal innuendo not uncommon in ordinary oral communication. Perhaps the most striking difference, though, between the Gide and Zola samples lies in the percentage of verbs used to express causation. The narrator of L'Assommoir contrives to use relatively fewer "verbs of transitivity," in which the subject affects a change in the predicate through an action, as well as fewer special verbs of causation. This is not without importance, for it seems attributable to his penchant for "describing" actions instead of "narrating" them (see the quotation from the banquet scene, above), relying heavily on the imperfect tense, expressing tendencies rather than precise effects. Even passages of detailed narration (and they are far from rare) tend to exist somewhat in isolation, without narrative links between them. The relatively elevated percentage for conversational parataxis in the Assommoir sample (actually, it is only slightly higher than the percentage for La
Porte étroite, although noticeably greater than for the Gide sample as a whole) may stem from the same phenomenon: we read individual scenes in detail, with verbatim reports of conversation, although narrative connections between scenes may be reduced or eliminated.

Behind this sort of fragmentation in the récit, the histoire follows a simple curve, as it traces the rise of Gervaise Macquart (from urban poor, to labor, to skilled labor, to the lower fringes of the petite bourgeoisie, as she marries and acquires her own laundry business), and her decline (downward again to urban poor, to slow starvation, begging and soliciting, to death apparently from hunger and exposure). If Gervaise's pitiable end is to be seen as the result of the working of inexorable laws, we should be able to trace the chain of causes and effects leading to her downfall. R.-M. Albrés makes much of the initial event (Gervaise's abandonment by Lantier) as a mark of her predestination, of her ill-starred inner destiny ("fatalité intérieure," p. 592). In what follows, then, we will examine the nature and expression of causation in this initial event; next, we will analyse the expressed and the inferable causal factors in Gervaise's downward slide, and finally we will note the remarkable reversal that links the initial events (through Gervaise's humiliation of Virginie) to our heroine's final degradation (humiliation by Virginie). Causation is far more markedly in operation here than in La Porte étroite, but it is at times less mechanical in nature than one might suspect.

1. The initial event. The proximate causes of Lantier's departure are manifest: his bad character, financial difficulties, and the absence of a marriage contract to bind him to Gervaise. We have ample evidence of his unsavory traits at the outset: he spends the night with Adèle, leaving Gervaise to worry at home; when he returns, he upbraids her just as brutally for her loving remarks as for her sarcasm, chiding her as well for her supposed failure to keep her person and their dingy lodging clean; he forces his "wife" to pawn some of her belongings, pocketing the cash himself to hire the carriage that will transport his own possessions as he abandons Gervaise for Adèle. The financial difficulties are apparent in the ugly confrontation over the pawning of Gervaise's clothes: this is obviously not the first dispute on the subject. Adèle has a steady income (from a factory job as a "burnisher"), possibly augmented by prostitution; since Lantier appears both selfish and unwilling to work, life with Adèle could be tempting for financial reasons. But how do such causes predestine Gervaise?

Lantier's departure leaves Gervaise penniless with Claude and Etienne to raise, but she will manage remarkably well, finding work as a laundress,
earning promotions, marrying Coupeau, who has a steady income as a roofer, and finally starting her own—initially successful—laundry business: being free of Lantier seems, if anything, beneficial. Yet Albérès notes, of the initial incident, that something or other tells us that she is doomed ("Un je-ne-sais-quoi nous avertit qu'elle est perdue," p. 592). One might look for it in the fatal stupidity or weakness which caused her to move in with Lantier in the first place. But she has been with him some nine years (Claude is eight), and, if the relationship were inevitably destructive, the destruction ought to have occurred before this. Furthermore, Lantier had rescued her from her abusive father in the provinces and had brought her to Paris as soon as he could afford to, sharing with her his meager inheritance. She accuses him of having squandered it (pp. 606, 612), but he reminds her, "Tu as croqué le magot avec moi" ("you shot the wad with me"), and she admits to having enjoyed theater, dinners, cabs, and good clothes upon their arrival in Paris. Now the money is gone, and she will have to work in any case; Lantier's departure leaves her with three mouths to feed instead of four.

The evidence presented concerning initial causes is of two sorts: narrated scenes and conversations, including Gervaise's confidences to Mme Boche. In neither case is causation unequivocally noted: the reader must seek to determine the facts by inference (does Lantier leave in part because Gervaise is really dirty, or is his insult gratuitous cruelty?), or take the word of Gervaise, a fallible character with manifest self-interest in the way she describes the situation to a friend. Gervaise herself is obviously surprised and uncomprehending when told that Lantier has moved out (p. 616); if she fails to perceive her abandonment as probable or inevitable, the reader is scarcely a more privileged judge of the forces at work.

In at least one instance, narrator and conversation are in disagreement about cause. Gervaise weeps when she learns that Lantier has abandoned her. Mme Boche sees the tears as possibly shed for a lost love: "Est-il possible de se faire tant de mal pour un homme! . . . Vous l'aimez donc toujours, hein? ma pauvre chérie" (pp. 616—17); "How can you go through such agony over a man! . . . So you still love him, huh? poor dear." If the "donc" denotes a conclusion based on evidence, the "hein?" suggests a hint of doubt. The narrator sounds more confident of his opinion:

Le souvenir de sa course au mont-de-piété, en précisant un fait de la matinée, lui avait arraché les sanglots qui s'étranglaient dans sa gorge. Cette course-là, c'était une abomination, la grosse douleur dans son désespoir. (P. 616)
Humiliation might well be, in context, a more accurate statement of the cause of the tears (Gervaise herself had just spoken of it) than love. Yet the fact that Gervaise will later take her lover back suggests that Mme Boche may not be totally in error. In this work, such little ambiguities abound, little gaps through which the reader enters the work.

If we are to see Gervaise as predestined in this initial event to a life of suffering, our belief will have to spring not entirely from the text but from our own experience. We may believe, for example, that Paris is no place for a poor, uneducated country girl, that it is the "Sin-City" atmosphere of the metropolis that led the couple astray, destroying an otherwise happy union, or that the experience of sudden "wealth," followed by a return to poverty, is destructive of character. The narrator says nothing about what fatalité caused the separation after nine years of union; the inferred author simply thrusts Lantier and Gervaise onto the scene in parallel to thousands of other provincials arriving in Paris with a little money in their pockets, or rather, in parallel to prevailing beliefs about what happens to such déracinés—the "uprooted" country folk. If we are on our own in search of general causes, we will not retain the freedom to interpret we found in La Porte étroite; for there is a myth of underclass Paris at work in the text, and more personal myths as well, that will gradually limit our freedom of interpretation. But at this point already, Albérès's "something or other," his "je-ne-sais-quoi," is not in the text, but in reader interaction with the text.

2. The "inevitable" decline. The narrator seems to recognize the beginning of the fall in a scene (p. 710) which occurs while the laundry is still prosperous; great heaps of dirty petticoats and blouses cover the floor, while Gervaise's crew of laundresses work away at ironing on a large table. Coupeau returns home in an inebriated state, and, lurching forward to embrace his wife, falls face down in the soiled clothes. Gervaise helps her husband to rise, offering her cheek to be kissed, but he seizes her breasts, under the amused eyes of her workers, then kisses her passionately on the lips, as she abandons herself to his ardor. The narrator observes:

... le gros baiser qu'ils échangèrent à pleine bouche, au milieu des saletés du métier, était comme une première chute, dans le lent avachissement de leur vie.
Like many French nouns ending in -ment, "avachissement," with its connotations of debilitation, softening, loss of moral fiber, is the name of a result, but it also appears to be the immediate cause of Gervaise's fatal decline: a general lowering of the standards of quality in the laundry's work (leading to a loss of clientèle and the eventual collapse of the enterprise), disappearance of self-discipline in Gervaise (splurging, nonpayment of debts, self-gratification, inability to resist Lantier's advances when he returns), and loss of pride (increased willingness to accept degradation and humiliation without a fight, a growing desire to die). Thus the stylistically enhanced significance of "avachissement," here used as a name of both a cause and an effect, seems to make of it a causal link between the first third of the novel and the decline that follows.

But the early chapters hardly suggest the onset of any moral decay within Gervaise. She rises by hard and conscientious labor from the straits in which Lantier leaves her. She resists Coupeau's initial propositions and agrees to live with him only after marriage. In marrying him, she selects a hard-working, relatively well-paid skilled laborer, dependable and opposed to the use of alcohol; his income plus hers will provide an almost comfortable living for them and her two children. Residing now in a slightly more prosperous quartier, she wins the respect of her neighbor, Mme Goujot, and the tender admiration-from-afar of Mme Goujot's son; these friendships lead to a loan for the establishment of her own laundry: by conscientious application of middle-class principles, Gervaise, now herself an employer, enters the middle class. Her rise is marked by energy, self-respect, self-confidence, discipline, and reasonable ambition. The birth of Nana seems to consecrate the bourgeois family ideal; profligacy, degeneracy, "avachissement," seem alien to the text's vocabulary.

Reference to the drunken kiss as a "first" fall, evoking thus a primal cause-without-a-cause, would seem to confirm the sharp causal rupture between rise and decline. But the term "chute," operating as it does here as both vehicle (Coupeau's physical tumble in the dirty linen) and tenor (the Coupeaus' moral degeneration) of a metaphor, reaches out to other images of falling in the text. This strategem shifts the transitivity of the narrative from the purely syntagmatic realm of the causal link and engages it in a
symbolic paradigm: one might say that readers, having been fed a bite of
the metaphoric apple, are driven from the garden of metonymic innocence.
At any rate, the cultural myths again come into play; readers may be
expected to conjure up visions of the biblical Fall, in which overweening
pride and concupiscence lead to expulsion from Eden. Suddenly all “down­
ward” transformations, changes from “good” to “bad,” from joy to despair,
from prosperity to poverty, may be included in the paradigm. As descrip­
tive of the plot structure, “chute” takes on the coloration of a meta­
language, announcing prophetically the ever dwindling fortunes of the
heroine, so that as misfortunes befall they appear prepared for, preplanned:
their causes desert the fictional reality in which Gervaise lives to take up
residence in the predispositions of the inferred author. Gervaise will “fall”
because our story teller planned it that way, and the nature of the “fall” will
be moral, emotional, social, and economic, because misfortune in these
areas is culturally viewed as a downward movement which, once begun, can
seldom be arrested by the victim.

As a lexical item, the expression “première chute” (“first fall”) is an
element of the récit. It reveals on that level that the narrator is privy, as we
might expect, to what lies ahead for Gervaise. But it also points to an intent
for us readers to know the future as well, and to be predisposed to think of it
as a “fall.” Thus a connection is made here too on the level of the histoire,
between the tumble in the dirty linen and the subsequent degradations, all
“sibling” effects of a common cause: “avachissement.” But what is more
remarkable is that, in their metaphorical connotations, the words evoke the
novel’s structuring, a mythic intent on the part of the “author” to portray a
moral fault and its consequences, and to reveal them as akin to the original
sin and its aftermath. At this juncture, we are seeking the cause of this
“fall” in the narration itself, in the “author’s” plan for the work. Making an
histoire conform to the structure of a preexisting myth is a way of reflect­
ing what Genette’s definition calls the “real or fictive situation” in which
the narrative “act” functions—a means of representing the narration. If,
in the récit, this incident appears as an unprepared beginning, in the
narration it has a “cause,” which is an inferable intent, borne out by the
remainder of the novel.

But this “première chute” is neither the first nor the principal “fall” in
the histoire: it contains an obvious allusion to Coupeau’s earlier tumble from
a rooftop, which appears superficially to be a partial cause of his subsequent
moral decline. That physical fall, however, has itself no necessary cause; it
is, on the literal level, an accident. Coupeau is soldering a bonnet to a rooftop stovepipe, while Gervaise and little Nana wait for him on the sidewalk below:

Il souda, il cria à Gervaise:
"Voilà, c'est fini . . . Je descends."

Le tuyau auquel il devait adapter le chapiteau se trouvait au milieu du toit. Gervaise, tranquillisée, continuait à sourire en suivant ses mouvements. Nana, amusée tout d'un coup par la vue de son père, tapait dans ses mains. Elle s'était assise sur le trottoir pour mieux voir là-haut.

"Papa! Papa! cria-t-elle de toute sa force; papa! Regarde donc!"

Le zingueur voulut se pencher, mais son pied glissa. Alors, brusquement, bêtement, comme un chat dont les pattes s'embrassent, il roula, il descendit la pente légère de la toiture, sans pouvoir se rattraper.

"Nom de Dieu!" dit-il d'une voix étouffée.

Et il tomba. Son corps décrivit une courbe molle, tourna deux fois sur lui-même, vint s'écraser au milieu de la rue avec le coup sourd d'un paquet de linge jeté de haut. (P. 688)

(He soldered, then called out to Gervaise:
"There, it's done . . . I'll be right down."

The stovepipe to which he was to fit the bonnet was in the middle of the roof. Gervaise, her mind at ease now, kept smiling as she followed his movements. Nana, suddenly amused at seeing her father, was clapping her hands. She had sat down on the sidewalk to get a better look up at the roof.

"Daddy! Daddy!" she was shouting at the top of her lungs;
"Daddy! Look!"

The roofer started to lean out, but his foot slipped. Then suddenly, stupidly, like a cat with its feet entangled, he rolled down the slightly sloping roof, without managing to get a handhold.

"God damn it!" he said in a stifled voice.

And he fell. His body described a gentle curve, turned over twice upon itself, and smashed down in the middle of the street with the dull thud of a laundry bundle tossed from a height.)
Analysis of the expressions of causality in this text reveals that known causes are related to Gervaise and Nana. Gervaise is “tranquillisée” by Coupeau’s words, by his position in the middle of the roof, as Nana is “amusée” by the sight of her father perched high above; we even know for what purpose Nana has sat down. Her cry is obviously caused by her amusement, although the text fails to make this connection explicit (parataxis), as we break away from the causal chain. Coupeau’s decision to lean forward appears to be the result of his daughter’s appeal to “look” at her (parataxis again), so that the child’s cry itself becomes an implied cause of the fall. Still, the action of leaning out is not of itself a sufficient cause; to demonstrate that, the inferred author has carefully provided an earlier incident, when Coupeau leans quite safely toward the edge of the same roof to chat with Mme Boche below (p. 686). But this time, Coupeau’s foot slips for no expressed reason, and if that error is surprising in an experienced roofer, it is perhaps no more surprising than the choice of simile: doubtless no animal is less likely to get its feet entangled than a cat—the inferred author is exercising his options to make unusual things happen. Coupeau’s roll down the roof is situated temporally rather than causally (“Alors” rather than “Donc”), and his inability to catch hold of a chimney pipe or even a ridge in the roofing, while stated, is unexplained. The reason for his oath is abundantly clear (parataxis), but his fall through the air is connected to the tumble on the roof only by “Et”: the events are narrated in detail, as if they had been permanently inscribed on the retina of some horrified onlooker, but the causal sequence remains unexpressed. This technique tends to reify the event for the reader, like an action seen in reality or on film. But it does not fully “textualize” the scene, nor mediate it as an interpreted whole; the event merely happened, whence its “accidental” quality. The sound of Coupeau’s body striking the pavement like a bundle of laundry tends to resituate the event in the mind of Gervaise, the laundress. Is it Zola’s narrator who chose to reify the incident for us, or have we been watching through Gervaise’s eyes all along? This additional level of indeterminacy separates the fall still further from any underlying causal chain.

If the narrator (or Gervaise?) gives us no cause for the slip, we begin to look once more to the inferred author, to other events in the histoire. At the point where the explained worlds (Gervaise and her daughter) meet the unexplained, in Nana’s call to her father, contributory responsibility for the fall appears to rest on Nana’s tiny shoulders. Why? Why indeed is little
Nana even brought to the scene? It is her first visit to a work site, and only the second for superstitious Gervaise. Nana will, in the course of this volume, evolve into a nasty brat and a rather vicious adolescent; she will have her own novel, _Nana_, in which to expose her adult depravity. Her innocent cry, “Regarde donc!” as a contributing cause of Coupeau’s misfortune, seems, on the level of the *histoire*, an initial repetition, a sign of the magical evil already present in the little girl, the “mark of the beast,” which will make of her a constant source of suffering for others. This reading is partially predetermined by Gervaise’s expressed intuition, almost an occult “precognition” (pp. 686–88), that her presence or Nana’s at a work site would provoke a fall. The inferred author seems to be preparing us for the action, hinting, if not at magical, at least at nonphysical causes for the accident. Beyond the existential realities, “son pied glissa. . . . Et il tomba,” we have a hint of the uncanny, and a suggestion of Nana’s evil nature which will later, with no apparent cause, come to the surface. Since Coupeau is subsequently at a loss to explain his misstep (pointing out particularly that he had not drunk a drop of alcohol before ascending the roof, p. 693), the mythic and magic underpinnings hold the story line together far more effectively than observed cause and effect. Repetition and reader comparison (of Nana’s evil deeds, of recurrences of the Fall motif) become, at this crucial juncture, the mortar of the story, replacing metonymic linkage.

As for the result of Coupeau’s four-story plunge to the street below, it involves a remarkable and unnecessary double implausibility. First, unbelievable as it may seem, Coupeau not only survives but recovers completely from his temporary injuries, returning for a time successfully to his work. Second, although mentally and physically fit for work, he lapses into idleness and alcoholism. These implausibilities are all the more amazing since a change in a single “event” of the *histoire* would have removed them both. Suppose the fall had left Coupeau partially incapacitated—a “bad back,” a twisted hand, or a simple psychological fear of heights—and the miracle cure is obviated on the one hand, while on the other enforced idleness and self-doubt provide solid explanations for the newfound drinking habit. If the inferred author chooses to put a “link” in his chain that fits poorly at both its ends, when metonymically adaptable links were readily available, he calls attention to metaphoric structure at the expense of the metonymic: it is easier to see the symbolic parallelism between the physical fall and the subsequent moral tumble than to trace precise causal relation-
ships from one to the other. By exercise of an option, the inferred author is determining a metaphoric reading.

So Coupeau is cured; Gervaise cares for him at home, where her love works its miracle and, incidentally, begins the "avachissement" which will lead to the "first fall" we observed earlier. The causal chain is more apparent on this level, although less obvious than it might have been, and it has two branches.

On the one hand, Gervaise and Nana had come to the work site to meet the roofer in order to inspect together a storefront suitable for a laundry. Even after the accident, thanks to the Goujet loan, she goes ahead with her project. Having her own business produces in her an optimistic faith in future prosperity, although her husband is still convalescing. There is perhaps a certain hubris in going into debt to found a business in a rented shop with no other income to fall back upon. Like Coupeau on the rooftop (reader comparison again), Gervaise feels falsely at ease in a precarious position and thus may be riding for a fall. If so, the inferred author's choice of events might be an attempt to "prove," as a law, that overconfidence leads to disaster.

On the other hand, by spoiling her injured husband at home and providing him with extra cash when he goes out, Gervaise appears to destroy in Coupeau all desire to work. In a sudden about-face, the virtual teetotaller begins drinking with the boys at the Assommoir, and his long slide into alcoholic stupor originates. While Gervaise's vague gâteries seem to be the primary cause, it is also possible that the inferred author presupposes in the roofer an alcoholic heredity. Coupeau's father had suffered an accident after drinking; for this reason, perhaps, Coupeau has shunned alcohol. His fall and the opportunity to drink are thus possibly all that is needed to cast him over the hereditary precipice. But neither the characters of L'Assommoir nor the narrator himself, whose language tends to identify him with the underclass, has the education necessary to explain the physiology of alcoholism from the "raw data" provided by the inferred author. We shall see the symptoms, the effects, including description in almost clinical detail of delirium tremens, but the causes are not adduced for us.

As for Gervaise, it is indolence rather than alcohol that overcomes her. And carelessness in her work is soon accompanied by moral slovenliness. When Lantier returns during the saint's-day feast, and the besotted and spineless Coupeau ends up inviting the still jobless hatter to move in with them, there is another mouth for Gervaise to feed, in addition to Coupeau's
mother, now also living with them. Although the text points to this as a cause for their weakened finances, it must be noted that the children are soon off working as apprentices, so that the additional expense to feed Lantier would scarcely be disastrous.

However, Gervaise quickly begins sleeping with Lantier again, on nights when Coupeau is too drunk to fulfill her needs, and the neighborhood is at once abuzz with rumors that tarnish the little laundry's image. The narrative voice stresses Gervaise's laxity:

Au milieu de cette indignation publique, Gervaise vivait tranquille, lasse et un peu endormie. Dans les commencements, elle s'était trouvée bien coupable, bien sale, et elle avait eu un dégoût d'elle-même. Quand elle sortait de la chambre de Lantier, elle se lavait les mains. . . . Elle aurait voulu changer de peau en changeant d'homme. Mais, lentement, elle s'accoutumait. C'était trop fatiguant de se débarrasser chaque fois. Ses paupières l'amollissaient, son besoin d'être heureuse lui faisait tirer tout le bonheur possible de ses embûches. . . . N'est-ce pas? pourvu que son mari et son amant fussent contents, que la maison marchât son petit train-train régulier, qu'on rigolât du matin au soir, tous gras, tous satisfaits de la vie et se la coulant douce, il n'y avait pas de quoi se plaindre. (Pp. 814—15)

(In the midst of this public indignation, Gervaise lived on, tranquil, relaxed, and somewhat sleepy. In the beginning, she had considered herself very guilty, very dirty, and she had been disgusted with herself. Whenever she left Lantier's bedroom, she washed her hands. . . . She would have liked to change her skin when she changed men. But, slowly, she got used to it. It was too much of a bother to wash up every time. Her laziness was making her soft, and her need to be happy made her extract all the happiness she could from her little miseries. . . . So long as her husband and her lover were happy—right?—so long as the household merrily followed its little daily routine, so long as they laughed from morning till night, all fat, satisfied with life and taking it easy, there was nothing to complain about.)

The evolution here described is from moral conduct to immoral conduct with guilt, to the same behavior without guilt. The major expressed causes for the disappearance of guilt are habit, laziness, and "her need to be happy," all of which produce in Gervaise a kind of sleepy lassitude, of indifference to public opinion, so long as the laundress knows her men are
happy. So the immediate causes are clear, and, in the following paragraph, Gervaise advances three more basic causes to explain her conduct: (1) when one has a filthy, drunken husband, one looks for “cleanliness” elsewhere; (2) since Lantier was her first and true “husband,” “natural law” authorizes her conduct; and (3) everyone in the neighborhood is engaged in some sort of sexual irregularity. These may be mere excuses, but if Gervaise believes them, they can structure a sound causal chain of the sort one might expect to find in the works of a determinist. Once readers accept the initial avachissement, the downward slide becomes indeed inevitable.

Yet the first two reasons for the moral collapse contain mythic elements. The cleanliness-purity theme is ubiquitous in Zola, and, in the later novels, such as Le Docteur Pascal, males can play the role of purifiers and redeemers of women, who, in the Rougon-Macquart novels, are often naturally impure. The return to Lantier can thus be read as a misguided search for salvation. And in turning to her first lover, she turns to her “true” husband. In an astute analysis of this phenomenon in Zola, Jean Borie evokes imprinting:

La défloraison n'est pas pour Zola épisode futile et sans lendemain. Elle est, au contraire, prise d'amour pour l'éternité; elle a valeur de mythe et trouve sa place dans cette anthropologie imaginaire que nous essayons de définir. Lorsqu'elle “se donne” pour la première fois, la femme absorbe, et garde en elle à jamais, sous forme d'empreinte, la virilité de l'homme qui l'a pénétrée.

(For Zola, deflowering is not a futile, inconsequential episode. It is, on the contrary, capture by love for eternity; it is endowed with mythic value and has its place in the imaginary anthropology we are trying to define. When she “gives herself” for the first time, a woman absorbs and keeps within her forever, in the form of an imprint, the virility of the man who penetrated her.)

These two reasons taken together suggest that an “imaginary anthropology” functions indeed as the root cause of the avachissement.

For the third excuse, Gervaise proposes a primary cause as well: “Oui, oui,” she says sarcastically, “quelque chose de propre que l'homme et la femme, dans ce coin de Paris, où l'on est les uns sur les autres, à cause de la misère” (p. 816); “Oh, sure; men and women lead real clean lives, in this corner of Paris, where we live on top of each other on account of poverty.” Here we rejoin the myth of working-class Paris: poverty causes overcrowded
living conditions, which lead inevitably to sexual promiscuity. Uttered in
defense of her conduct by a character with an ax to grind, none of the three
reasons is an objective observation of causation in the story line. Readers
will decide for themselves what to believe. But in the absence of privileged
explanations from the narrator, and in view of the relative plausibility of
these reasons as statements of the way Gervaise’s mind works, acceptance of
Gervaise’s causal logic is tempting. If readers acquiesce, Zola’s inferred
author will have inserted both mythic and ideological causes at the origin of
the mechanistic chain.11

To explain how avachissement leads to ultimate destruction, the novel
sets a final psychological cause in place: the joyous side of self-destruction, a
kind of financial and physical death wish. As customers begin to fall away,
as debts mount up while Coupeau and Lantier eat (and drink) Gervaise out
of house and home, the narrator explains that “she was virtually inebriated
by a rage for indebtedness; she drove herself dizzy, chose the most expensive
items, gave free rein to her appetites, now that she couldn’t pay” (p. 794;
’elle était comme grisée par la fureur de la dette; elle s’étourdissait,
choisissait les choses les plus chères, se lâchait dans sa gourmandise, depuis
qu’elle ne payait plus”). This clear declaration about the psychology of
credit might function as a “law.” Indeed, when nearly all is lost, Gervaise
returns to the pawn shop, and the narrator affirms: “she was in the grip of
pawn-shop mania and would have shorn her head if she could have gotten a
loan on her hair” (p. 821; elle était prise de la rage du clou, elle se serait
tondu la tête si on avait voulu lui prêter sur ses cheveux”). “La rage du clou”
has the ring of a ready-made expression—pawn-shop mania—as if the
desire to transform all stable, physical possessions into liquid assets, to feed
upon and drink up one’s own physical reality, were a well-known and
catalogued disease. Like Rimbaud’s greatcoat, which, through excessive
wear, was “becoming ideal,” so Gervaise’s substance is joyously transformed
into an abstraction: avachissement becomes self-manducation, until she
eagerly asks the neighborhood undertaker to carry her away before she is
dead (p. 929). Gilles Deleuze perceives the death wish as underlying all
instinctual behavior in Zola, the absent cause, the void at the center of
being:

c’était déjà cela, la découverte de Zola: comment les “gros appétits”
gravissent autour de l’instinct de mort, comment ils fourmillent par
une fêlure qui est celle de l’instinct de mort, . . . comment il con-
stitue à lui seul la grande hérédité, la fêlure.12
and this was already Zola's big discovery: how the "*major appetites*" gravitate around the death instinct, how they swarm through the crack which is the death instinct, . . . how it alone constitutes the principal hereditary factor, the crack.)

The joy of self-destruction finds perhaps its clearest objective correlative in the Assommoir bar. Here foregathers the gang with the colorful nicknames—Mes-Bottes, Bibi-la-Grillade, Bec-Salé, also called Boit-sans-Soif, Cadet-Cassis (Coupeau)—false names covering true identities like joy covering pain, lightheartedness concealing the fear of mortality. The horror-masked-by-gaiety of drinking is a kind of absent cause in the novel.

Absent, that is, until Gervaise, when she too at last begins to drink, unMASKS the horrible underside of the cozy tavern, in a famous passage:

Elle se tourna, elle aperçut l’alembic, la machine à soûler, fonctionnant sous le vitrage de l’étroite cour, avec la trépidation de sa cuisine d’enfer. Le soir, les cuivres étaient plus mornes, allumés seulement sur leur rondeur d’une large étoile rouge; et l’ombre de l’appareil, contre la muraille du fond, dessinait des abominations, des figures avec des queues, des monstres ouvrant leurs mâchoires comme pour avaler le monde. (P. 867)

(She turned and caught sight of the still, the stupor machine, shuddering under the glass roof of the narrow courtyard with the vibration of its hellish cookery. At night, the copper parts were darker, lighted only on their rounded bellies with a large red star; and the shadow the machine cast on the back wall conjured up abominable pictures, figures with tails, monsters opening their jaws as if to swallow the world.)

With its causal à, the expression "machine à soûler" links drunkenness to a very mechanical, predictable cause. Although the text says nothing of it, readers may be aware that behind the machine lie the greed of the brandy merchants and perhaps the political motivations of the ruling class; in front of it, the universal death-thirst, activated among the masses by poverty. But, since the machine itself assumes in Gervaise’s mind the gigantic proportions of Hell itself, whose purpose is to "swallow the world," the sociological causes for the existence of the machine seem subsumed in it, so that the evil of society, whatever the reader perceives that to be, appears to function like a machine, predetermined by some occult, demonic force. We
have seen the Fall, and it has taken us straight to Hell. The linguistic transformation of definable sociological ills into Satanic forces leaves the reader free to invent plausible sociological causes, while at the same time that invention is determined and limited by the infernal metaphor. Zola's inferred author, abetted by a narrator with limited insight, leaves gaps and indeterminacies in the causal chain on the diegetic level, but he binds the story together on the exegetic plane through metaphor and symbol. Primary causes remain unexplained, but they are replaced by magic (Coupeau's fall from the roof as prefiguration; mythic anthropology at the origin of avachissement) or demonic powers (the maleficent force in Nana and the brandy maker's hellish still).

As if to stress the superhuman force of the demons at work in the narrative, the inferred author gives both to Gervaise and to Coupeau the means to avoid their slide to oblivion. Two incidents provide escape hatches; although they fail to crawl through them, the possibility to do so was presented, so that the downfall is inevitable only if mystical or deep psychological forces made it impossible for them to see and profit from their opportunities.

After Coupeau's convalescence, he takes a roofing job well south of Paris, in Etampes:

\[
\begin{align*}
\ldots \text{ et là il fit près de trois mois, sans se soûler, guéri un moment par l'air de la campagne.} \ldots \text{ A son retour, il était frais comme une rose, et il apportait quatre cents francs, avec lesquels ils payèrent les deux termes arriérés de la boutique} . \ldots \text{ ainsi que d'autres petites dettes du quartier.} . \ldots \text{(P. 844)}\\
\ldots \text{ and there he put in nearly three months, without getting drunk, cured for a time by the country air.} \ldots \text{ When he got back, he was fresh as a daisy, and he brought home four hundred francs, with which they made the two back payments on the shop} . \ldots \text{ and settled other little debts in the neighborhood.} . \ldots\)
\end{align*}
\]

This favorable sign should have sent the couple scurrying to live in the provinces, where the healthful conditions and a modicum of available work would have kept them afloat, far from the Parisian demons.

Perhaps more surprising is Gervaise's failure to accept the offer of young Goujet, to whom she is visibly attracted. Coupeau is drinking, Lantier is back, and the laundry business is poor. Goujet, a skilled, industrious, and prosperous smith, one day gathers his courage and asks Gervaise
to run off with him (pp. 798–99). He could get a job in Belgium, and they could make a new start together. Her refusal, essentially on moral grounds, seems to run counter to the *avachissement* which has her in its grip:

"Ce serait très mal . . . Je suis mariée, n'est-ce pas? J'ai des enfants . . . nous aurions des remords, nous ne goûterions pas de plaisir . . . Quand on reste honnête, dans notre position, on est joliment récompensé . . ." (P. 799)

("It would be a very evil thing to do . . . I'm a married woman, you know. I have children . . . we'd feel remorse; we'd get no pleasure. . . . When you stay honorable, in our position, you're very well rewarded. . . .")

The last sentence is surely not ironic in Gervaise's mind, but one can question the deep-seated sincerity of her moral judgments. Perhaps she is being "moral" to save Goujet from going down with her: "I'm very fond of you too," she says, "too fond to let you do stupid things. And this would be a stupid thing, of course . . ." ("Moi aussi, j'éprouve de l'amitié pour vous, j'en éprouve trop pour vous laisser commettre des bêtises. Et ce seraient des bêtises, bien sûr . . ."). Perhaps she is simply too *avachie* to envisage such a radical change in her life. It might be that a (supernaturally inspired?) passion for Lantier is holding her back, or even that she has truly been taken in by the moral preachments which the rich use to keep the poor in their place. The indeterminacy of cause, here again arising from the fact that an interested character gives the only explanation, leaves thus yet another gap in the causal chain of the novel. Given a glimpse of a happier life, both Coupeau and Gervaise elect to remain in their ruinous situation. Readers are left to seek the reasons in demonic forces, or in their psychological correlative, *la fêlure*.

Instead of the freedom to interpret we found behind the gaps in the *récit* of Gide's *La Porte étroite*, we discover here a mythic substratum with its own metonymy. The problem is to determine whether this mythic causal chain is a referent of the tale, a part of its *histoire*, or whether it expresses an intent of the *narration*. If Gervaise, despite her initial gumption and her later opportunities, is foredoomed, is it because of social ills and a psychological flaw, present in the *histoire*, or because of an intent in the *narration* to illustrate a theory of supernatural causation and to work through a modern esthetic of the tragic? Readers may reach differing conclusions, but the major reversal in the text points to the importance of the intent of *narration*. 
3. *The chiasmic reversal*. In the rise and fall of Gervaise Macquart, the conjunction of mythic and esthetic causation is nowhere more obvious than in the reversal inherent in her relationship to Virginie, the sister of her rival for Lantier, Adèle. The first time we see them together, in a public laundry, they engage in a brutal physical combat from which Gervaise emerges triumphant. Virginie is mysteriously present when little Claude and Etienne arrive to inform their mother of Lantier's departure, and Mme Boche guesses at the reason: "Elle rit de vous voir pleurer, cette sans-coeur, là-bas. . . . Elle a emballé les deux autres et elle est venue ici leur raconter la tête que vous feriez," (p. 617); "She's getting a laugh out of seeing you cry, that heartless beast over there. . . . She got the two of them going, and now she's here so she can tell them all about the expression on your face." If Mme Boche is right, Virginie, who shares the one-room flat where Adèle receives Lantier, would thus act as a major contributing cause of the initial event, having inspired the Lantier-Adèle affair. But the transitivity that runs through "a emballé," as a part of a character's speech, comes from the inferred author; the speech itself is an "event" which could be situated in its own causal chain. If readers perceive Virginie as the primal urge, the evil force that gets the narrative moving, it is the inferred author, rather than the narrator, who has instigated the interpretation.

The fight begins when Gervaise perceives Virginie's taunting stare:

Quand elle aperçut devant elle Virginie, au milieu de trois ou quatre femmes, parlant bas, la dévisageant, elle fut prise d'une colère folle. Les bras en avant, cherchant par terre, tournant sur elle-même, dans un tremblement de tous ses membres, elle marcha quelques pas, rencontra un seau plein, le saisit à deux mains, le vida à toute volée.

"Chameau, va!" cria la grande Virginie. (P. 617)

(When she caught sight of Virginie standing in front of her in the midst of three or four other women, speaking in low tones, staring at her, a wild rage took hold of her. Stretching out her arms, feeling around on the ground, turning in circles, trembling from head to toe, she took a few steps, came upon a full bucket, picked it up with both hands, and hurled its contents with all her might.

"You stupid ass!" cried big Virginie.)

In an almost Gidean way, the expression of causality begins by hiding behind a temporal mask ("Quand" for "Parce que") and lurking in participles ("parlant bas, la dévisageant"). The passive voice ("fut prise") avoids
an opportunity for direct attribution of cause. The narrativity flows through the inevitable causal verbs, of course, but parataxis intervenes between the thrown water (we will learn only later that it struck Virginie’s feet) and the result: Virginie’s insult. The links are there, but this is scarcely the style of a narrator seeking to express the workings of natural laws through obvious causal chains. Violent actions abound in the fight, which is described in lurid detail—clawing, drenching, ripping away of clothing—but the psychological forces that engender them remain unnamed. Superficially, they are obvious, but upon encountering the reversal, the reader will need to return to this passage and infer some unexpressed relationships.

Why does Gervaise win? Struck on the arm with a laundry paddle, she summons an unnamed force: her strength is suddenly multiplied “ten fold.” Stripping her opponent, she succeeds at last in applying the paddle, repeatedly and vigorously, to Virginie’s bare buttocks, humiliating her in her sex itself. The reader can infer the combination of hatred, pain, and frustrated sexual desire that underlies this violence, caused (supposedly, mysteriously) by Virginie’s instigation of Lantier’s departure and by her subsequent taunts. In the light of the later reversal, Gervaise’s brutality here will appear to be the sadistic half of a sadomasochistic rite, of which the masochistic portion will be played out, with startling symmetry, near the end of the novel.

Gervaise’s degrading service in Virginie’s fine-food grocery and sweet-shop at the close of the work constitutes the obvious reversal. Virginie has acquired the very storefront in which Gervaise ran her unsuccessful laundry; she has taken Lantier along with the shop; and she has reduced Gervaise to scrubbing floors in the transformed store. It is tempting to seek a causal chain between the two humiliations. Quite probably, Virginie is still harboring a grudge when she encounters Gervaise, apparently by chance, in a stairway, many years after the fight, although that is never stated as fact and can only be inferred in light of subsequent events. Gervaise at first expects to be struck across the face with the mackerel her old enemy is carrying:

Mais non. Virginie eut un mince sourire. Alors la blanchisseuse, dont le panier bouchait l’escalier, voulut se montrer polie.

“Je te demande pardon, dit-elle.

—Vous êtes toute pardonnée”, répondit la grande brune.

Et elles restèrent au milieu des marches, elles caressèrent, raccom­modées du coup, sans avoir risqué une seule allusion au passé. (P. 736)
But no. Virginie gave a meager smile. Then the laundress, whose basket was blocking the stairway, determined to be polite.

“I beg your pardon,” she said.

“And pardoned you are,” the big brunette replied.

And there they stood, in the middle of the stairs, chatting, friends again on the spot, without having risked a single allusion to the past.)

No indication of ill will from Virginie, no explanation of Gervaise’s sudden decision to be polite. This is a critical juncture, and mysterious forces are at work: suddenly and without explanation, the two women are fast friends.

A frequent visitor to the laundry, Virginie apparently contrives to whet its proprietress’s appetite for Lantier by talking of him often. Shortly thereafter, when Lantier reenters Gervaise’s life, readers may wonder if he did so on Virginie’s urging. It is difficult to infer that Virginie is plotting from the outset to take over Gervaise’s storefront, since the laundry’s failure is at this juncture far from a foregone conclusion, and since it is Lantier himself who, later on, encourages the brunette to take this action (p. 826). Yet unmentioned forces seem to be conspiring, from the meeting in the stairwell onward, to bring about the reversal of fortunes. The purchase of the lease to the shop is dependent, for example, on an “inheritance” which Virginie had fortuitously received from an aunt, and which is revealed only late in the tale (p. 826). No law of nature decrees that schemers inherit the wherewithal to accomplish their machinations: less natural powers are seemingly at work.

And so it appears particularly noteworthy that Gervaise and the narrator are in remarkable agreement about the fact that Virginie’s acquisition of the shop and her subsequent humiliation of the former laundress therein constitute a “vengeance.” When the brunette seeks, through Lantier, to acquire the store, Gervaise’s hostile reaction is reported in free indirect style:

Non, non, jamais! Elle avait toujours douté du cœur de Virginie: si Virginie ambitionnait la boutique, c’était pour l’humilier. Elle l’aurait cédée peut-être à la première femme dans la rue, mais pas à cette grande hypocrite qui attendait certainement depuis des années de lui voir faire le saut. Oh! ça expliquait tout. Elle comprenait à présent pourquoi les étincelles jaunes s’allumaient dans les yeux de chat de cette margot. Oui, Virginie gardait sur la conscience la fessée du lavoir, elle mijotait sa rancune dans la cendre. (P. 827)
(No, no, never! She had always doubted Virginie's affection: if Virginie had her eye on the shop, it was just to humiliate her. Maybe she would have let it go to the first woman in the street, but not to that big hypocrite who had surely been waiting around for years to watch her go off the cliff. Oh, that explained everything! Now she understood why the yellow sparks were glinting in that chatterbox's catlike eyes. Yes, Virginie had never forgotten the paddling in the laundry, simmering her grudge over the coals.)

Much later, when circumstances have reduced Gervaise to scrubbing floors in what had been "her" shop, while Lantier and the new proprietress look on, the narrator describes the scene:

Et tous les deux, le chapelier et l'épicière, se carraient davantage, comme sur un trône, tandis que Gervaise se traînait à leurs pieds, dans la boue noire. Virginie devait jouir, car ses yeux de chat s'éclairent un instant d'étincelles jaunes, et elle regarda Lantier d'un sourire mince. Enfin ça la vengeait de l'ancienne fessée du lavoir, qu'elle avait toujours gardée sur la conscience! (P. 890)

(And both of them, the hatter and the proprietress of the sweet-shop, struck a still more pompous pose, as if on a throne, while Gervaise dragged herself around at their feet, in the black slop. Virginie must have been getting a thrill, for her catlike eyes gleamed for an instant with yellow sparks, and she looked at Lantier with a meager smile. This at last avenged her of the old paddling in the laundry, which she had never forgotten!)

Both passages explicitly declare the existence of a causal relationship between the paddling in the laundry and Gervaise's humiliation. But both also put in question the competence of the speaker to make such a judgment. In the first text, "elle avait toujours douté du cœur de Virginie" is surely one of those lies we tell ourselves to cover the shame of being taken by surprise: Gervaise, who "comprenait à présent," appears to have been completely taken in and to have uncovered the causal connection after the fact. In the second text, the narrator, although potentially omniscient, admits his uncertainty about Virginie's emotions ("devait jouir") and his need to judge on the basis of exterior signs. The causal connection of a preplanned vengeance appears virtually certain, but its certainty resides less in the affirmations than in those remarkable exterior signs and in the astounding
conjunction, across 63 pages of text, between the vocabulary of Gervaise and of the narrator.

The verb “jouir,” used as it is without complement in the second passage, is invested with quasi-orgasmic connotations. The exterior signs of this “thrill” are given as the “yellow sparks” in Virginie’s eyes and her “meager smile.” The presence of the yellow sparks in the earlier passage marks the beginning of this sexual victory, which culminates in Virginie’s seduction of Lantier, in a time anterior to the attempt to acquire the shop. The “meager smile” sends us all the way back to the meeting on the stairs (p. 736): repeated vocabulary unites the passages, preparing the reversal far more clearly and effectively than obvious causation.

But the lexical coincidence (“yeux de chat,” “étincelles jaunes,” “garder sur la conscience,” “fessée du lavoir”) does more than unify the second Virginie segment as a prepared vengeance. The narrator’s corroboration of Gervaise’s hindsight tends to validate it, of course, to make us believe in a planned connection between the two humiliations. But the choice of identical words functions also to unite the two speakers, Gervaise—the creature of the inferred author—and the narrator. For Gervaise—her sudden strength, her later weakness, her long-term love for Lantier, her belated hatreds—all are the work of the inferred author. When her language coincides with the narrator’s, inferred author and narrator unite; the narrative at that point conjoins them: from a causal viewpoint, both are “the author,” or at least all the movements and decisions in the text which we can read as “authorial presence.”

This is another way of saying that the vengeance, the reversal, occurs on the level of the narration. By itself (and despite Zola’s affirmations in Le Roman expérimental about subservience to the laws of nature), the notion that a novel is what its “author” makes it is, in causal systems, a truism. But “authors”—whether you define them as individual human wills or pervading sociocultural megatexts—can provide in the discourse credible causes for their events or leave literal causation implausible or indeterminate. The récit of L’Assommoir does the latter, leaving the reader to seek explanations on other levels.

It is thus possible, for example, to read the two Virginie segments as “testing events,” of the sort we observed in Gide, measuring Gervaise’s power as she is rising and her weakness as she falls. Or, structurally, we may infer in the text an esthetic desire for symmetry. Or the reversal, in the repeated evocation of Virginie’s feline eyes momentarily alive with yellow
glints, can revive the symbolical, like the repeated “fall.” Virginie has the traits of a sorceress who, with evil eye, can change the lives of others. As Satan’s minion, she could be the dynamic behind all that happens, giving the novel a unified and tragic structure. Gervaise’s initial flaw: sexuality, living with Lantier. Her punishment: abandonment. Her cardinal sin: rejecting the punishment, fighting against fate (the conquest of Virginie, rising in the social hierarchy). Whence the Fall: avachissement. The diabolic order of the world is restored: Virginie is re-enthroned, and Gervaise, converted and assenting to her fate, is hounded willingly to her death. In the absence of the Freudian vocabulary of sadomasochism, unavailable to this text, such supernatural correlatives construct a mythic chain of causation to obliterate the gaps in the mechanistic one.

But our purpose is neither to propose nor to defend a single “coherent” reading of the text. It is not the doughnut but the hole, so to speak, that has been our focus, and the ways in which breaks and weaknesses in the causal chain bring the reader into contact, no longer with the récit, but with histoire and narration. For the text seems to expect that a causally coherent reading will be sought. It provides causally linked metonymic structures, either at the level of histoire or narration, and it offers gaps in the literal récit, thus inviting the reader’s creative participation in “constructing” the novel. If one believes that the Satanic forces mentioned have as their referents “real” psychological or social tendencies demonstrably present in Gervaise’s and Coupeau’s world, then causal linking functions in the histoire; if they are read as “occult” references, symbolic of novel structure, the metonymic linking is in the narration. Causation may be read either at the level of “story” or of “production-of-story.” Table 3.1 lists some of the primary options, by level, at key points where the gaps make them evident.

The conjoining of fragments that is reading reflects symmetrically the fragmentation that is writing. One can scarcely assume on the part of a traditional writer an “intent” to fragment, for fragmentation is inherent in language (récit) and in “events” (histoire) arbitrarily perceived as such. But when major changes in character—from energy and ambition to avachissement—are not explicitly explained (Michel’s conversations with Ménalque in L’Immoraliste suggest more clearly the reasons for Michel’s “downward slide”), when unnecessary implausibilities, like Coupeau’s complete recovery from a four-story fall, invade the causal chain, the reader can infer, with respect to reality-referential texts, that narrative options are being exercised.
Table 3.1  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>EFFECT</th>
<th>EXPLANATION, BY LEVEL</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
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<td>(explicit in récit; possible inferences for histoire and narration)</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
| 1. Lantier's departure | Récit: Not fully explained.  
| | Histoire: Virginie's evil machinations?  
| | Narration: Textual manipulation to prepare reversal? |
| 2. Coupeau's fall | Récit: Unexplained.  
| | Histoire: Nana's evil nature?  
| | Narration: Textual manipulation for creation of symbol? |
| | Histoire: Gervaise's love conquers Fate?  
| | Narration: Textual manipulation to reveal mythic substratum of Coupeau's decline? |
| 4. Coupeau's inability to profit from cure | Récit: Questionable.  
| | Histoire: Satanic (psychological?) forces?  
| | Narration: Textual manipulation for tragic structure? |
| 5. Gervaise's avachissement | Récit: Poverty, overcrowding, imprinting for first lover, need for pleasure.  
| | Histoire: Satanic (psychological?) forces? Death wish?  
| | Narration: "Hubris" for tragic structure? |
| 6. Virginie's triumph | Récit: Fortuitous inheritance; Gervaise's capitulation as laundry fails.  
| | Histoire: Virginie's evil "magic"?  
| | Narration: Textual manipulation to achieve reversal? |
| | Histoire: Gervaise's death wish?  
| | Narration: Textual manipulation to complete tragedy? |
for extradiegetic reasons. Using causal logic, readers can then seek to infer, from their effects, the reasons for the choices made.

Since causation functions across many pages in *L'Assommoir* (the “first fall” is a distant precursor of Gervaise’s fate, and the chiasmic reversal near the end imposes the rereading-as-cause of the initial Virginie segment), a constant dynamic appears, in retrospect, to have inhabited the story from one end to the other. The mythic dimension of the novel, springing from symbols and repetitions, also implies a permanent dynamic, an inevitable flow of causal forces. Reading metaphorically is a relatively static experience, viewing a highway from a high, hovering helicopter. Reading metonymically is seeing the same highway from a motorcycle at seventy miles per hour (one good crack in the pavement can be fatal). Readers tend where possible, I think, to take the helicopter. Thus *L'Assommoir* attains its “anti-Gidean” appearance of constant, inevitable causality. It is only an appearance, but when there are gaps in which we can employ our creativity, *L'Assommoir* limits more stringently, with symbols, the kinds of connections we can make than does, for example, *La Porte étroite*. As Michel Serres points out of the whole Rougon-Macquart family tree: “Le mythe . . . rend connexes des variétés locales déchirées. Il noue des carrefours . . . Il enjambe une faille. Il coule les lèvres des crevasses. Fait du haillon une tunique.”

(“Myth . . . brings broken-off local varieties into connection. It straddles a fault line. It sews up the lips of crevasses. Makes the tattered rag a tunic.”)
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Notes


7. Especially in *La Porte étroite*; see chapter two, above.

8. Matthews points out, p. 38, that Zola's characters are capable of expressing ideas that would seem to surpass their capacity, but that does not occur here.


10. See Jean Borie, p. 59. Borie points out that in Zola a woman's children are all, regardless of paternity, exterior manifestations of this imprint. That theory might explain why Nana is cast more nearly in the mold of Lantier than in that of her biological father, Coupeau. The origins and obvious erroneousness of these and similar nineteenth-century male-dominance myths are treated by Hilde Olrik, "La Théorie de l'imprégnation," *Nineteenth-Century French Studies*, 15, 1 & 2 (Fall-Winter 1986–1987), 128–40, with specific reference to Zola.

11. Of the three principal mythic causes, "male imprinting" and "underclass Paris" are charged with obvious ideological overtones. Belonging to a different "culture," the "Fall from Eden" myth, despite its Judeo-Christian origins, will not appear ideological until the myth of the underclass unites with it in the final Satanic imagery.

