Inference, Causality, and the Levels of Narrative

Histoire et narration n'existent donc pour nous que par le truchement du récit. Mais réciproquement le récit, le discours narratif ne peut être tel qu'en tant qu'il raconte une histoire, faute de quoi il ne serait pas narratif . . . , et en tant qu'il est profferé par quelqu'un, faute de quoi . . . il ne serait pas en lui-même un discours. Comme narratif, il vit de son rapport à l'histoire qu'il raconte; comme discours, il vit de son rapport à la narration qui le proffère.

(Thus histoire and narration exist for us only through the intermediary of the récit. But reciprocally the récit assumes its identity as narrative discourse only insofar as it tells an histoire [otherwise it would not be narrative . . . ], and only insofar as it is proffered by someone [otherwise . . . it would not of itself be a discourse]. It owes its existence as narrative to its relation to the histoire it tells; it owes its existence as discourse to the narration that proffers it.)

—GÉRARD GENETTE

Suppose—erasing for a moment what we have written under erasure—that we return to our initial position: there is no causality as such in fiction. There may be words, credible or not, referring to it, but causation remains invisible: nothing causes anything in novels unless a reader infers it.

What then are those "gaps" and "weaknesses" we have uncovered in "causal chains"? A gap does not depend upon the presence or absence of inference, but on the degree of assurance with which a reader hypothesizes. Consider two potential gaps in L'Assommoir: Coupeau falls four stories to the street below, and then he is found to have injuries; Gervaise is energetic and self-disciplined, and then she demonstrates traits of slovenliness and
laxity. A relationship of implication, based on life experience (or on newspaper accounts thereof) makes us confident in supposing that Coupeau's fall caused (or explains) his injuries, while Gervaise's apparent transformation provides little ground for inference. Hubris theories, notions that success leads to failure, may fit the récit, but they are highly speculative, espoused with misgivings on the basis of meager evidence. The gap lies not in the inference as such, but in the relative doubt that surrounds it. Texts may or may not allow for ready inference.

"Weakness" in a "causal chain" is characterized by implausibility, but not all implausibilities weaken our inferred connections. Here, it is perhaps less life experience than the story itself which determines how weak an implausibility appears. Again, two contrastive examples illustrate the principle: Coupeau's survival and complete recovery from a four-story plunge; and the incredible sequence of events we have already described leading, in La Bête humaine, to Flore's discovery of Jacques's and Séverine's mutual passion. The implausibility in L'Assommoir appears unnecessary to the causality of the histoire, since Coupeau is cured and ends up working in Etampes as if nothing had happened. Thus the fall could, for all its surface consequences, have been eliminated from the histoire. It could also have been used to explain (had there been lasting physical or psychic damage) Coupeau's drunken decline, but the text eschews that function. The apparent gratuitousness of the implausibility makes of it a "weakness" and sends us looking for writerly reasons, for the intent of narration. On the other hand, Flore's wrecking of Jacques's train and her subsequent suicide seem integral parts of a causal histoire, implied by jealousy. Readers may be more willing to accept a most unlikely series of events when they are linked together by plentiful reasons for inference to achieve an obvious purpose. Refusing to believe in a specific train becoming snowbound near Phasie's house, or in Flore's opening the door just in time, means rejecting all the rest, all the dramatic consequences of these events. Flore's discovery and the excitement that follows make it easier to "swallow" the causally incredible preparation. Our foresight ("when Flore finds out, there'll be Hell to pay!"), based on inferred understanding of the intent of narration at this point, keeps us going, accepting the implausible as possible.

Thus implausibility is not of itself a "weakness." Again it is a matter of the ease of readerly inference: if we can readily infer the narrative necessity for an event, if we can easily see why, for the purposes of narration, it is required, we are more likely to suspend disbelief; the alternative is rejecting
the story as a whole. When we have doubts about narrative purpose and the incredible event's place in it, the implausibility appears as a "weakness" in the "chain." Whether we perceive a gap or a weakness, the plane of narration has a crucial role: if we are confident we understand its purpose, we can fill the gap, accept the implausibility; if we are unsure of the intent of narration, we are impelled to look ever more closely to uncover it, in extratextual allusions, metaphors, and other elements of comparison.

Ease of readerly inference and intent of narration are thus prime determiners of the nature of fictional texts. Brief examination of each will help us begin to define the nature of the changes that have arisen in twentieth-century fiction.

Creation or obliteration of readerly uncertainty in inference is a classifying characteristic of novels. Devices that create uncertainty—absence of inferable causes in the histoire (Gervaise's unexpected avachissement) or in the narration (Coupeau's "gratuitous" and "inconsequential" fall)—represent a lack or "ungrammaticality" in the chain of textually inspired causal inferences. I borrow the term Michael Riffaterre has so masterfully applied with respect to poetry with some hesitation: it implies a "grammar" of implied causation; it implies a "norm," although none exists. But if grammar is defined as presence of causal implication, then its absence, like an ungrammaticality, provides an entry into, or reason for recourse to, the narration.

It should be obvious that dozens if not hundreds of minor gaps (not all causal) appear on each page of traditional novels, all of which are open to reader inference. Most of these surmises are doubtless made without reflection, on the basis of personal experience. We infer that, if a character steps off a sidewalk, she or he is in a street, where there may be carriages (horsedrawn or automobile, according to place and time), other people about, buildings on either side, and a sky above; we assume that a character called "Marceline" has at least the same genetic makeup as a character by that name mentioned forty pages earlier. Although they are individually of minor importance, the sheer numbers of these small hypotheses required by texts produce a wider range of indeterminacy than is often recognized. Indeterminacy goes unnoticed precisely because, in mimetic fiction, it is mostly inconsequential. One of the times we become aware of the essentially hypothetical nature of fictional reality is when a minor inference proves unsound: we suddenly learn, perhaps, that the busy thoroughfare we had created in imagination is "at this hour deserted." But the "realistic"
tradition usually contrives to spare us such shocks: the essential (i.e., causally consequential) details are provided in advance, a technique reminiscent of the now outmoded cinematic convention according to which a scenic space is filmed in its entirety before the cameras move in to show characters acting within that space, so that viewers may integrate them mentally into their surroundings. The avoidance of shock by elimination of the potential for erroneous hypotheses in fiction might be termed, in our “grammar,” the “rule of prepared consequentiality.” Not only must consequential details be provided in traditional novels, but they must be proffered sufficiently in advance to forestall incorrect inferences.

The operation of this rule points to an effort in mimetic fiction to conceal from readers the degree to which the fictional world they enter is open to inference. Our little hypotheses must be automatic, obvious, and apparently error-free, so that our imaginary scenes will seem firm, familiar, and safe for us as readers, no matter how dangerous they may be for the characters. When we imagine fictional people in settings, whether it be Gervaise in her laundry or Jérôme and Alissa in the symmetrical garden at Fongueusemare, there are two areas of potential inference: those elements of the scene which will have a function in events, and those which will not. For the second area, our imagination is relatively free: Jérôme may be imagined, for example, with or without a mustache, for that detail remains inconsequential. But, for a familiar-seeming fictional world, prior presentation of consequential details is a requisite, whether it be explicitly in the récit, implicitly in the histoire (characters out-of-doors may be presumed to be under a sky), or by convention (fictional “existents” such as characters and settings are assumed to remain the same unless we are made aware of the intervention of a force to change them, for example). If Virginie’s fortuitous inheritance may appear to be a weakness in the structure of L’Assommoir, it is because it forces readers to revise the scenario; they have no reason to infer early on that she might be related to anyone who could accumulate a nest egg. Such shocks require us not simply to reevaluate past events, but to redefine the parameters of the possible and the probable in a preestablished situation. They are a standard part of the fictional esthetic nowadays, as we shall see, but destroying readerly inferences after the fact, on the level of the histoire, breaks the rule of prepared consequentiality, a fundamental metonymic dictate of “realism.” This rule for guiding readerly inference in matters of consequence is a primary basis of what Roman Jakobson calls the “profound affinity” binding realism to metonymy.2
As for the "inconsequential" inferences, they constitute the reader's freest creative participation in traditional novels. Through them, we insert ourselves and our life experience into texts, possibly recreating our own identities and injecting our psychological defenses, as Norman Holland suggests, into the background of the action, thus coloring the reading of the text as a whole.

The notions of "textually conditioned" and "free" inferences are, of course, not absolute, but a matter of degree. As I have noted, hypotheses are by definition conditioned: X is a necessary condition that I infer Y. Without the condition, we are in the realm of fancy or guesswork. Even "free" inferences are limited by our experience and conditioned to some extent by the text (in a novel of the 1870s, a "voiture" must be imagined as horse-drawn; there are no blue horses; etc.). Likewise, textually conditioned inferences are partially free: our imaginary visual image of a character may acquire far more detail than a text gives us. Thus the condition of inference is the point at which readers' experience and propensities on one hand, and textual data on the other, conjoin.

If hypotheses are limited on one end by the requirement that there be a condition of inference, they are constrained on the other by the necessity for at least some doubt. By definition, no hypothesis is, as yet, proven "true." A proven hypothesis about a story would be truth itself. Where causal relationships are concerned, such truth is never totally obtainable.

When inferences concern causes and effects in fiction, they rest upon that other set of hypotheses we call the levels of narrative. The *histoire* itself, as a preexisting series of events, is inferred; the *récit* is a condition of that inference, although our experiences and penchants also participate in the condition. The idea of an "author" is also inferred from the existence of a narrative text; in addition to the voice speaking to us from the page, there is an inventor of events for the voice to relate. And the final inference is that of intent: if things happen as they do in a story, there is, so we infer, a purpose behind it. Like all hypotheses, this one is of unassured veracity. As a text-based assumption, it cannot claim to reveal the "true" intentions of any "real" author. It presumes merely that what indeed happens in a novel fulfills an inferable purpose, which we have called the "intent of narration." This inference is conditioned by the existence of récit and histoire taken together, as well as by readerly experience. In this instance, however, it is our acquaintance with literary and other texts which will doubtless provide our personal conditions for inference, rather than our general knowledge of
"life." We infer the intent of narration more from what we know about texts than from what we know about living.

In discovering these levels, as if they lay one above the other, we are engaged in making what might be termed "vertical" hypotheses. The causes and effects we infer on any one of the levels lie in "horizontal" relationship to each other. Thus, the levels appear to mask one another, to impede our vertical inference. Believable causal statements in the récit obviate the search for possible hidden causes in the histoire, and strong, plausibly inferable chains of cause and effect in the histoire tend to reduce our questioning of the narration. Insofar as the mimetic tradition follows the rule of prepared consequentiality, providing creditable conditions for satisfactory inference in advance, the "author" seems to disappear from the text, in casual reading; the histoire itself seems to be the only "intention."

In his essay on verisimilitude and motivation in Figures II, Gérard Genette calls attention to the contrarieties of causal logic inherent in fiction of mimetic tendency. While he is not really discussing cause and effect as such, but rather relationships of implication among functional narrative units, he brings causal vocabulary into the discussion by evoking the causal logic of a seventeenth-century critic (Valincour) to explore the chronological direction of such logic in La Princesse de Clèves:

... M. de Clèves ne meurt pas parce que son gentilhomme se conduit comme un sot, mais le gentilhomme se conduit comme un sot pour que M. de Clèves meure, ou encore, comme le dit Valincour, parce que l'auteur veut faire mourir M. de Clèves et que cette finalité du récit de fiction est l'ultima ratio de chacun de ses éléments.6

(. . . M. de Clèves does not die because his gentleman behaves like a fool, but the gentleman behaves like a fool so that M. de Clèves may die, or even, as Valincour says, because the author wishes to have M. de Clèves die, and because that intention of the fictional narrative is the ultima ratio of each of its elements.)

What the Genette-Valincour argument points to is the difference in causal direction, by narrative levels, which we have observed. If the rule of prepared consequentiality impels "realistic" fiction to provide the causes before revealing the effects in the récit and the histoire, the narration has the effect "in mind," and invents the cause afterward so that the effect may occur. As Sartre's Roquentin discovers (before Genette, but long after Valincour: see chapter nine, below), the beginning of a story implies a purpose, an "end":
it is the effects that have given rise to the causes. Why does the text of *La Bête humaine* inform us (p. 61) of Jacques's hereditary flaw? The answer is to be found in the murder of Séverine (p. 270). On the plane of *narration*, the plan for Séverine's death "causes" the insertion early on of a reference to Jacques's mania. It is of course possible for a real author to create a homicidal maniac and to decide later how to use him or her, but limits of potential use in mimetic fiction are already inherent in the character. We have encountered other examples of the *narration's* reverse logic. The cause of Virginie's humiliation near the start of *L'Assommoir* may be inferred to be the symmetrical humiliation of Gervaise by Virginie near the end. Coupeau's fall from the rooftop subsequently appears symbolic of his moral decline. By inference, readers may conclude that the planned moral decline caused a "desire" for a prefigurative symbol. Coupeau's miraculous recovery separates the incident from all causal chains: with no explicit causes or effects, the incident appears relevant only if it serves a metaphoric function. Just as, for example, in the case of a homicidal maniac who never kills, readers would be faced, if it were not for potential symbolism, with an irrelevancy, and irrelevance is never an assumption in conventional fiction. A causal relationship, at least on the level of *narration*, is assumed for all details.

Genette calls the anterior details ("caused" by a plan for ulterior events) the "motivation." It is a "false" causality inserted in the *histoire* to mask the "true" causality, which I situate in the *narration*, and which is antichronological and based on intent. The function of such masking, for Genette, is verisimilitude. If we know the reasons for an event before it happens, if it is "motivated," it appears more plausible, verisimilar: prepared consequentiality is in operation. But I would suggest, based upon what we have seen about reader assurance in inference, that the relationship has reciprocal elements. For if a world described in a fiction is familiar, verisimilar, readers will be all the more confident in their ability to draw causal assumptions. Thus verisimilitude helps us perceive tightly knit causal chains, gives us assurance in filling the myriad little gaps (and the larger ones, too) between events. Causation is always to be inferred, and familiar worlds reduce the uncertainty in inference. Thus verisimilitude facilitates *histoire*-level causal inference, just as, reciprocally, ready inference may give an impression of the verisimilar.

But while forward logic in the *histoire* gives an impression of "reality," it is the backward logic of the *narration* (which is also, lest we forget,
Denizet's logic) which sets texts apart from the verisimilar reality they pretend to describe. We infer (on solid grounds) that the future-of-text is known on the plane of *narration*; it is difficult to infer such exterior foreknowledge in our real lives. The inferred causality of the *narration* is by nature indexic, as smoke is an index of fire, as a photograph is an index of a camera. Coupeau's fall is, on the level of *narration*, indexic of a project to symbolize; on the level of the *histoire*, it is, in literary transmutation, iconic of the moral fall to follow. Cabuche's fortuitous theft of Grandmorin's watch is indexic of a project in the *narration* to have him falsely accused of murder; in the *histoire*, it is exemplary (perhaps iconic) of coincidence: the "interference of series," the intersection of two otherwise unrelated causal chains. In each case, the apparent structuring of the past by the future in order to bring itself into existence, to justify its existence, marks a divergence from the "real." Textualization, as the result of an inferred intention, can create only a pseudorealitv; the hidden inverse logic of the *narration* undermines the realism of the most realistic *histoire*.

Always inferred as in the *narration*, causality in the *histoire* may seem at times explicit, when words referring to it spring up in conversations, interior monologues, etc. But these are themselves *histoire*-level events: the credibility of such language, as we have seen with Gide's Jérôme, is a matter for reader inference in context. In realistic *histoires*, cause normally precedes effect. Although we have seen no examples of it, narrators can obviously, in the *récit*, give the effect before the cause, which appears in a flashback; thus, in Mauriac's *Thérèse Desqueyroux* for example, the judge gives his verdict of "non-lieu," the reasons for which we will learn half a novel later, at the end of a long analepsis. But analepsis, whether it occurs in the memory of an intradiegetic character as in the Mauriac novel or through another device, is really a strategy of the *récit*. Readers end up reconstituting a chronological *histoire*, presumably with cause before effect if it is realistic.

That is not to say the analeptic (or proleptic) option is of no effect once readers have mentally reestablished chronology; questions concerning why it was selected simply concern the *narration*, while the notion of "how" is to be found in the *récit*. But for purposes of normalization, I will describe analepsis as a divergent form: the "standard" traditional novel is recounted in chronological order of events. Causal elements in the *récit* are explicit and, as such, they call for no direct inference on the part of readers. Indeed, they express inferences of the text, whether they are opinions of the narrative voice or causal assumptions inherent in the linguistic code. The
reader's task at this level is thus to attempt to provide explanations where they are lacking and to determine whether the explanations given are to be believed. Belief, for example, in Jérôme is not essential to the comprehension of his story; statements about it by Juliette, Abel, and Alissa tend to confirm his facts. But his interpretation of events may be put in question, and so his intermittent, clustered explanatory vocabulary is an instrument for judging him rather than for making sense of the histoire. In contrast, the narrator of La Bête humaine must be believed in all he says, or the histoire is senseless: Denizet's récit must appear erroneous (based as it is upon anti-chronological logic, which the narrator seems magically able to eschew) in light of it. The narrator's uncanny, apparent ability to “discover” the past as it happens constitutes a virtually invisible subversion of mimesis—invisible because it is based on absence.

Thus the inference that we are referring to here as causality not only exists on the traditional levels of narrative, but it characterizes and constitutes those levels. Whether our causal hypothesizing is in search of an idea as the ultima ratio of a text (narration), or proposing relationships of implication among incidents (histoire), or gauging the credibility of words (récit), it is the readerly quest for causes that brings narrative levels into existence. As inferences about the text, they do not precede it nor belong in essence to the writerly world. Table 5.1, particularly in columns three and four, summarizes the causal distinction among levels.

Table 5.1's typology is “normalized” essentially in that it does not allow for nonchronological récits (analepsis, etc.), to which I accord special status, and in that it does not admit of causation explicit in the histoire through conversations and verbalized thoughts. These latter are not abnormalities in traditional fiction, but as “events” in the histoire they are read rather as actions; their linguistic component shares the characteristics of the récit, like small récits embedded in the narrator's larger one. What normalization brings to light, particularly in the “cognition” and “direction” columns, are the fundamental distinctions among levels arising from causal analysis.

If the inferable existence of narration, with its counterchronological logic, separates the fictional text neatly from “reality,” what may we infer as its source? The “indexic author” is not real. All we can say is that he, she, or it is the sum of linguistic, social, cultural, psychological, and anthropological codes funneled through the mind and the pen of “someone”: as Genette affirms in Figures III, a text is “proffered by someone,” who is also the
Table 5.1 Normalized Typology of Construed Causation

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<th>Level</th>
<th>Expression</th>
<th>Cognition</th>
<th>Direction</th>
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<tr>
<td>narration</td>
<td>ideal</td>
<td>inferred</td>
<td>antichronological</td>
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<tr>
<td>histoire</td>
<td>incidental</td>
<td>inferred</td>
<td>chronological</td>
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<tr>
<td>récit</td>
<td>linguistic</td>
<td>explicit</td>
<td>chronological</td>
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*narration* ("proféré par quelqu’un . . . la narration qui le profère"). Both the proffering (*qua* event) and the codes are place- and time-specific: fictional texts are a part of history.

But if history is to be significant, differences in causal strategy should be apparent across the years. In what sense, for example, are Zola’s texts causally anterior to Gide’s? Obviously, the narrator in Zola has not yet acquired the importance as causal interpreter which he or she will attain in later fiction. Zola’s *récit* is most often transparent, a slightly tinted glass through which we look directly on the facts and the events of the tale. Causal relationships are usually readily inferred, almost self-evident, or characters explain their motivations in honest conversation or in interior monologues. If, on occasion, a narrator appears only partially reliable, readers are all the more encouraged to seek out causal relationships in the chain of events itself, in the *histoire*. In the canon of modern fiction, from Proust to the new novel, the *récit*, linked by narrators’ perceptions of causality, will be powerfully interposed between reader and *histoire*. (Tastes change, and therefore so do “canons.” But what has been viewed as “typically best” of early twentieth-century French fiction has a strong *récit*, usually by an intradiegetic narrator who provides her or his own causal explanation of events—or who, like Jérôme, fails to do so—events whose causes are often not self-evident.) Zola might well be seen as the culmination of the *histoire*-dominant tradition. *Récits* with narrowly limited perspective have existed all along—notably in the eighteenth century, with the epistolary *Liaisons dangereuses* or *Candide* as prime examples, but also in nineteenth-century France (one thinks inevitably of Fabrice at Waterloo)—but ease of causal inference at the level of the *histoire* is characteristic of the mimetic tradition from Balzac to Zola. Denizet is a quasi exception. Arising out of the *histoire*, he serves as a substitute narrator, providing a competing explanation of events to the one we receive from the narrative voice. In *La Bête humaine*, his circumscribed reconstruction loses in context;
but historically he wins. From Michel and Jérôme to Marcel, Roquentin, and Rieux, the circumscribed, intradiegetic voice dominates, and without competition from a transparent récit. Thus the narrator's magic capacity, bestowed by the narration to achieve its ultima ratio, by which he "discovers the past as it happens," begins to disappear. In this sense, Zola's successors may be more "realistic" than he.

Then too, prepared consequentiality will diminish. Narrators limited to normal, human capacities often discover and relate causes, in Nietzschean fashion, after the effects. Jérôme (apparently) discovers the reasons for Juliette's engagement to Teissières after the fact (although some astute readers may suspect them in advance), and he presents Alissa's diary near the close of his récit, at the point in the timeline of the story when it entered his life, although it may provide some causal explanations (or aid in inferring them) for elements of his foregoing récit. With certain exceptions, of which I shall evoke an example or two, stories will tend to admit to the inverse logic of narration, instead of seeking to conceal it.

Furthermore, Zola appears willing to allow for confident inference of causation within narrative sequences. Typically, major gaps in the causal chain occur between sequences; the long, explicitly connected chains of La Bête humaine are doubtless the exception. Readers are free to surmise relationships that would unite the fragments, but Zola's texts provide a mythic, metaphoric substratum, which guides our choices and tends to limit readerly interpretation. Indeed, the vocabulary of the "mythical anthropology" Jean Borie uncovers so convincingly in the Rougon-Macquart novels can be read as a lexicon of pre-Freudian psychology: mythic motivations are, in any case, "causes," although their expression is metaphoric rather than metonymic. Causes can, in this sense, be readily inferred for most of the events in the Rougon-Macquart series: "Satanic forces" is perhaps as reality-referential as a metaphor for human motivations as is "Oedipus complex." Even La Bête humaine appears to accept the principle of causation, while raising doubts about human ability to observe and textualize it in open systems, either before or after the effect. Obviously aware of the loss of truth value in tendentious explanations (Denizet), Zola's texts are not above using causation to mask (in the manner described by Genette) as mimetic certain plot deviations developed apparently for structural effect: the Gervaise-Virginie reversal, the Misard chain. The underlying presumption in this practice is clear: readily inferable causation works hand in hand with verisimilitude. The assumption that the verisimilar illusion is "real-
istic" has less currency in the twentieth century, as the circumscribed narrator replaces the omniscient one. Truth value will gain in importance at the expense of an illusory mimesis.

If we view novels as devised solely for our entertainment, concealment of the narration's manipulations behind the chronological causality of the histoire is perhaps less than crucial. But if we see the text as providing a "lesson in life," truth value reasserts itself and the problematics of textualization acquire a new seriousness. When novels appear to convey epistemological, ontological, or ethical knowledge, as we saw with Gide, readers become wary: the "age of suspicion," as Nathalie Sarraute called it, has arrived.

Notes

6. Genette, p. 94.
7. Genette, p. 97. He concludes by defining the "value" or "profitability" (rendement) of a narrative unit as its function minus its motivation. Thus Cabuche's theft of the kerchief (cum watch) would seem relatively "profitable," since it has a simple motivation (easily acquired adoration for Séverine) and an important function (the irony of his conviction for murder). On the other hand, Flore's suicide serves no histoire-level function at all, causes
(implies) nothing; yet it is motivated by a long and extraordinarily complex chain of events. The suicide would appear to be a total loss as a unit, unless its "profit" derives from the very drama surrounding it.

