It is difficult to justify the inclusion of a chapter on myth, one of the oldest forms of human expression, in a section devoted to modernist and postmodernist texts; it is still more difficult to argue for its inclusion among “nonrectilinear causal strategies,” when straight-line causation is almost characteristic of myth. Suffice it to say that mythic expression was not an unpopular vehicle in the modernist period, and that its rectilinearity provides an interesting special case of that phenomenon, perhaps more revelatory of causal logic than of myth itself.

_Plot_ is the standard translation of _mythos_ in Aristotle’s _Poetics_; I use the term here rather as a synonym for _histoire_. The foregoing Proust chapter evoked the erosion of an objective concept of the _histoire_, as a term referring ever more insistently to each reader’s individual creation. In general, however, mythic _récit_ can be read as exemplary, and thus as “authoritarian” in Susan Suleiman’s sense of the term: “redundancies overdetermine the possible inferences from the _récit_, so that readers tend to constitute the same _histoire_—a series of causally connected events, that is, a traditional “plot.””

But if Proust’s causal strategies indicate the need for redefinition of “_histoire_,” the notion of “myth” raises questions, as the foregoing may
suggest, about the nature of “narration.” The usefulness of the expressions we have adopted in this area—“intent of text,” “intent of narration”—lies in the fact that they designate an underlying purpose in texts without suggesting that that aim is anterior to or causative of the text itself. For that is precisely what inference discovers: texts have an inferable purpose, but they are not necessarily themselves products of that purpose nor created as agents for its accomplishment. So long as it is understood that texts come first and reader inference about them afterward, ambiguity is avoided. In this system, texts generate, with readerly cooperation, certain meanings, which are in turn inferred to be their ultima ratio. The manifest circularity: text → meaning → intention → text (or récit + histoire → narration → récit + histoire, or story → inferred author → story), is useful and cleverly descriptive of relationships. But if texts are to be seen as productive of generalized essences, of meaning that lies beyond their own specificity and that of their readers, then it becomes interesting to know where the circle “begins,” or where the generalized meaning arises.

Ricoeur would seem to start with the text, when he defines myth as “a symbol developed in the form of a récit.” (He might also have defined it—although he did not—as “a récit developed in the form of a symbol,” or as “a récit read as a symbol.”) Thus the symbol, with the cosmic, oneiric, and linguistico-poetic origins he posits for it, appears to precede its development as a récit. But symbolization is a form of human mediation of the real, a verbal mediation, a “matrix of symbolic meanings as words” (p. 18), so that the verbal stratum would appear to mark the “beginning” of a symbol, although textualization in the form of a temporal récit (production of myth) would appear to come later. Yet, when it comes to reading mythic texts, Ricoeur suggests that mythic meaning is part of a temporal reading sequence, for he describes a “signifié primaire,” a primary and literal signified, reminiscent of what we have been calling histoire, and a “signifié second,” a second signified based upon the first, and ineffable: an emotional, experiential signified. This second signified may “make us think,” but it is not in itself a “thought.” Is it the mediation of “reality” (cosmic, oneiric, poetic) in a text that produces myth, or is it the readerly experience, mediating the text to attain the “signifié second”?

The answer is important, and it seems to arise in Ricoeur’s distinction between myth and allegory. How one reads, he seems to say, makes all the difference: what distinguishes them is a way of reading rather than a textual structure. With allegory, he points out, the first signified, the literal sense,
is contingent, and the second signified is sufficiently exterior to it to be directly accessible. The relationship between the two of them is thus perceived as one of “translation”: once we have deciphered the code, translated the literal *histoire* into its more general meaning, we can discard the *histoire* as useless. But historically, he shows, allegory was less a literary procedure for the artificial creation of pseudosymbols than a way of reading myths, less a literary than a hermeneutic concept. *Allegory* consists, in this sense, of treating myths as disguised philosophy, so that, once we have pierced the disguise, we can recover an intellectual “sense”—a thought or idea (p. 23). It would seem, conversely, that for myths to be what they are, to avoid being “allegorized,” they must be read properly, that they must receive a mythic reading to achieve full status as myths.

Ricoeur points to a venerable tradition of allegorical interpretation, and it is with that tradition that our causal model obliges us to make common cause. Primed to recover inferable relationships, it is not suited to discovery by spontaneous intuition of essentially ineffable, experiential knowledge. All we can do is to infer, from the *récit*, the succession of specific events termed *histoire*; insofar as the *histoire* encourages interpretation in more general terms, search for the essential within the existential, we move toward a linear “signifié second,” a series of relationships from which we can infer an intent behind the *histoire*. The second signified will have to be of a sort that can serve as *ultima ratio* for causal relationships in the *histoire*; our belief in comprehension by inference and in an authoritative narrative “act” thus leads us away from the spontaneity of mythic reading toward a more nearly stabilized, authoritarian reading. *Récit* conditions inference of *histoire*, which in turn conditions inference of *narration*: the level of *narration* now “becomes” the allegorical abstraction of myth. A method which infers “authors” and “intentions” will not readily admit of the direct, noninferential understanding necessary for the discovery of myth in mythos; it can, however, “allegorize” quite interestingly, as we shall see.

Myth and symbol are the ultimate generalities, expressing essence by means of existence. But myth differs from symbol in its development “in the form of a *récit*”: chronology enters the picture. With a discrete symbol, a relationship is established between a primary and a secondary, more abstract signified. But a myth, operating in time, presents a relationship on the literal level of two or more events or signifieds, a relationship which must signify an analogous relation on the symbolic level. In order for a
relationship to be generalized, to be of the essence, it must be unfailingly repeatable, replicable at each insertion into human experience. (Creation stories, such as those in Genesis, the union of Uranus and Gaea, and the Big Bang, are the obvious exception: first causes can be first only once.) It is the causal bond that insures the universal applicability of allegorical truth in myth, and it is literal-level causation that leads to the discovery of symbolic causation. From Eden to Achilles's heel, the functioning of causality is the subject and structure of mythic exemplary tales.

If myth is replicable in human experience, it must be also repeatable in texts: the same symbolic "message" may be rendered in different literal forms. Thus Jesus can tell us about the rejoicing in heaven caused by the repentance of sinners in three parables: the Lost Coin, the Lost Sheep, and the Prodigal Son. The myth of the Dying King (sons overthrowing fathers or father figures) has been repeated from Sophocles to Shakespeare to Sartre. But in noting repetition, rather than replicability, in viewing myths spatially, like a series of surfaces that can be stacked in the manner of playing cards (so that vertical lines strategically passed through the "deck" would find at each card an identical mark), we risk losing sight of the linear dynamics inherent in the causal links.

Mythic novels tell specific stories that are temporally and geographically related to the real world, but each refers, on the symbolic level, to an extratemporal causal matrix. Works since 1870 exhibiting such relationships of relationships include Camus's La Peste, Cocteau's Les Enfants terribles, Gide's Thésée, Giono's Regain, Malraux's La Condition humaine, and Zola's La Faute de l'abbé Mouret, to all of which we may turn for examples of allegorical causation in mythic texts.

While these texts present no direct invitation to interpret, of the kind included in many of Jesus's parables, they employ a number of allusive strategies (usually more than one per novel) urging readers to seek a "signifié second." Frequently one finds a direct reference to the existence of a more general superstructure, of a symbolic level on which the text can be experienced: Thésée and La Condition humaine, for example, evoke it in their titles, La Peste in its epigraph, and Les Enfants terribles in the text (pp. 83, 92). Proper names can also serve as an onomastic clue to the existence of a symbolic parallel: Faute de l'abbé Mouret (the Edenic "Paradou," in which the abbé Mouret "mourait"); Peste (Joseph "Grand," "insignificant and retiring hero," p. 1331); Thésée (proper names repeat directly those of the tradi-
tional myth). Clear parallels to a preexisting intertext, to another incarnation of the same mythic structure, encourage readers to experience the text on both literal and symbolic levels: *Faute de l'abbé Mouret* (the biblical Eden story); *Thésée, Peste* (relationship of characters' situation—notably that of Rambert and Rieux—to that of Sisyphus, and thus ultimately to Camus's *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*; noteworthy structural parallels to *Condition humaine*, suggesting a common myth as matrix for both); *Regain* (parallels to ancient fertility rites, to rites of passage, to cultural transformations relative to the passage of human societies from the condition of hunter-gatherers to agriculture); *Enfants terribles* (relationship to primitive and Freudian concepts of "taboo"). Novels also point to their mythic nature by metaphoric repetition or even by internal interpretation of their own symbols: *Faute de l'abbé Mouret; Regain* (e.g., burial of the dead described as planting of seed—Panturle's mother, Mamèche and her husband); *Enfants terribles* (e.g., repeated theater metaphors, spheres—white snowball at the beginning, black ball of poison at the end); *Condition humaine* (Gisors's general interpretations of specific realities, e.g., Kyo's failure to recognize his own recorded voice); *Thésée* (Daedalus's explanations, pp. 1430–38). And at times, causal implausibilities at the literal level suggest that the true reason for occurrences can be sought only on the level of the "second signified": *Faute de l'abbé Mouret* (incredible size of and unlikely flora in the walled garden of Paradou, an essential condition of the abbé's "fall"); *Regain* (uncanny ability of Mamèche to lead Arsule to Panturle, to be his bride, by flitting through the trees and grasses; remarkable powers of Gaubert's plow to produce a rich harvest in a bad year); *Enfants terribles* (unlikely death of Michael before consummation of his marriage to Elizabeth; improbable return of the malefic spheroid). By such means, novels alert readers to the existence of a second level of meaning, to a symbolic matrix implicit in the narration informing their literal *histoire*.

This symbolic structure constitutes a second causal chain (often a simple, straight-line construction, although with "collective" novels such as *Condition humaine* and *Peste*, the organization can be quite complex), parallel to the caused events on the literal level. Mythic stories in which the literal causation appears implausible seem the most truly magical, for, to complete the causal chain of the literal *histoire*, readers must have recourse to the causation operative on the symbolic level, bringing myth "down," as it were, into mythos, where it appears to function magically, and thus promoting mythos itself to the level of myth. Peter Brooks describes such
direct interaction between narration and récit, in my sense of these terms, as “a perverse logic of narrative,” what classic rhetoric calls “metalepsis of the author,” in which an action is attributed to the “author,” when it should have an agent in the récit. The relationship of metalepsis to magical happenings has already been hinted at with respect to L'Assommoir (if one admits metalepsis, a “mythic” reading emerges) and alluded to in reference to Proust (where readers acquire “magic” powers). And in Regain, for example, Maméche's death remains unexplained on the literal level (is it from old age, starvation, overexertion?), but, since in dying she brings about the sexual union of Panturle and Arsule and thus the rebirth of Aubignane, her death appears a magically successful sacrifice, revelatory of the notion in narration that sacrificial death is a cause of renewed life in nature (“si le grain ne meurt . . .”). It seems all the more magical in that she foresaw it as inherent in her chosen action (laying out before departure her own burial sheets), and in her ultimate “burial” in the sheets in which Arsule and Panturle consummate their union—a random and hasty choice on Panturle's part, when fortuitous rats were discovered to have ruined her preselected shroud. What are mere odd coincidences on the literal level become injected with magic when causation from the matrix is imported to fill the void, to explain the implausible; and the histoire thus partakes of the atemporal, essential quality of the “second signified,” inferred in the narration.

Such a “promotion” of the histoire is evident in Les Enfants terribles as well, where an element of the matrix structure presents taboo as a source of masochistic pleasure. Paul's beloved Dargelos (antihomosexual taboo) fortuitously provides Paul with a source of pleasurable suffering in the lung-disease-producing snowball, and at last in the ball of poison. Still more obviously fortuitous on the literal level is the uncanny resemblance of Agathe to Dargelos; she can only be understood as a socially acceptable (because female) reincarnation of the adorable androgyne. Her presence in the little coterie sets up the conflict between the anti-incest taboo (represented by Paul's dominating sister, Elizabeth) and homosexual desire, until Paul and Elizabeth's simultaneous death becomes, in the last pages, a mutual orgasm. Because the double return of Dargelos, in the person of Agathe and in the gift of the second baneful spheroid, remains unexplained, mysterious, the tale is elevated from a story of adolescents growing up unsupervised to a representation of the universal power of taboo.

By the same token, once the power of mythic causation is felt to be at
work in a given histoire, such specific explanations as may appear in the récit are ironically downgraded. Arsule arrives in the region of Aubignane as a kind of cart-pulling slave to Gédémus, a knife-and-scissors grinder. Elizabeth meets Agathe when she goes to work in a fashion house where the latter models. Such particular information serves to render plausible the antecedents of the implausible. For the real purpose of specific causes on the literal level is to be implausible, or to bespeak by their presence their absence elsewhere. As we have seen, particular causal vocabulary establishes the expectation of explanation that will impel readers, when believable explanation is lacking, to interrogate the narration. Such questioning, when the reader finds the mythic answer that explains the implausibilities and fills all the gaps, produces a metacommunication; the récit transforms the histoire from a sequence of events into a language, into that code which, once deciphered, suggests the “second signified.” And so the mythic histoire is elevated toward universality insofar as it assumes elements of metacausation from the matrix structure, while the causation of the récit, when it is credible and specific, is depreciated. At least, in the competition between the two parallel causal chains, that is what usually happens.

It is just possible, however, for the causes functioning in the histoire and present in the récit to win a kind of victory, ironically downgrading mythic causation in the narration. That is what happens in Gide’s Thésée. When a given myth has already received a consecrated expression, retelling normally retains the causal matrix while changing characters and situation as well as temporal and geographical setting. Thus, in La Faute de l’abbé Mouret, Zola preserves the mythic causal chain of temptation-fall-expulsion, while imposing it upon the specifics of characters different from the biblical Adam and Eve, in a different place and time. Thésée, on the other hand, retains the characters, places, and events of the classical expression of the myth; what changes in the récit and histoire is the traditional causation.

Traditionally, for example, the labyrinth is a complex maze of passageways and the Minotaur a flesh-eating monster; in the Gidean text, the labyrinth turns out to be a palace of youthful pleasures that no one wants to leave (complete with a narcotic smoke, wafted on the air, to weaken the will), and the Minotaur a physically beautiful but stupid bovine. Thus, in the ancient versions, Theseus’s escape is the result of strength and courage well used against royal power and vengeful cruelty, of cunning deployed against Daedalus’s wise strategies; it is a conquest of youth over the power
and wisdom of age, the stuff traditional rites of passage are made of. In the Gidean récit, the hero must overcome, not obstacles imposed by others, but his own youthful pleasure-seeking drives; Ariadne's thread is primarily symbolic ("tangible figuration of duty," as Daedalus puts it—Thésée, p. 1433). It represents the social responsibility of Theseus's royal origins—which, noblesse oblige, he fulfills remarkably well later on as king of Athens. Like its ancient counterparts, Thésée presents a rite of passage, but it involves a victory not over adult power but over the free concupiscence of youth. The cause of Theseus's triumph now is the sacrifice of individual pleasure for the eventual benefit of society. By changing the immediate and literal causes of struggle (complex maze becomes charming garden) and therefore the qualities required to win, the récit downgrades ironically the traditional mythic causal chain: socialization replaces strength and shrewdness as the modern means to adulthood. But depreciation of the traditional structure obviously does not divest the story of mythic qualities. Instead, the new causation creates a new and highly valorized myth in place of the old one. Change in causality at the literal level produces a displacement of the traditional myth at the symbolic level; retention of the original characters and setting makes the displacement evident.

So it is that the lesson of the myth, its allegorical "signifié second," is contingent upon the causal structures of the récit, rather than upon characters, times and settings. Where causation expressed in the récit is plausible and explicit, it appears superficial, weakened by irony. Where it is implausible or absent, it is replaced, by readers, with the mythic causes from the same chronological position in the matrix chain, causes that often seem magically powerful in context. If a given allegorical matrix has been previously expressed in a text, the choice for subsequent authors would seem to be to retain the causal matrix and change the contingent trappings (as in La Faute de l'abbé Mouret), or to use the same personnages and décors in which to animate a new causal matrix (Thésée), in competition with that of its "ancestor."

When a mythic novel seeks to unveil a matrix that has not been expressed before, it relies on allusive strategies like those listed above to awaken readers to the existence of its "signifié second." I have pointed out elsewhere8 the mythic matrix common to Malraux's La Condition humaine and Camus's La Peste. I would argue that La Condition humaine (1933) is the first novel to present the Absurd as a mythic matrix. It indicates by the universality of its title a commitment to portray all humanity through the
activity of individuals. The metaphysical notion of absurdity is subdivided in this “collective” novel into its constituent practical problems: notably inevitable suffering (despite our hunger for happiness), unavoidable death (though we wish to live), and ineluctable isolation (in spite of our longing to communicate with others). The récit presents a collectivity of individuals imprisoned in a closed city and facing a common enemy. Each character has his or her own story, with its literal causal chain; each one combats elements of the absurd dilemma. Thus the group, functioning as an individual and as the true “hero” of the novel, confronts the Absurd on all its levels. *La Peste* (1947) repeats the basic literal structure (closed city, collectivity, common “enemy”) and evokes a similar matrix.

Both novels have characters who strive to escape the absurdity of the human condition: Clappique (*Condition humaine*), and Rambert early on (*Peste*). Each has characters who would like to conquer death (*Condition humaine*: Tchen, and perhaps Kyo, by martyrdom for “the Cause” and an afterlife in human memory; *Peste*: Tarrou, and perhaps Rieux, through medicine) and suffering (*Condition humaine*: Kyo, May; *Peste*: Rieux, Tarrou, and others). Both have characters seeking to overcome their isolation and commune with others: Katow succeeds temporarily through a gift of cyanide and a handclasp *in extremis* (*Condition humaine*); Joseph Grand “gets through” to Rieux in a sincere and symbolic prose sentence: “Ma bien chère Jeanne, c’est aujourd’hui Noël” (*Peste*, p. 1434). But the literally expressed causation of these individual stories is depreciated with respect to that of the matrix. For example, a primary reason why Kyo, Katow, and other communists are captured by the forces of Chang Kai-Shek is Clappique’s failure to warn them; caught up in the fever of gambling, he remains at the gaming tables until it is too late. But on the level of narration, the mythic cause is obvious: Kyo and Katow must be shown imprisoned and awaiting the ultimate unpleasantness (burning alive in a locomotive’s fire box) for the purpose of illustrating two possible reactions to a universal problem—the approach of death. Clappique’s failure is a ploy on the literal level (*histoire*) to justify a symbolic segment. Such ploys are essential to mythic novels of the Absurd, where nothing can appear superficially implausible or coincidental. If indeed implausibilities or major causal gaps appeared, readers could infer mythic causation, as we have seen, thus importing potentially “magical” or “supernatural” overtones into a text that must deny all mystical power as antithetical to the Absurd. (But the “tragic” readings of Malraux—in the sense of classical poetics—that have crept in
suggest that some gaps do exist.) Thus the individual stories of the characters in these novels are set forth in generally clear and plausible causal chains (with historical justification in *La Condition humaine*), even though readers alert to the mythic dimension will see matrix causation as determinant and literal causation as a ploy.

Traditional myths are by nature judgmental: if you do A, B will result, and B is good (or bad). The rebirth of Aubignane is good (*Regain*); the inability of Elizabeth and Paul to overcome or escape the constraints of taboo is tragic (*Enfants terribles*). But with absurdity, nothing is ultimately good or evil in a universal sense: judgments of that ilk are a matter for individual determination. Both *La Condition humaine* and *La Peste* are remarkably free of judgment. Given the universal dilemma, each character acts in situation and faces the consequences of her or his choices. But the récit judges neither choices nor results. A fascist, for example, is given the chance to explain and defend his torturing of communists in *La Condition humaine*; neither Rambert (for seeking to flee) nor Cottard (for profiting from the epidemic) is condemned, in *La Peste*, for his decisions. The absurd myth impels the reader, likewise embroiled in the human condition, to judge which strategies against the common peril appear more nearly successful or more admirable.

The matrix of the absurdist myth is thus obviously not a simple, rectilinear causal strand. The conjoined paradigms which make it up resemble one another in that they have their original cause in the absurd paradox: on the one hand a human limitation and on the other a profound desire to overcome it. This tension has as its effect an action, which results, in the absolute sense, in failure. Some actions may be seen by readers as achieving partial, temporary success, or as representing, even in failure, more admirable attitudes. On the literal level, these "collective" texts share some characteristics with the "track-and-sidetrack" structure, with general parallelism among the branches, but pretension to universal truth establishes a "signifié second," a second level causally parallel to the literal récit and interacting with it.

The causally oriented, inferential spectacles I am wearing have thus served to uncover the allegorical traits in mythic tales. These are hardly without value: allegory announces the power of the general over the specific, of permanent causal laws over the seemingly random circumstances of daily life. Insofar as myths have ethical and religious overtones, allegory repeats and reaffirms moral and spiritual values in each new *histoire* that
incarnates it. Retelling the power of mythic causation in ever different specific situations, as new mythic stories “repeat” old myths, constitutes a ritual act of renewal. La Mamèche of Regain is not Demeter, but death and rebirth find worthy celebration, in both human and agricultural terms, in Giono as in the early “Homeric” hymns. Even when mythic novels will not valorize religion (e.g., La Condition humaine, La Peste), they magnify the importance of the second signified by incarnating it in an emotion-filled context.

But the ineffable, purely mythic content to which Ricoeur points is an understanding born of comparison, of spatial relationships foreign to causality, which recall the helicopter-motorcycle comparison at the close of chapter three. From above, every element of the landscape stands in perpetual relation to every other; the dynamic, earth-bound motorcycle yields an inevitably reductive view. It is, like language itself, linear, directional, and temporal, while the completeness of the view from above, ineffable, escapes the linearity of language. For it is directionality that characterizes allegorical reading: there is a beginning (récit), a “primary” signified (literal histoire) and then a “second” one, which, once attained, supercedes its predecessor, thus left behind, discarded. The comparative view, the view from above, is nondirectional and extratemporal: all kinds of signifieds, regardless of the ordinal numbers that may be critically applied to them, coexist. Writing and reading are radically simultaneous; there is no beginning, no ending of a mythmaking “process.” It is rather the directional optic of causality that imposes linear order. Where Ricoeur can see, for example, fear and purification as two views of a same reality (p. 40), causal analysts must observe cause and consequence. They can “compare” only perception and memory, not simultaneous perceptions. While language makes Ricoeur’s analysis seem at times directional (primary → second, symbol → development), it remains spatial and ultimately comparative.

The causalist argument makes allegorical expression a part of the intent of narration, so that the general causal stance of narration (e.g., sacrificial death brings new life) is itself a cause of the histoire (Mamèche must die in Regain so that her death clearly brings about the rebirth of Aubignane), which allows us to infer the narration. Only readers’ conditions of inference, springing from their own life experience, can guarantee, from the causal viewpoint, the “veracity,” the universal applicability of the myth, for they are all that is outside the circular game of mirrors which is the text itself and its levels of narrative. Only readerly recognition of mythic qualities in texts
can set essence and existence in relationship. Whence, from the etiological position, the basic (allegorical) structure: the parallel causal strands of primary and secondary signifieds, interacting and competing to supplant one another, often with delightful irony, across the suture that (un-)separates them.

The paradox of an absurdist “myth” lies of course with the fact that it must uncover the eternal and the universal despite nihilistic premises. Absurdist writers tend to present the Absurd as a primary cause of human unhappiness and revolt, while they express, on the other hand, profound doubts about the objective existence of causation; for them, derivation of causes and effects, of explanations, from observed phenomena constitutes subjective interpretation, in a world in which psyche and physical reality are irrevocably divorced. An absurdist strategy for portraying this problematical causal outlook forms the subject of the next chapter.

Notes


6. Suleiman, pp. 28–45, describes this phenomenon. Reading for cause and effect of course encourages the reading of mythic texts as *exempla*.

