Narrating Trauma in Elizabeth Bowen's
The House in Paris

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"What have I done?" This is the question Karen Michaelis asks herself at three o'clock in the morning, lying awake in a hotel room after she has just slept with Max Ebhart, the fiancé of her friend Naomi Fisher. Though such a question does not particularly strike the reader—the reflex to evaluate the consequences of an event like an affair, one so ripe with social repercussions, seems logical—that question swells and erupts with more questions: what does it mean to evaluate the causal dynamics of a relationship which exists “outside life” (200)? How does a relationship which exists “outside life,” as if in a “dream,” interact with temporality (179)? What are the implications of such a bond on someone's sense of identity—and, inherently, on their sense of place, belonging, and home? And, critically, how does the question “What have I done?” serve to illuminate, or complicate, what Peter Brooks terms, “our compulsions to read” (Brooks, 36)? In order to begin answering some of these questions in regards to Elizabeth Bowen's novel The House in Paris, it will be useful to activate a particular critical framework in which narrative, temporality, and the idea of trauma can interact.

Peter Brooks, in his essay “Reading for the Plot,” establishes the way in which the formal device of narrative imposes a coherency on events that would otherwise seem arbitrary or unordered. He claims that “Narrative demarcates, encloses, establishes limits, orders” (Brooks 4). Already in this description rings the clear language of boundaries, the idea of which inevitably intuits, on the other side, transgression, chaos and violation. Elemental to the understanding of Brooks' use of narrative is the artificial, composite nature of its construction: it is a thread that strings together separate events, forming them into a perceived whole. Plot, then, becomes a human activity, one integral to the process of interpretation. It is the need to navigate between what happened, and why it happened, when it did. That is to say, it determines how we read
events. Brooks then distinguishes between "narrative" and "plot": though narrative refers broadly to the cogent whole, plot, specifically, becomes the thread "of interconnectedness and intention which we cannot do without in moving through the discrete elements—incidents, episodes, actions—of a narrative" (Brooks 5). The notion of "plotting," then, becomes a process, a dynamic interpretation of events. That Brooks conceives of plot as a technique "which we cannot do without" anticipates, furthermore, the trauma that comes from the inability to plot and that drives the compulsion to "read." To clarify the interpretive quality of plot, Brooks calls upon the Russian formalist distinction of fabula and sjuzet. The fabula corresponds to "what really happened" (Brooks 13). The raw—which is to say, uninterpreted, undigested and unfinished—version of events constitutes the fabula. The sjuzet, by contrast, describes the order of events in the text as we experience them. This narrative distinction gives us a vocabulary with which to discuss the trauma that hovers around The House in Paris.

Trauma, in the novel, becomes staged on the level of the sjuzet. The fabula/sjuzet distinction will prove indispensable to our analysis because of the novel's temporal displacement: the present comes before the past. Thus our experience of events in the "Present" section linger over our interpretation of the following "Past" section. The text's structure, its gaps and its characterization serve to enact trauma. People and events that are non-integratable become exemplary of an elusive trauma which looms over the narrative. More specifically, the central trauma exfoliated within the text erupts from Karen's year in the house in Paris. Her exposure to narrative possibilities that cannot sustain integration into her life in London lasso her to events of the past. What we find, however, is that the "trauma" is not a particular event but a constellation of circumstances and possibilities around that year. Though it originates that year, the wound is reopened, and deepened, by Karen's visit to her Aunt Violet's house in Ireland, and finally, most profoundly, by her affair with Max Ebhart. The trauma stems from the way in which these events
and relationships leave Karen bereft of a true home, fragmenting her identity. She cannot integrate that year in Paris, or her relationship with Max, into her home space, the locatable container for her identity; she cannot integrate it into her previously mapped out self-narrative, in which she marries and builds a home with Ray; finally, she cannot integrate it into her need for a linear, forward moving conception of time. The different locations throughout the novel—the house in Paris, Chester Terrace, Mount Iris, and the border towns where the affair takes place—provide a landscape through which we see evidenced, diversely, narrative and temporal coherency and fragmentation, sedimentation and containment. Though Karen tries to impose narrative and temporal coherency on her life—tries “re-plot” discrete events and episodes, in the vein which Brooks tell us is so necessary—she ultimately fails. Her failure is embodied, literally, by Leopold; both his existence and her inability to meet him in the “Present” sections of the novel gesture to this failure. She cannot “plot” Leopold in her life, cannot integrate him into her narrative. Thus the novel enacts the impossibility of containing a trauma intimately linked, as we will see later, with sexuality.

The dynamic process of plotting, moreover, is overlaid with the presence of time. That it to say, in order to plot—in order to collate events in a meaningful pattern—we must understand where those events end. We cannot properly place an event, “plot” an event, until we know where it must fit in order to cohere with the rest. Plot then becomes “the active quest of the reader for those shaping ends that, terminating the dynamic process of reading, promise to bestow meaning and significance on the beginning and middle” (Brooks 19). The *sjuzet*, then, implicates “time-boundedness” (Brooks 22). A structure must be bound by a proper end in order to have a resonant, and meaningful, middle and beginning.

It is here that we call upon Frank Kermode's analysis in *The Sense of an Ending* of what, exactly, it means “to end,” to more fully crystallize Brooks' ideas about narrative coherency and
plotting. Kermode predicates his analysis on what he sees as “a need in the moment of existence to belong, to be related to a beginning and to an end” (Sense 4). Critically for our analysis of Bowen’s novel is the deployment of the phrase “a need...to belong.” The need to belong expands the ideas of plotting, narrative coherency, and placement of events past its structural application to immobile text: now, it seems, personal identity comes into play, sense of place and harmony with our surroundings. Kermode suggests that in order to form what he calls a “concordant structure,” one where the beginning, middle and end are in harmony with each other, “we project ourselves—a small, humble elect, perhaps—past the End, so as to see the structure whole, a thing we cannot do from our spot of time in the middle” (Sense 8). He implies that to bestow meaning on the whole requires a “sense of an ending”—a sense of where the narrative will end up—which can be performed mentally. The novel’s characterization of Karen becomes exemplary of what happens when someone enacts that mental projection “from our spot of time in the middle.” Kermode suggests, like Brooks, that there is a way in which we twist, torque and “manipulate data in order to achieve the desired consonance” (Sense 9). Just as plotting involves dynamic interpretation, so, too, does the construction of concordant structures. But a structure, nonetheless, has an undeniably fixed quality. We desire the bounded quality of narrative—a neat beginning and end—in order to comprehensively frame it. Proper containment begets belonging, orientation and security. There is a threatening quality, then, to a narrative which cannot be contained by a clearly demarcated beginning and end; unbounded time seems to menace.

Leopold’s presence in the framing sections of the novel exemplifies time as unbounded. He becomes an “unplottable,” unassimilable figure. He vehemently desires change, chafing against his scripted place geographically and socially. Critically, though, the “un-plottable” nature of Leopold introduces a second layer of trauma. While the schema of trauma, wounding, scarring and healing is mobilized through the characterization of Karen, Mme. Fisher, Leopold
and Max, it is equally present on the structural level of the text itself. On the level of the novel's sjuzet, we can think about the “Present” section of the novel as retroactively split open by an eruptive “Past” section that follows.

The way that the narrative stages temporal dislocation recalls, in the past's encroaching movement on the present, Henri Bergson's concept of the experience of duration: “Duration is the continuous progress of the past which gnaws into the future and which swells as it advances” (Bergson 725). Duration is figured here as a predator, a threatening current which, in its “endless flow,” consumes and breaks down any boundary with which it is confronted. What is more, Bergson's description of the way in which we perceive our psychic states in time echoes Brooks' assertion about plot as the unifier that we use to navigate discrete moments. Bergson claims that “Instead of a flux of fleeting shades merging into each other, [our attention] perceives distinct and, so to speak, solid colors, set side by side like the beads of a necklace; it must perforce then suppose a thread, also itself solid, to hold the beads together” (Bergson 724). This evocation of solid colors “set side by side like the beads of a necklace,” held together by an imagined thread, evocatively recalls the thread “of interconnectedness and intention which we cannot do without in moving through the discrete elements—incidents, episodes, actions—of a narrative” (Brooks 5). Again we come back to the apparent need to impose order and coherence, to “plot” individual states, events, or memories so as to retrospectively give them meaning. In the way that the novel traffics between the past and the present, the reader actually experiences an active sense of duration. In this process we become implicated, as readers, in the trauma of the novel's sjuzet.

On a fundamental, structural level, then, The House in Paris does not contain itself: the past quite literally “gnaws” into another temporal section.

The novel's construction thus resists the imposition of a “ending.” Though the “Past” section is neatly framed by the two “Present” sections, trauma pervades the entire narrative; our
reading becomes burdened by a looming sense of instability, anxiety and death. Despite its trafficking between the past and the present—an attempt to "plot," coherently, the trauma of that year in Paris—the *sjuzet* does not offer a sufficient explanation of Karen's failure to meet Leopold in the "Present," the original instigation for the flashback. Cathy Caruth, situating herself through Freud, theorizes in her introduction to *Unclaimed Experiences* that trauma's injurious power comes not from a specific wound but "the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available" (Caruth 4). The trauma, then, is not necessarily a discrete event but—as I will try to suggest in my own analysis of *The House in Paris*—a constellation of events and figures which become, in their looped indeterminacy, the "story of a wound that cries out."

From the beginning of the flashback, we see Karen's life before the the affair framed in terms of narrative coherence, limits and containment. Though already engaged to Ray—her cousin's cousin, a relation which gives the potential union "that touch of inbreeding that makes a marriage so promising" (69)—she feels the friction of that container: "She had firm ground under her feet, but the world shrank; perhaps she was missing the margin of uncertainty" (68). Spatial and sexual constriction, then, become dominant tropes in her life. She is, in a sense, cocooned from change, submerged in insularity. The language of geo-physicality operating here in the phrase "the world shrank" foregrounds the way in which even her relationship with Max is later discussed in terms of spatial geography. Her visit to Hythe with him, where they finally sleep together, is repeatedly described as "[making] an island of the town." It turns a potential space of liveliness and community into an isolated land form that "is cut off from everywhere else" (162). Karen's life in London, by contrast, is figured precisely in terms of connection, attachment and bonds, ties both reassuring and limiting. Her friends and family "were rooted in the same soil," growing and feeding off of the same ground (69). The ground in which her family and London
life is rooted, furthermore, is "firm ground." Though Karen begins in this section of the novel to chafe against its limitations and shrinkage, the whole, smooth quality of her life must be noted, for it becomes a site which registers later trauma. The location of Karen's life before her visit to Cork, then, is largely a stable one: "The Michaelis lived like a family in a pre-war novel in one of the tall, cream houses in Chester Terrace, Regent's Park" (68). Critically, the exterior facade of her home-space reflects this stability.¹ The modifier "cream"—rather than, perhaps, white—denotes both textural smoothness and pigmented uniformity. It is a house, then, that is unblemished and unwrinkled, untouched by time—even the collective, historical trauma of the war does not penetrate. What is more, the text figures Karen's life in terms of interiority. That is to say, the Michaelis' social world is plotted so as not engage with boundaries or time, with geographic difference or historical change. We see this lack of friction evidenced, for instance, by the explanation that "up against no one, [the Michalis] are hard to be up against" (69). Again, we note the social embodiment of the inoffensive "cream" front of Chester Terrace, a word which almost seems to efface its having a front—and thus a confrontable boundary—at all. Thus the Michaelis household and Karen's inherited world become forms of shelter, a source of protection from the threat of the forward movement of time.² Thus the desire for a predictable life and the need to "read," or construct a normative narrative around events, are intertwined in the novel from the start, driven by opposing impulses.

1 We can recall here Gaston Bachelard's idea, in The Poetics of Space, of houses as intimate spaces, localized sites which protect and shelter our most private selves. Edward Casey's assertion, in his essay "Place Memory," about "attuned spaces" which enable one to feel chez soi hovers around a similar idea of home. Karen's house here is a locus of habitation, orientation, and familiarity. Her inability to fully integrate herself into it after her affair is in part traumatic precisely because her actions set her at odds with its bourgeois conformity. Casey at one point discusses the way in which "place acts to alleviate anxieties of disorientation and separation" (195). We can say, then, that the narrative robs Karen of proper "place memory," disrupting her own sequencing of events.

2 Its protective function seems to resonate with Heidegger's ideas about the space of "dwelling" as providing shelter and protection. See "Building Dwelling Thinking" for further reading. We can think about the "inherited" Chester Terrace world, moreover, as a metaphysical space akin to Bachelard's "felicitous" spaces. Karen's house is not just a concrete edifice but a space which metonymizes a particular mode of thinking: the tenacious maintenance of narrative coherency, the need for order, and the need for predictability.
The text uses Karen's visit to her Aunt Violet in Cork to stage the tension between her pre-constituted narrative frame and her conflicting desire to bend that frame, to open it out to death, sexuality and time. It is with her visit to her Aunt Violet that Karen, for the first time, becomes aware of the way in which a cocooned life can become sedimented to the point of morbidity, atrophied by time. The visit exposes her to a different life-narrative, one that does not impose a suffocating sense of enclosure, as her life in London does—one that, we will see, exposes a series of narrative possibilities that are so threatening to Karen's "inherited world" as to require suppression. Aunt Violet's residence in Ireland makes Karen's family "uncomfortable; it seemed insecure and pointless, as though she had chosen to settle on a raft" (75). Though not isolated in the same way that an island is, here again we have the presentation of a structure bereft of roots, a raft which floats unmoored. Notably, Aunt Violet, by deviating from her own family's trajectory and settlement in London, becomes "unplottable." She chooses to remarry after the death of her first husband, acting outside of her family's predictable, conventional container. More significantly, perhaps, is that the text presents Aunt Violet's second husband, Uncle Bill, as a "hysterical little person who had not even a place: his house, Montebello, had been burnt in the troubles" (74). Neither Aunt Violet nor Uncle Bill, then, belong; both exist outside of the bounds of a definable place. Uncle Bill's former house, furthermore, is framed in terms of death and chaos: a photograph of Montebello shows it "flanked [on] each side by groves of skeleton trees," a lingering memorial to the violence of the Irish "troubles" (74). What is more, we are reminded through the incessant ticking clocks at Mount Iris that the forward flow of time relentlessly presses against the present moment. They "hung on their hill over the inland sea, and seemed as safe as young swallows under an eave...fate is not an eagle, it creeps like a rat" (82). While Chester Terrace may preserve itself against time's onslaught, enabling the Michaelis to live "like a family in a pre-war novel," Karen's visit to Cork forces her to confront a conception of time, or
fate, that “creeps like a rat.” That the text couches the movement of time as “creep[ing]” recalls, in its incremental, sneaking manner, the Bergsonian concept of duration which “gnaws” into the future. Uncle Bill, as the novel's hysterical, anxious figure—he is obsessively punctual—personifies Bergson’s idea that the past “follows us at every instant...leaning over the present which is about to join it, pressing against the portals of consciousness that would fain leave it outside” (Bergson 725). Uncle Bill cannot escape the chaos of his own past, the “troubles,” the burning down of his home; those horrors constantly “[press] against the portals of [his] consciousness.” His neurosis and anxiety become yet another example of how the novel stages the need to impose temporal order and coherency.

Uncle’s Bill’s acute anxiety about time and news of Aunt Violet’s death crystallizes, for Karen, a sense of unavoidable temporal pressure: “Aunt Violet's probably dying was not only Aunt Violet's probably dying, it was like ice beginning to move south. Useless to wish she had never come to Mount Iris; the cold zone crept forward everywhere” (89). Again, we hear the evocation of time “creeping.” That Karen realizes the futility of wishing “she had never come to Mount Iris” further mimes both the irreversibility of the knowledge gained—Karen is indelibly marked by this trip—and the nature of the knowledge. Despite its initial appearance, Mount Iris proves itself a space of confinement and boundaries, though an unlocatable one. While on one level Aunt Violet transgresses her family's expectations by moving to Ireland, choosing to settle on a “raft,” on another she does not deviate: still confined to a big house in the country, she never “walk[s] uphill.” But it is Mount Iris, and the unfulfilled, truncated life of her aunt which propels Karen back into the past and rekindles her relationship with “some gaunt, contemptuous person who twisted life his own way” (79). This phrase, in which she describes Max as someone who “twisted life his own way,” is noteworthy for the way in which it enters into conversation with our previous discussion of plotting. Unlike Karen—who at this point in the novel's sjuzet
has not deviated from the narrative her family sets out before her—the agency implied in the phrase “twisted life his own way” bestows upon Max a self-authorship. As that “French-English-Jewish man,” he is fundamentally unclassifiable; he does not belong in Karen's stable, “inherited world” (91). As a counter-narrative possibility to Ray, he exhibits an attractive force over Karen who, just exposed to the stagnancy and death encapsulated in Mount Iris, seeks a sense of control and authorship over her own narrative.

Karen's rekindling of her relationship with Max, however, only proves to deepen the wound, the scar of which her visit to Mount Iris opens. Her meeting at Twickenham—Naomi's dead aunt's house—with Max and Naomi serves to annihilate Karen's sense of the future and present and therefore traps her in the past. She becomes contained temporally, quarantined in a moment which no longer exists: “since the after-noon of the cherry tree there had been no To-day...She must rely on marriage to carry her somewhere else. Till it did, she stayed bound to a gone moment, like a stopped clock with hands silently pointing an hour it cannot be” (134). Meeting Max again at Twickenham precipitates a crisis of time. By re-inserting him into her life, Karen interrupts the progression of her own narrative, causing an irreparable dissonance which blocks her from the forward progression of time. The language of constraint and paralysis is heightened in this passage; Karen is “bound,” compared to a “stopped clock.” Whereas in Cork “the cold zone crept forward everywhere,” here it is inert. Meeting up with Max plunges Karen all the more deeply back into that year in Paris. And yet that year is a “gone moment,” one incompatible with her engagement to Ray and her life in London. The “hour it cannot be” becomes metonymic of that whole year: the possibilities and relationships to which she was

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3 Nicholas Royle’s reading of *The House in Paris* in his essay “Fanatic Immobility” gives us a vocabulary of “scarring,” “wounding,” “seepage” and “hemorrhaging” with which to talk about the novel. Though he focuses almost exclusively on Leopold and a discussion of how “crypt-effects” operate in the character and the broader novel, my analysis is indebted to his vocabulary.
exposed and which cannot exist or be permitted and integrated into her life in London.

One explanation of Karen's adhesion to this "gone moment" is a particular narrative possibility, to which the text subtly gestures multiple times: the sexual relationship between Max and Mme. Fisher. Karen remembers how

She saw now that his frequent presence about a house where young girls were could have been thought irregular, had he not made such a point of ignoring Mme. Fisher's young girls. A cold, withdrawing bow was the most most of them got. Those darkish late afternoons he was there so often, waiting for Mme. Fisher to come in or be free to talk to him: when he was not really there, some shadow often deceived Karen, or she would be misled by a door ajar: uncertainty, at that special time of day, made her life pump through her furiously, uselessly. When they were in the same room, his weight shifting from foot to foot, as he leaned on the mantelpiece talking to Mme. Fisher, filled her with uneasiness. Every movement he made, every word he heard him speak left its mark on her nerves. He was the first man I noticed, she thought now. (113)

Karen presents Max's potentially inappropriate presence in the house as mitigated by his attachment to Mme. Fisher. And yet we cannot help but notice the text's gloss over the oddity of a young man's frequent visits to an older woman. Max and Mme. Fisher's relationship becomes a counter-intuitive means of explaining and alleviating his consistent rejection of girls his age. The accumulation of words like "irregular," "shadow," "deceive," "misled," "uncertainty" and "uneasiness," however, mobilizes our sense, as readers, that something hides beneath the surface of the text. The density of the language of cloaking and obfuscation would seem to evidence Karen's own inability to assimilate the presence of this sexually perverse relationship in her life. That Max was "the first man [she] noticed" is not insignificant. Coming from the tradition-bound conservatism of her own family, exposure to Max and Mme. Fisher's unexplainable relationship could potentially be construed as traumatic, in particular because Max is "the first man [she] noticed." While Karen mentions, slightly before this passage, feeling "so much unnerved by the bare idea of meeting him that she would turn back upstairs again when she heard him cross the hall," the emphasis here, and in the earlier passage, is on Karen's "uneasiness," her "unnerved"
state (112). A cursory reading merely frames it as a young woman's first romantic preoccupation. And yet closer inspection would seem to indicate that Karen's uneasiness stems not from Max's presence, but from his specific, sexually charged interaction with Mme. Fisher.

This close inspection mimics the type of "abnormally attentive scrutiny" about which Kermode, in his essay "Secrets and Narrative Sequence," writes. He claims that narrative, when read with "abnormally attentive scrutiny," reveals textual "secrets" ("Secrets" 84). Though they can take diverse forms, Kermode identifies these secrets as "at odds with sequence," giving the example of words that occur with abnormal frequency, or oddities of expression ("Secrets" 83). He goes on to say that the existence of these secrets, though not the content, can be found in their suppression: "a passion for sequence may result in the suppression of the secret. But it is always there, and one way we can find the secret is to look out for evidence of suppression, which will sometimes tell us where the suppressed secret is located" ("Secrets" 83). This statement seems to strike a similar chord with Fredric Jameson's assertion, in The Political Unconscious, that a narrative frame is a formal "strategy of containment," an apparatus which merely gives text the appearance of unity (Jameson 54). Underneath the ostensibly coherent framework of narrative, however, lie fragments, "rifts and discontinuities" which undermine the text's unity (Jameson 56). That Kermode identifies "secrets" as "at odds with sequence," enables us to put him in dialogue with Brooks and Bergson, and our above discussion of narrative coherency. If we consider the disruption of Karen's ordered narrative, of her "plotted" life, as a disruption of proper sequence, we can analyze Bowen's text for signs of suppression of that distortion. Karen's own "passion for sequence"—her need to impose order, to bestow meaning on sequences of

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4 Though Jameson's reading is relentlessly political and historical—suggesting that these subtexts, once unearthed, gesture to "the Real," the social and political voices which have been marginalized and pushed under the surface—his notion that "rifts and discontinuities" in a text bespeak subsumed, suppressed tension is a useful addition to our discussion of trauma in Bowen's novel.
events—then becomes Bowen's primary figure through which we see enacted, on the level of the text's *sjuzet*, a suppression of unassimilable trauma.

The perversity and impropriety that a sexual relationship between Mme. Fisher and Max implies, however, appears to be a concept so foreign and unsettling as to be practically unvoiced and unvoicable. Caruth's analysis of trauma proves particularly helpful here:

...the wound of the mind—the breach in the mind's experience of time, self, and the world—is not, like the wound of the body, a simple and healable event, but rather...is experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known and is therefore not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly, in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor. (4)

Caruth's figuring of trauma as a “breach in the mind's experience of time, self, and the world” keys into why that year in Paris lassos Karen with such tenacity. Though she appears to recognize, in a peripheral, half-formed way, the “uneasiness” that watching Max and Mme. Fisher engenders, it is “experienced too soon, too unexpectedly.” She cannot integrate it into her consciousness.

The Fishers' house, in the novel, functions as a place which epitomizes this displacement of trauma “experienced too soon.” It is a space of liminality, a paradoxically fixed location which traffics between the past and the present. Mme. Fisher, as the proprietress, is repeatedly figured as a character in between life and death, one who never fully resides on either end. The text emphasizes her desire to cling to the present: “her smile was for the present and Henrietta: an unreminiscent smile,” (43) and later, “How frantically but coldly she loved the present!” (45)

That her smile, however, is “unreminiscent” belies the depth of the past which swells within the house. The negated adjective—a technique Bowen relentlessly employs⁵—acts, here, as a kind of textual abrasion. It signals a density of past memory which Mme. Fisher's “unreminiscent smile” rejects. As Kermode reminds us in his own analysis of secrets in Joseph Conrad's *Under Western

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⁵See pg. 75 “unstrange,” p. 101 “unalive,” and p. 112 “unbright” for further examples.
Eyes, “the oddity of the expression is a way of directing attention to it” (“Secrets” 94). Bowen's negated adjectives function as one of Kermode's “secrets.” On the meta-textual level of trauma, those negated adjectives become signals which direct us to pause, to look closer. “Unreminiscent” is the scar under which temporal trauma lingers. Though the dialogue between Mme. Fisher and Henrietta (or even Mme. Fisher and Leopold, later) positions Mme. Fisher in control, that she “frantically” loved the present indicates her inability to control time's forward press. Her powerlessness over time, then, becomes an expression of Bergsonian duration, the “continuous progress of the past which gnaws into the future” (Bergson 725). Despite Mme. Fisher's seeming control over almost everyone in the house, it appears that the past is the one element beyond her grasp. Leopold discerns this vulnerability most clearly: “he diagnosed her as prey to one creeping growth, the Past, septic with what had happened” (233). Mme. Fisher in this phrase becomes not just the engineer of Karen and Max's affair but its victim, too. “Septic” with the events of the past, infected by their duration, Mme. Fisher in some sense falls prey to her own artificial divide between the past and the present. In “frantically” clinging the the present moment, she denies the “creeping growth” of the past, as opposed to Karen who, coming back from Cork with the knowledge of her Aunt's impending death, surrenders to “the cold zone [which] crept forward everywhere,”(89) the way fate “creeps like a rat” (82).

Mme. Fisher, then, as a gothically tinged, living corpse—as neither alive nor dead, but relentlessly overwhelming the present—acts as a parasitic, vampiric presence in the house. Max and Mme. Fisher's relationship, furthermore, does not even fit into a particular category neatly. Its incomprehensibility is its hallmark. On the one hand, there seems to be a pedagogical, vicarious aspect to their relationship. Max understands women “as she made [him] see them: they were not much” (150). Mme. Fisher exerts a powerful, formative influence over his sexuality, serving a kind of teaching function. On the other hand, there is an unequivocally direct sexual
bond between the two. Though “her sex is all in her head,” Max explains, “she is not a woman for nothing” (150). Because her “sex” cannot be enacted physically, it preys upon and shapes his own sexual maturation. And yet—and here we come back to Caruth’s idea of trauma as experienced “too soon”—Max claims that “[Mme Fisher] was ready for me when I was not ready for her” (150). Thus when we isolate Max as a figure, he seems to experience his own form of trauma in his relationship with Mme. Fisher. The *sjuzet* links the chain of trauma that stretches back further and further. It presents Max as caught in a traumatic loop of unpreparedness that includes Karen, Leopold, and even Henrietta and Ray.

Mme. Fisher’s predatory sexuality becomes displaced, in the novel’s *sjuzet*, onto Leopold in the “Present.” The narrative begins to reenact the peculiar, unsettling fusion originally between her and Max. We see this confirmed when Mme. Fisher laments: “In your and my terms, Leopold, your childishness is simply a pity for me—for me, solely: naturally I regret it. If you were less a child, I could enjoy more fully my short time of being alive again” (228). The sexual implications ring clearly. Were not the sexual maturation of Leopold still incubating—were the Grant-Moodys, his foster family, to consider Leopold “ripe for direct sex-instruction”—Mme. Fisher could “enjoy more fully [her] short time of being alive again” (31). She becomes “alive again,” like a reanimated corpse, precisely because Leopold’s characterization reactivates the suppressed original dynamic. When Leopold’s interaction with Mme. Fisher, furthermore, is retroactively undergirded by our knowledge of her and Max’s sexually perverse relationship, we feel how this moment thickens the trauma looming over the narrative. Collating these moments exemplifies the *sjuzet/labula* distinction. That is to say, Leopold’s interview with Mme. Fisher resonates more fully precisely because the organization of the *sjuzet* stages Max’s reactions to her first. As readers, then, we become co-opted in the trauma, experiencing the same circling and sense of displacement along with Bowen’s characters. That year in Paris, and its associated cast of figures
and places, becomes a locus around which the trauma hovers. Though this trauma has an elusive, murky quality to it—the text is not forthcoming or explicit—it seems constellated around an almost phobic fear of sexuality.

The mantlepiece in the Fishers' houses serves as a specific site through which we can track the trauma swelling within it. More than just a recurring image, more than just an object pregnant with symbolism, the mantlepiece becomes a fixture which reappears throughout the text as a sign of suppression. The origin of the textual spasm begins, against temporal sequence, in the middle of the *sjuzet*. Though it appears in the two "Present" parts of the novel, we learn in the middle "Past" section that it is Max's tendency to "[lean] on the mantelpiece talking to Mme. Fisher" (112). At its origin, then, the mantelpiece is marked by an unclassifiable, unassimilable relationship: the intimate bond between an older widow and a young man in his prime. It returns again as the site of Max's suicide, which happens precisely when he learns that "[Mme. Fisher] was at the root of him," and that she engineered his affair with Karen at the expense of her own daughter's engagement. He slits his wrists "with his back to the mantelpiece" (201). His suicide, then, becomes a violence enacted upon the mantelpiece, a defacement of the pristine marble which so epitomizes his entangled bond with Mme. Fisher. The "blood splashed on the marble" becomes a stain across the narrative (201). Though materially impermanent—the mantelpiece does not display tangible marks of that moment of trauma—Nicholas Royle claims that "the event of Max's suicide overflows, stains, poisons what is to come: the stabbing, cutting, gash of the event of death becomes, in time, its consequences" (Royle 56). While Royle's analysis focuses on the way in which this "overflowing" quality of Max's suicide impacts causal relations (in terms of how the consequences of an event begin to supersede the cause), what is of interest to our argument here is how the text itself is warped, "stained" or "poisoned" by a gash which cannot contain itself. Years later, then—though at the very beginning of the *sjuzet*—Leopold's
magnetism to the mantelpiece becomes an at first unremarked instance of this textual hemorrhaging. Upon his initial entrance into the house, the salon where Max and Mme. Fisher always talked exercises a particular force over him:

Going back to shut the door [to the salon], which was open, Leopold added, “As a matter of fact, [Miss Fisher] told me not to come in here.” Having shut the door, Leopold walked across to the mantelpiece, which he stood with his back to, looking at Henrietta with no signs of shyness, in a considering way. (13)

Though Leopold's insistence on staying in the room could be interpreted as merely a sign of contrariness, the scaffolded resonance of the phrase “Leopold walked across to the mantelpiece, which he stood with his back to” cannot be ignored. Naomi's warning to Leopold “not to come in here,” seems to illustrate her own foreknowledge of the house's power of entrapment. When Naomi breaks the news to Leopold that his mother cannot come to meet him, furthermore, we are told that “looking down at his feet as they took each step on the parquet, Leopold walked to the mantelpiece” (213). The syntactical structuring of this sentence is such that it makes Leopold's feet the active agent. The feet that compel him forward appear disaggregated, in some sense, from his sense of volition.

And yet the mantelpiece is not only figured as menacing container of trauma. There seems to be a way in which Leopold, who, “solitary before the mantelpiece, swelled with content at his own ignorance of the past” reforges it for his own uses (216). Though, it seems, Leopold cannot fully resist the pull of the house—one so sedimented in time as to exert an almost parasitic pull over the present—he, with aid of Henrietta's presence, partially releases himself from its containment. Initially, the scene in which he sobs against the mantelpiece after hearing of his mother's failure to come appears to reenact the trauma of Max's suicide. The dispensation of fluids—Max's blood and then Leopold's tears—creates a framing symmetry. Henrietta's presence in the “Present” sections of the novel, however, seems to mitigate, or serve as a
Henrietta's subjective narrative perspective in the “Present” sections of the novel accentuates Mme. Fisher, and the house's, liminality. Upon being called to speak with Mme. Fisher, “Henrietta's heart sank slightly: she felt like a meal being fattened up for a lion” (12). Henrietta, as a character firmly a part of the present—she has no history with the house, and does not appear in the “Past” section of the novel—allows us to observe its parasitic pull. Her journey into Mme. Fisher's bedroom allows the narrative to emphasize “Pompeian red walls [that] drank objects into their shadow” (38). The house itself, then, not only Mme. Fisher, becomes parasitic, anthropomorphized as a predator. The literal structure of it—its walls, its frame—becomes a consumptive power, “drinking” objects. That the walls are “Pompeian” mobilizes the house's containment function. Like the inhabitants of that city frozen in time by casts of ash, the house appears sedimented, a container of the past.

And yet we cannot quite make the claim, patently, that the house simply acts as a register for time, containing and accumulating its forward flow. Henrietta and Leopold serve as two examples of children in transit who complicate this assertion. Henrietta, we are told, “had dropped down a well into something worse than the past in not being yet over” (42). Both children, then—because of their newness to the house—exemplify duration's predatory quality. There is the implication here that like a well, the house is somehow bottomless. It becomes a separate, quarantined space which contains, it seems, a condensed form of crisis. Bergson at one point writes that “inner life may be compared to the unrolling of a coil, for there is no living being who does not feel himself coming gradually to the end of his role; and to live is to grow old” (Bergson 727). The “unrolling of a coil,” figured in terms of aging and death, is suggestive of the compacted sense of time contained within the house. That is to say, because the house is a quarantined space, but one which registers the relentless growth and “gnawing” of time, it exists
in a moment of perpetual crisis, of perpetual trauma. It does not end, but simply grows and swells. If we return to Kermode's *The Sense of an Ending*, we observe that the space of the house becomes a place where the end as no longer “imminent” but “immanent” (*Sense* 25). The feeling of death and crisis—staged by the *sjuzet* through Mme. Fisher's “septic” vulnerability to the past, the chained displacement of Max's suicide and Karen's “stuck” sense of time—fills the house. This sense of “immanent,” ever present crisis becomes akin to the looming trauma cast over the whole narrative. The sense of crisis comes from living in “a world which may or may not have a temporal end” (*Sense* 26). On the one hand, then, the narrative frames the house as a space pregnant with immanent crisis; it resists the resolution of any trauma. On the other hand, the text's trafficking between the past and the present—in its over all structure as well as through the character of Karen—responds to the need for an ending. The narrative's temporal dislocation attempts to resolve that sense of immanent crisis. We will remember that this need for an ending is inseparable from the process of plotting, that “active quest of the reader for those shaping ends that, terminating the dynamic process of reading, promise to bestow meaning and significance on the beginning and middle” (Brooks 19). The house, and that year in Paris, function as sites around which the trauma constellates precisely because they resist this bestowal of neat, ordered meaning.

The similarity present across the novel's *sjuzet* between Henrietta and Naomi exemplifies the text's resistance to the imposition of a clear, securely capped “end.” We see their parallel

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6 Kermode's discussion of “imminent” crisis versus “immanent” has a particular historical specificity. He writes about the modern (early 20th century) era in which a new sense of felt crisis presented itself. Up until this point, framed by literature of the Christian tradition, a sense of apocalypse was imminent, predicted for the end. The modern era, Kermode contends, is pregnant with this “end” in perpetuity; “the age of perpetual transition in technological and artistic matters is understandably an age of perpetual crisis in morals and politics” (*Sense* 28). Noteworthy, however, is that Kermode writes about the time in which Bergson himself wrote. This, perhaps, can help us make sense out of Bergson's predatory, “gnawing” past. Like the sense of immanent crisis which “gives each moment its fullness,” Bergson's theory offers the figure of a present moment swollen or “swelling” with the past (*Sense* 6). In a retrospective way, we can map Kermode's historical analysis onto to the atmosphere of transition and uncertainty in which Bergson writes in 1907 and which pervades Bowen's 1935 novel.
functions to Leopold and Max, respectively, in the phrase “Being not there disembodied [Henrietta], so she fearlessly crossed the parquet to stand beside [Leopold]”(219). It is she who, in her “disembodied” resemblance to “walls or [a] table,” permits a degree of comfort to Leopold, allows him to feel that “no one was there.” And yet we cannot ignore the way in which these statements redeploy the same language Max uses to describe his relationship with Naomi. He defends his and Naomi’s engagement to Karen by saying “I could not endure being always conscious of anyone. Naomi is like furniture or the dark. I should pity myself if I did not marry her” (159). Just as Henrietta’s presence becomes negated through a comparison to furniture, so too does Naomi’s. That Henrietta occupies the same textual locus as Naomi would suggest that Leopold does not cleanly leave behind his resonances with Max. What is more, because Henrietta acts as a proxy for the reader—we enter the house through her narrative perspective—her co-optation into the chain of trauma reiterates the house’s predatory, inescapable force. Leopold's sobbing against the mantelpiece, furthermore, can be considered a reenactment of the same trauma initiated years (and pages) earlier with Max’s suicide.

And yet Henrietta’s unimposing—in fact paradoxically absent—presence permits Leopold to look outwards: “Reposing between two friends, the mantelpiece and [Henrietta’s] body, Leopold, she could feel, was looking out of the window, seeing the courtyard and the one bare tree swim into view again and patiently stand” (220). Leopold here projects himself outside of the house, “seeing the courtyard” through the window as a means of liberation. Rather than seeing from the outside the “inside darkness (10)” of windows, as in the opening description, here we “[look] out” towards a scene of nature which waits for Leopold. Linked to an exterior, he is no longer isolated in the house, quarantined or like an island, as his father is. The mantelpiece becomes a fixture of support, a “friend.” Somewhat paradoxically—when we consider the extent to which the mantelpiece is mired in past trauma—it becomes a site which enables Leopold’s
projection of self into the future. Henrietta facilitates this projection through her clear dissociation with the past. It is she who “fearlessly crosse[s] the parquet to stand besid[e] him” while he cries against the mantelpiece (219). Her crossing back to the mantelpiece becomes a reversal, or refiguration, of Max's original flight from the house. Rather than a trail of blood leading away from the mantelpiece, then, we have a doubling back driven by “disembodied” sympathy. Thus despite Henrietta's support of Leopold promising liberation for him from the house, we see that it links her all the more firmly into the chain of trauma. The textual echoes, once exfoliated, thwart our attempts to linearly plot them, to reach out towards an “ending.”

Henrietta's co-optation by the house dislodges her from her firm place in the “Present.” Though the trauma of the affair seems indelibly linked to the house—resulting in the tone of portentous doom which we see evidenced in Henrietta and Naomi's taxi ride there—its events take place in other locales. Max and Karen's first meeting is in a border town, Hythe:

Not having been here before and now coming with Max made an island of the town. It stayed like nowhere, near nowhere, cut off from everywhere else. Karen cannot divide the streets from the patter of rain and rush of rain in the gutters. She remembers a town with no wind, where standing on the canal bridge you hear trees sighing with rain and the sea soughing on the far-off beach. (162)

The geographical locations of the affair, then, are “nowhere, near nowhere, cut off from everywhere else.” In order for the affair to proceed, it must first be removed from Karen's quotidian life, itself an “island” in her memory. This particular passage, moreover, evidences a particular textual stutter akin to Kermode's “secrets.” The tense abruptly switches from the past to the present in the sentence “Karen cannot divide...She remembers a town....” The effect of this is to bring us back, almost unwillingly, to an acknowledgment of the novel's construction. That is to say, Bowen's slipping into the present tense reminds the reader that this flashback functions as an explanation of events in the “Present.” Though we are well situated in the *sjuzet*, propelled forward by the desire to “plot”—to find out why Leopold's mother “cannot come”—the narrative
rift of abrupt tense switching recalls that the middle section in the novel is nothing more than what Karen "would have had to say" to Leopold (67). The switch to present tense uncovers, briefly, the plot thread "of interconnectedness and intention" which runs underneath the flashback (Brooks, 5). We have, then, several layers of the unassimilated: the unassimilated nature of the affair in Karen's life, the geographical, spatial isolation in which the affair occurs, and the unassimilated elements of the sjuzet itself. Though for the majority of the flashback we are firmly in the mode of third person omniscient several moments surface in which narrative perspective shifts. Collating these moments together will enable us to see the various "wounds" around which the trauma is constellated. Already, with this instance at Hythe, we see the undercurrent of Karen's fear in living "cut off from everywhere else." This recalls, retrospectively, the extent to which her relatives "were rooted in the same soil" (69). Her affair with Max threatens to displace her from her rooted life and sense of belonging into a liminal, undefinable space.

One particular passage through which we can analyze the different "wounds" appears immediately after Karen conceives Leopold:

Had this not been escape? She was washed back ashore again. Further out than you dare go, where she had been, is the outgoing current not strong enough not to let you back? Were you not far out, is there no far out, or is there no current there? I am let back, safe, too safe; no one will ever know...I shall die like Aunt Violet wondering what else there was; from this there is no escape for me after all. Max lies beside me, but Naomi sat on my bed in the dark; she was there first and will never go away. (166)

Immediately noticeable is the blurring of narrative voices. Though we seem to be in third person at the start of the passage, we shift into second, as if the narrator directly addresses the reader. And yet the insistent, panicked tone of the questions in second person give the impression that we are hearing Karen's voice, as if a part of her interior narrated monologue. Abruptly, we shift to first person. The shuttling back and forth between narrative voices culminates at the end of the passage. Here, at last, we come to another suppressed narrative possibility: the homoerotic bond
between Naomi and Karen. Like the moment in which Karen sees Max talking to Mme. Fisher by the mantelpiece, it seems that “Naomi [sitting] on [Karen's] bed in the dark” functions as one of Caruth's events “experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known” (Caruth 4). We can collate this particular gesture to an amputated homoerotic narrative with a moment far earlier in the flashback, where Naomi and Karen meet after Naomi's Aunt has died. As Naomi sits in the Michaelis' salon, we are told “What she did want, and wanted badly, was to see Karen: a need so pressing as to be without grace” (99). Though certainly this “need so pressing as to be without grace” can be thought of in terms of supportive friendship, it does not stand alone. The text later refers to

this bond between them, or band round them, forged in that year in Paris (yes, forged—it was metal, inelastic, more than chafing sometimes) when she was so young, so much frightened of Max, so unable to ignore him, that Naomi there was what you had to have. But since then, there had been everyone else, and her conscience began to send in bills about Naomi. She ought to want to thank Max for making all that all right... (102-3)

Each time the text refers to the bond between Naomi and Karen, it seems, there is a particular urgency or sense of imperative. Naomi “was what you had to have”; her support enables Karen to cope with her fear of Max. Just like the sense of unease and distress Karen feels in watching Max and Mme. Fisher, her being “so much frightened of Max, so unable to ignore him,” could simply be figured in terms of romantic preoccupation. And yet when we assemble these episodes together, and when we observe their coincidence with textual “rifts,” they become an expression of that unassimilated trauma. Caruth claims that unassimilated trauma “returns to haunt the survivor later on” (Caruth 4). That Karen's “conscience began to send in bills about Naomi” seems to be one instance of this haunting. The structuring of this phrase makes Karen's “conscience” the active agent, an independent being who compels Karen to repeat, or return back to “the year in Paris.” The last sentence trailing off in an ellipsis, furthermore, acts as an obliterated, blank space into which “all that”—“this bond between them,” Naomi sitting on
Karen's "bed in the dark," "what you had to have"—becomes subsumed. That blank space at the end of the sentence becomes a textual gash, an opening in the wound out of which the trauma seeps.

The idea of blank spaces, or gaps, indicating some kind of suppressed trauma can help us understand several other key moments in the text. One such instance is the moment of Leopold's conception. The text does not in fact ever describe the event. Rather, a gap in between paragraphs appears—one that is more substantial than the normal paragraph breaks around it—and then the text immediately dives into Karen's thoughts. This blank space, however, indicates a trauma that is not merely the shame or guilt of having an affair with Naomi's fiancé, nor even simply that he is of an unclassifiable, foreign background (though that is an undeniable component). The text phobically eviscerates any presence of sex; all we are left with are blank spaces. What seeps out of that textual gap on either side is, furthermore, a concern about time. That is to say, the trauma which "cries" out of the textual wound, which speaks through that gap, is the fear of an unplottable life. The inability to find a point of closure in her self-narrative—because she is stuck in time—robs Karen of her ability plot. The text positions her as a reader whose "active quest....for those shaping ends" continues indeterminately; the sjuzet traps her in a moment of crisis. Before the gap in the page, Max claims "It will be too late when you ask yourself: What have I done?" (165). The text then jumps to Karen's rehearsal of causality:

"She asked herself: What have I done? At about three o'clock. She only knew she had slept by finding an hour missing on her luminous watch. She thought, how frightening luminous watches are, the eye of time never stops watching you..." (165)

Karen's having slept with Max, then, imbues her, suddenly, with an acute awareness of time's tyrannical impartiality. Her "luminous watch" becomes the measure by which she attempts to form her own narrative sjuzet. Though she asks "What have I done?" we can interpret her

7Recall here Caruth's assertion that trauma is "the story of a wound that cries out" (Caruth 4).
question as containing two questions: What have I done, and When did I do it? Like her
“hysterical” Uncle Bill, Karen's preoccupation with temporal coherency demands demarcations
and order. In the vein of Peter Brooks, Karen here tries to construct her own coherent narrative
sjuzet. She attempts to fit an isolated event into an ordered sequence. Karen's “luminous watch”
whose “eye of time never stops watching [her]” seems to frighten precisely because it denies her
the ability to quarantine the affair. There is the implicit acknowledgment, it seems, of the
experience of duration. The “eye of time,” that arbiter of the past, exerts a pressure on Karen
analogous to the Bergsonian durational past which “press[es] against the portals of consciousness
that would fain leave it outside. Just as the “eye of time never stops watching you,” so too does
its current never stop moving forward. And yet “What have I done?” here becomes indicative of
Karen's inability to reconcile the past and the present. She mechanically rehearses basic causal
relationships, thinking “While it is still Before, Afterwards has no power, but afterwards it is the
kingdom, the power and the glory (166), or, later, “Now nothing more has to be. Whatever may
happen this morning, it will be part of afterwards” (167). This allusion to the Lord's Prayer, and
the relentless focus on the power of “Afterwards” recalls Kermode's discussion of the sense of
imminent apocalypse in the Christian tradition. She appears to obstinately resist the sense that
crisis, in her traumatically looped world, is ever present, immanent. Rather, her adamant fixation
on “Afterwards” frames her as trying to return to a sense of imminent crisis.8 Karen's inability to
reconcile her affair with her present life—her engagement to Ray, her life at Chester Terrace—is
perhaps most clearly encapsulated her plea to Max: “But I thought you felt as I did, that this
finished the past but did not touch the future. Being here does not seem to belong to now, it
belongs to the year in Paris when I used to want you so much even to look at me” (176). The

8 Her need to return to the Christian bound teleological tradition of imminent crisis is not surprising when we
consider her home exists as if in a “pre-war” novel. The novel frames her home as a space which denies the modern
sense that every moment is fraught with imminent crisis.
language here evokes Brooks' discussion of “shaping ends” which bestow meaning on the beginning and middle: “finished,” “did not touch,” “belong.” This is the desperate desire for containment, the need to hold off a sense of imminent crisis. Laced through Karen's words is the desire for a coherent narrative. Just as Jameson posits narrative as a formal “strategy of containment” which merely gives the appearance of unity, so too does Karen's rehearsal of causality become her attempt to impose a narrative framework around her affair (Jameson 54). And yet her year in Paris, and the alternative narrative possibilities perceived—Max and Mme. Fisher's relationship, her and Naomi's—erupt, like the flashback of the novel, into the present sections of her life. Those eruptive memories continue to shape the narrative's staging of the future, moreover, because of Ray and Leopold's eventual bonding and departure from the house.

The *sjuzet*'s displacement of trauma appears, initially, to arrive at a “sense of an ending” with Leopold's interview with Mme. Fisher in the third section. After learning most of the story of his birth from her, he seems able to recognize the extent to which the mantelpiece represents her tyrannical power over the house. Despite his “interview” in her room, in which he learns of his mother's anxieties and still born second child, he discerns the control Mme. Fisher desires to exercise over him. Unlike Max, who, upon understanding that “[Mme. Fisher] was at the root of him” (201) commits suicide against the mantelpiece, Leopold saw not the mantelpiece but a woman with long hair being propped up in bed to sign away Leopold, then his own head helplessly bobbing and rolling on that journey to Italy, like a kitten or puppy's. Nothing said undid that. (248)

He, then, at this point having learned of his past, appears able to recognize its presence in the mantelpiece. He understands the symbolic density of the mantelpiece, the way in which it bears the weight of Mme. Fisher's manipulative desire. And yet even though he intuits his own lack of agency and helplessness, his recognition does not seem to change the fact of Mme. Fisher's control over him. She, critically, does not tell Leopold the whole truth about his conception.
Though he confirms his father's death, and learns that Max "was at the time he died still more ignorant of [Leopold] than it is generally wished [Leopold] should be of him," the fact of suicide remains obscured (255). This particular omission yokes Leopold all the more firmly to Mme. Fisher. Before she finishes her story, she passes out from exhaustion, and Leopold exits the room feeling that "to leave her became unbearable....If she is asleep she must wake, if she is dead she must live again! You make my thoughts boil: listen! Now I have more to say—"(233). Striking in this passage is the way in which it reopens, or re-imagines, what Max and Mme. Fisher's conversations might have been like. Though the text only provides visual access, through Karen's memory, of the image of Max and Mme. Fisher talking—there is never a scene of direct interaction between the two—the interior dialogue Leopold constructs here retroactively imagines it. Leopold's reiterated "must" and his exclamatory commands gesture to the strength of feeling formed and solidified for this woman whom he has just met. Unraveling before the reader, it appears, is the very dynamic which most "filled [Karen] with uneasiness," an echo of Max and Mme. Fisher's sinister intimacy (112).

We can look to the level of the text for evidence, once again, of this suppression. The passage where Leopold thinks that "to leave her became unbearable" exposes a slippage in narrative voice. We move abruptly from third person to second person to first person, "he" to "you" to an emphatic "I." The text spasms, erupts with Jamesonian "rifts and discontinuities" which bespeak the trauma reemerging from under the surface. Leopold's narrative voice, almost, acts as a conduit for the reemergence of his parents' trauma, registering each shift and rift with a different narrative perspective. On the level of punctuation, even, we see this textual spasming. "You make my thoughts boil" abruptly ends with a colon. We shift suddenly to the imperative exclamation "listen!" Finally, our terminating clause—which concludes a much longer paragraph—does not, in fact, ever end. The dash continues on in indeterminacy, much in the way
that Leopold's unnaturally close bond with Mme. Fisher continues on his father's.

There is one character, however, who seems potentially able to resist Mme. Fisher's influence: Ray Forrestier. It is his voice, in fact, that cuts off Leopold's train of thought above, that follows after the dash: "He heard voices through the floor, in the salon. A man's down there; perhaps that is the doctor" (233). To an extent, Ray serves a terminating role in the third section of the novel. He, in part, enables Leopold to create an end for his sentence, to break out of the cyclical rehearsal of trauma. Ray is, notably, the only character whose entrance into the house is of his own free will as an adult. Karen's parents shuttle her there as a young woman; Naomi is born into it; Max is contained by Mme. Fisher's influence, and Leopold and Henrietta are ushered in for the day by adults. Observing the house through his perspective, however, allows us to understand the extent to which the house exerts an almost supernatural pull over its inhabitants. His narrated monologue becomes a meter through which we can measure the house's force:

He had wanted to feel, till he came to this very door, that he was not bound to come—as of course he was not bound to come. Not bound in any way. He had stayed free up to the moment when he walked in...He stayed free all the way here. So, free, he had walked in....He was here, that was all. The world had come to an end. (237)

The sheer number of times Ray reminds himself that he "was not bound to come" intuits, rather obviously, the magnitude of the house's binding power. It reminds us, moreover, that Karen's failure to come exerts an ethical pressure on him to come and not to leave Leopold abandoned. He seems to parse and rehearse the causal steps of his journey to the house, demarcating between the approach to "this very door," "the moment when he walked in," "walk[ing] in," and being "here." The abrupt, incongruous quality of the statement "The world had come to and end," parallels the way in which entrance into the house collapses, or stops, that linear causality to which he so clings in the above passage. Ray—certainly from his marriage to Karen—intuits the house's containing function. The "unspoken dialogue" representative of their life together
structurally mimes Karen's cyclical rehearsal of trauma. In it, she insists, repeatedly, “I want to be back where we started” (244). She denies Leopold's presence in her life, imploring Ray to “stop remembering,” to “be alone” without Leopold. Her desire, here, to reject duration's forward flow becomes an avenue for her to reconstruct, or replot, her disrupted narrative. Her rejection of the durational past becomes her denial of a sense of modern, immanent crisis. And yet like the wound which continually cries out, the unspoken dialogue of their marriage “can be heard by the heart pursuing its round, and, though it goes on deep down, any phrase from it may swim up to cut the surface of talk when you least expect, like a shark’s fin” (245). Leopold's existence becomes a fact which cannot be ignored, which “cut[s] the surface” of the scar Karen tries to reknit over her traumatic wound.

Even Ray is not immune to the constellation of trauma around the mantelpiece. After suggesting that Leopold “needn't go back to Italy,” he “getting up, abruptly for such a big man, walked to the mantelpiece. Here he discovered the dead cigarette between his fingers, dropped it and lit another. His dropping the charred cigarette on the speckless parquet startled Leopold more than anything yet” (250). Ray here seems compelled towards the mantelpiece, led forward by a force out of his control. He “abruptly” gets up to walk towards it, and seems to unconsciously reenact Max's blood splashed on the parquet. The mantelpiece thus teams with signs of suppression. Every person within its radius seems to capitulate to its draw, reenacting that originating moment of trauma which reaches back to Karen's experience that year in Paris. That original moment of Karen observing Max “as he leaned on the mantelpiece talking to Mme. Fisher ” becomes spun out and redeployed in the text at various points in the narrative sjuzet (112). On a meta-textual level, then, the sjuzet enacts trauma itself: the repetition and redeployment of the originating mantelpiece scene becomes a way in which text stutters, spasmodically attempting to contain a trauma which inevitably surfaces.
Though Leopold's interview with Mme. Fisher, his attraction to the mantelpiece, and his dynamic with Henrietta suggest a reenactment of trauma, several moments in the text generate the possibility that he might break that cyclical repetition. Ultimately, his own imaginative capacity appears to be the key to that liberation. The tension between Leopold's creative force of imagination and the house's pull crystallizes when Henrietta and Leopold play tarot cards. In response to Henrietta's diagnosis of “Oh dear, Leopold; really you are unlucky. Spades again. Ace, too: that's the worst,” (59) Leopold exclaims

“Oh, damn all these cards! You don't know how, you don't make anything come!” Leopold impatiently broke the circle, sweeping the cards into a porridge with both hands. The gilt ships slipped over each other, here and there a card bent, its edge caught on the parquet. (60)

Despite cards that insistently imply Leopold's future death or misfortune, he physically “[breaks] the circle,” removing himself from the ring of cards which threaten to define his future for him. This emphatic refusal to be defined by a predetermined, fated course frames Leopold as an active agent of his own liberation from the past. When Henrietta, for instance, explains how “The knaves used to be lovers,” Leopold expresses disdain for anyone mired in the past: “Then throw them out. It's the future I want to know” (58). And yet though he looks forward, the text seems to undermine, or question, the extent of his control. That the cards he “sweep[s]...into a porridge” end up “bent,” their “edge[s] caught on the parquet” mobilizes the pull of the parquet and mantelpiece. Once he disrupts the circular framework of the cards, the way they fall appears out of his control. That is to say, the way they fall becomes determined by the house's sinister magnetism, its containing force.

Though the house ropes Karen to a particular locus in time—“bound to a gone moment,” stuck in the middle of her narrative—Leopold becomes the architect of his own. Unlike Karen, who “relives scenes, he sees them alive” (66). That he sees scenes as “alive” in a house framed
by death and sedimentation intuits all the more clearly his own imaginative capacity. The idea of
duration, for Leopold, becomes a source of hope rather than a threatening, unbounded menace.
Because Leopold's meeting with Karen never takes place, it can exist in the imaginary, outside of
the bounds of the house and outside of the bounds of contained memory. Its power for Leopold's
identity derives itself, paradoxically, from its absence. Karen's failure to come allows Leopold to
imagine her as he needs to, to construct her for himself: "So the mother who did not come to
meet Leopold that afternoon remained his creature, able to speak the truth" (65). And yet we
cannot assert, unqualifiably, that Leopold neatly liberates himself from the house, cutting the
threads which tie him down to that cyclical trauma. After he registers that Karen cannot come—
the reaction which only appears in the third section of the novel—he realizes that "she was not,
then, the creature of thought" (216). It is the realization that she exists "outside himself,"
uncontained by "his imagination in which he had bound her up" that so troubles Leopold (216).
His cognizance of her independent, unbounded existence precipitates his sobbing fit against the
mantelpiece, the same one in which Henrietta becomes a substitution for Naomi. And yet it is
precisely Henrietta's presence which enables him to look forward, "out of the window" and
towards the future (220). Likewise, it is Ray's abrupt decision to remove Leopold from the house,
and its emplotted cycle of trauma, which would seem to seal off, at last, that reopened wound.

On the one hand, then, Leopold threatens to reenact, in the same spatial framework, part
of the trauma of Max's suicide. The moment when he realizes Karen exists "outside himself,"
however, enables him to move past the atrophied sedimentation of the house. Whereas Karen, in
her unspoken dialogue with Ray, appears confined within the past, desiring only to "be back
where we started," Leopold looks forward in time, embracing duration (244).9 In resuming her

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9 We must resist the temptation, here, to claim Leopold or Ray as unqualified "hero," figures, as Harriet Blodgett
does in her essay "The Necessary Child: The House in Paris." She conceives of Leopold as the renewing force of the
old life with Ray, Karen seeks to plot her life in accordance with her family's narrative. Out of sync with the present moment, she attempts to restore order, meaning and coherency on a fragmented and disrupted personal sjuzet. Her failure to come to the house becomes her inability to integrate that trauma in her life. Ironically, it is her compulsion to contain the past within the house which precipitates Ray's actions. Whereas the narrative's sjuzet traps Karen in a looped moment of immanent crisis, Ray opens up a counter narrative which provides a potential "sense of an ending."

We will remember, according to Brooks, that "Plot could be thought of as the interpretive activity elicited by the distinction between the sjuzet and fabula, the way we use the one against the other" (Brooks 13). If we think about "the year in Paris" as a part of the fabula, the raw version of events, and the sjuzet as the predetermined life narrative, we can understand Karen's confinement in the past, and her failure to come to the house, as a failure to plot. Her denial of duration—of Leopold—becomes central to this unsuccessful negotiation between the fabula and the sjuzet. Leopold, rather than abnegating duration's forward flow, actively seeks it out. His physical movement outside of the house with Ray at the end of the novel liberates him from its parasitic grasp. The combined presence of Henrietta and Ray in the third section of the novel constitutes a critical aspect of Leopold's liberation. And yet though liberated, he not located. That is to say, Leopold begins and ends the novel as a character in transit. Partially reenacting and partially escaping the trauma contained in the house, physically liberated from it but nevertheless displaced to a train station, he becomes liminal. The sjuzet's staging of Leopold's inherited trauma resists a neat, secure resolution of the text. Despite his and Ray's departure from novel which brings its trajectory forward into the future, relinquishing it from the grasp of the past and present. She figures the ending with Ray, moreover, as unequivocally positive: Ray's acceptance of Leopold, the fulfillment of his rational, luminous name. We cannot forget that Ray acts under an ethical and moral pressure from Karen's abandonment, nor that the sjuzet stages Leopold as yoked to the house and its nexus of trauma.
the house, and the potential need for an “ending” that satisfies, Leopold is, ultimately, without a mother. Her absence is perhaps the greatest gash, or gap, in the narrative; she becomes the lingering “blank space.” The echoes between Leopold and Max, moreover, remain. That is to say, signs of suppression continue to linger over the narrative. The trauma constellates around the house and that year in Paris because of the tenacity with which they resist containment, emplottment and the bestowal of neat, ordered meaning. In his liminality Leopold is not, then, so far from the house itself. In the final scene of the novel, he pesters Ray: “Where to?” (268) Rather than bestowing a place, a sense of belonging—or a sense of an ending—Ray responds with “A taxi out here” (268). The novel itself, then, begins where it started, thus enacting, and repeating, the eruption of trauma that is its flashback.
Bibliography


