

Spooks and Holy Ghosts: Spectral Politics and the Politics of Spectrality in Hilary Mantel's *Eight Months on Ghazzah Street*

On the first page of her autobiography, *Giving up the Ghost*, Hilary Mantel sees a spectre and makes an admission. Mantel describes seeing a movement, “a flickering,” on the staircase of her Norfolk home and states “I know it is my stepfather’s ghost coming down” (1). This distinctive way of seeing and the problematic status of the knowledge it leads to have a profound familiarity for Mantel. “I am used,” she says, “to ‘seeing’ things that are not there. Or – to put it in a way that is more acceptable to me – I am used to seeing things that ‘aren’t there’” (*Giving up the Ghost* 1). This sensitivity to the apparently insensible, and in particular to the figure of the ghost and the operation of the spectral, is not limited to Mantel’s biographical experiences. Later in the same chapter she exhorts herself to tell her readers how she came to “sell a house with a ghost in it” (5), a phrase which astutely describes her writing career. From her earliest writings to her most recent publications, it is clear that Mantel is an author who understands the power of haunting. Her debut duology, *Every Day is Mother’s Day* and *Vacant Possession*, deployed a host of spectres within a quasi-gothic framework to explore the politics of care-giving in Margaret Thatcher’s Britain, while most recently her Booker Prize winning novels, *Wolf Hall* and *Bring up the Bodies*, reanimate the historical dead; “their skulls [are] tumbled from their shrouds, and words like stones [are] thrust into their open mouths” (*Wolf Hall* 649). Bearing this pre-occupation with ghosts and the gothic in mind it would not be unreasonable to anticipate that Mantel’s third novel, *Eight Months on Ghazzah Street*, would continue this trend, particularly given the prominence on the cover of each edition of critic Robert Irwin’s thought provoking characterisation of the book as “A Middle Eastern *Turn of the Screw*.”

Yet closer reading of the novel reveals that this is a problematic comparison on several levels. Henry James’s story is understood to be an exemplar of the gothic text and is renowned as a classic ghost story. Yet, upon initial inspection Mantel’s third novel, which is based upon the author’s time living

in Saudi Arabia, is devoid of the supernatural and the majority of the hallmarks of the gothic text are remarkable only by their absence from this book. The dead do not return in the narrative, indeed they are represented as irrevocably lost, and no “literal” ghosts haunt the novel’s protagonists, Frances Shore and her husband, Andrew. Certainly, *Eight Months on Ghazzah Street* is not a book about ghosts. Rather, this paper argues, *Eight Months on Ghazzah Street* is a text which is concerned with the hinterland between the sensible and the insensible which is occupied by the *spectre* and if *Eight Months* is not a book about ghosts but about spectres, the quality of spectrality itself must be understood as something related to but distinct from “ghostliness.” Mantel recalls playing the role of a ghost in Noël Coward’s *Blithe Spirit* but rather than emphasising the post-mortem positioning associated with the ghost she characterises her role as “a phantom of air and smoke” (*Giving Up* 54). This description of a non-subject, composed of an emptiness permeated by smoky traces which evoke notions of dematerialisation, exemplifies the play between absence and presence, visibility and invisibility, sensibility and insensibility which defines spectrality for Mantel and allows her to put it to work in *Eight Months*.

In place of the ghosts of the traditional gothic project Mantel depicts political spectres, those individuals so disenfranchised by dominant political systems that their very personhood becomes compromised. The occluded ancestral secrets that provide the kernel of classical gothic novels are supplanted here by a quest to bring to light the non-present living and to make visible the very fact of their spectralisation. The exposure of the apparitional subjects who populate the Saudi Arabia of *Eight Months on Ghazzah Street*, and Mantel’s insistence upon the political implications of being rendered a “phantom of air and smoke” who can never be fully seen and fully heard is mirrored by a pre-occupation with a rendering legible of the ways in which religious and political systems are able to operate invisibly but indisputably in homes and minds, to spectrally “walk through walls” erected between public and private. Appropriating the function the gothic heroine, described by Sarolta Marinovich as being ‘to seek out the centre of a mystery’ (192), Mantel creates in Francis a figure capable of exposing this “spectral politics.” Diverging from the well trodden critical path that looks

to Jacques Derrida to facilitate discussions around the spectral and the political, this article turns instead to the work of Jacques Rancière regarding what he terms the distribution of the sensible in order to establish that, while haunting and spectrality are undeniably central components of the gothic project, here they are the key to recognising this haunted text as a profoundly political novel. In identifying the dual significance of invisibility, this article maps the complex interactions between the political and the spectral in *Eight Months*, establishing the novel as a text driven by the need to articulate the politically charged nature of the liminal space wherein individuals and events can be rendered spectral.

The initial section of this article is concerned with analysing the ways in which the operations of a State apparatus are presented as having a spectral quality within *Eight Months on Ghazzah Street*, reading Jacques Rancière and Jacques Lacan together in order to chart the complex and sometimes paradoxical relationships between agency, invisibility, spectrality and power that are present in this text. However, this reading necessitates a consideration of whether Mantel's spectralised Saudi Arabia may be problematic from a critical perspective and demands that we question whether it is *possible* for Mantel's novel to constitute "[a] Middle Eastern *Turn of the Screw*" as Irwin dubs it. While this comparison to Henry James's infamous tale rightly recognises the gothic atmosphere and profound ambiguity of the text, and acknowledges the book's status as a ghost story of sorts, the presence of the gothic and the use of the spectral in *Eight Months* pose a problem that changes the critical stakes of what Mantel is attempting in her novel. The text critiques the politico-religious regime in Saudi Arabia using a carefully crafted spectral metaphor, yet, within the Islamic faith, the concept of the ghost is wholly absent and folk belief in ghosts in Saudi Arabia is minimal. This being the case Mantel's spectralisation of Saudi Arabia could be viewed negatively as an attempt to think about a politico-religious system in terms that don't apply to it or, worse, as an ethnocentric imposition. As such, having established the significance of spectrality to this novel, it is necessary to address this clash between subject matter and mode of representation. In closing, this article demonstrates that the discordance between the overarching metaphor of the text and the

theological assertions and cultural practices to which the text refers is deliberately created, that the imposition constituted by Mantel's invocation of the gothic is a conscious one. Following a discussion with her Muslim neighbour, Yasmin, Frances Shore concludes that "[o]f course [Yasmin] can't break out of her culture [. . .]. No more can I break out of mine. No more would I want to; no more does she" (121). I argue that this impasse is what is principally highlighted by the presence of the spectral in *Eight Months*. By creating in Frances a quasi-gothic heroine who is only able to relate to the text's fictionalised Saudi Arabia through the decidedly Western, Protestant lens of the ghostly and by crafting a narrative whose events are profoundly ambiguous, both to the novel's protagonist and to the reader, Mantel is able to articulate how attempts to translate the phenomenon of the cultural and politico-religious milieu of Saudi Arabia into the terms of another culture can only result in stubbornly enigmatic remains which register affectively as well as textually. Just as Francis is thwarted in her attempts to gain an explanation for mysterious events taking place in her home, to make visible and audible that which has been veiled and muffled, so too is the reader frustrated, left with a text populated by apparitions that refuse to fully appear, a narrative that refuses, finally, to tell. Ultimately, Mantel's spectral strategy enables her to call into question previously taken for granted definitions of politics and political action, rendering the act of attempting to see "beyond appearances [. . .] to another reality" the most profoundly political of gestures (Mantel, *A Kind of Alchemy* 8).

The Ladies Vanish: Agency, Invisibility and the Writing of Jacques Rancière

As it seems to me the first right a person has is the right to be seen. And that is denied to women by the veil. But you really have to have lived there to know it, to know what a gang of women under the veil look like when they move through a public place. It is as if they are not there (Mantel, 'The Scottish Review of Books Interview').

It is a delimitation of [...] the visible and the invisible, of speech and noise that simultaneously determines the place and stakes of politics as a form of experience. Politics

revolves around what is seen and what can be said about it, around who has the ability to see and the power to speak (Rancière, *Politics* 8).

Eight Months draws heavily upon Mantel's personal experience of living in Saudi Arabia. In a piece written for English newspaper *The Guardian* she describes how, on arriving at Jeddah airport, her first experience was a lack of acknowledgment, stating "[n]o one met my eyes" and recounting how, in response to her sympathetic glance, the gaze of a male fellow passenger "jerked away" (31). This encounter with what Mantel describes in the piece as the "avoidant gaze" characterizes the experience of Frances Shore as she attempts to negotiate her new life in Jeddah. Early on in the novel Frances attempts to purchase painkillers from a male shop assistant while out with her husband. Instead of speaking to Frances the assistant looks past her, addressing his questions about the transaction to Andrew "as if [Frances] were a ventriloquist's doll" and causing her to ask "[a]m I visible?" (112). This encounter, with its central question of visibility, has impact far beyond articulating the experience of a female Western incomer to a conservative Muslim society, as it lucidly illustrates the thinking of Jacques Rancière with regard to how political systems operate. It is important to note here that for Rancière "politics" has a very specific meaning that differs from an understanding of the political as "the practice of power or the embodiment of collective wills and interests and the enactment of collective ideas" (Rancière *Dissensus* 152), the policy making and enforcing of governmental bodies etc. Rather, Rancière defines politics as being "before all else [. . .] an intervention in the visible and sayable" (*Dissensus* 37) and understands a political action to be one that disturbs the distribution of the sensible, that is, the apparently "natural logic" of the "distribution of the visible and invisible, of speech and noise [which] pins bodies to their places and allocates the private and the public to distinct 'parts'" (*Dissensus* 139). As such, participation in the political system is necessarily predicated upon this division between what and, more importantly, who "is visible or not in a common space" (Rancière, *Politics* 8). By bringing the two quotations that opened this section into conversation with each other it is possible to see that what Mantel defines as the denial of a basic right is a profoundly political act according to the Rancièrian definition of the

political; to be deemed invisible, set outside the realm of the sensible, is automatically to be excluded not only from political enfranchisement as manifested in participation in the day to day processes of democracy but also from “the community of citizens” as a whole (Rancière, *Politics* 7), to be denied the status of those who “partake” (Rancière, *Dissensus* 27).¹ Crucially, the correspondence between Mantel’s sentiments and the thinking of Rancière make it clear that *Eight Months* constitutes a political gesture in its own right, a gesture which places the ability to be seen and heard at the centre of political subjectivity and narrativises the difficulties and dangers associated with contesting the partition of the sensible.

As Frances’s experience in the pharmacy demonstrates, the difficulty of being seen that Mantel encountered upon her own entry into Jeddah is transposed into the fictionalised Saudi Arabia of *Eight Months*. This preoccupation with visibility and invisibility exceeds Frances’s individual experience, finding its most potent articulation in the novel’s representation of veiling.² Shortly after her arrival in Jeddah, Frances comes into contact with a group of veiled Saudi women in a supermarket:

Around her, women plucked tins from shelves; women trussed up in their modesty like funereal laundry, women with layers of thick black cloth where their faces should be. [. . .] ‘I didn’t know the veil was like this,’ she whispered. ‘I thought you would see their eyes’ (57-58).

The disappointment of Frances’s expectation that the full veil frequently worn in Saudi Arabia would not prevent eye contact emphasises how the veil not only negates visual identification, due to the “cloth where their faces should be”, but also prevents a more profound identification by precluding

¹ See Aristotle’s definition of the citizen as ‘one who partakes in the fact of ruling and the fact of being ruled’ discussed in Rancière, *Dissensus*, p. 27.

² For the sake of clarity, it is important to state that the garment described as a veil in *Eight Months on Ghazzah Street* is a niqab, a full face veil with a slit to allow the wearer to see. The slit is either permanently covered with a mesh which obscures the eyes or else has a detachable mesh panel which can be pulled down to conceal the eyes from view or raised to reveal them.

eye contact and rendering imperceptible the female viewpoint, literally the point from which these women see the world. The verbs “pluck” and “truss” used in the passage are linked through their association with the preparation of poultry and thus the same linguistic field is applied to the foodstuffs on the shelves and to the women purchasing them. This association has the effect of communicating the shift that full veiling in this context appears to produce – that from subject to object. This articulation of the ultimate consequence of invisibility being an acute difficulty in being recognised as a subject is significant, forming one element of a semantic strategy wherein veiling, invisibility and lack of agency come to be associated with death or spectrality, connecting the living female subjects described with the object of the post-mortem body. The “funereal laundry” of the previous passage is the first indication of a link being created between death and the veiled women that Frances encounters. Later in the novel this association is given a spectral inflection as Frances observes a veiled group crossing a busy road:

In front of them, a collection of black-veiled shapes had drifted into the road. They hovered for a moment, in the middle of the great highway, looking with their blind muffled faces into the car; then slowly, they began to bob across to the opposite kerb (92).

The uncertain quality of the women’s movements, hovering, drifting and bobbing, combined with their reduction to an indefinite physical “shape” gives them a phantasmal quality and through invoking the crude image of the “ghost in a sheet” of popular culture Mantel is also able to posit these women as being subject to a social ghosting in which they are “muffled” and “blind”, denied the ability to be, as Rancière puts it, among those “who [have] the ability to see and the talent to speak” (*Politics* 8). Elsewhere in the text veiled women “glide” in a silent “deep-below world” that recalls the underworld domain of the dead, a recollection made more potent when in the following paragraph Frances visits a souk where she handles some traditional beaded face-masks, intended to serve the same purpose as the veil, whose owners are conjectured to be either “emancipated, or deceased” (210). Veiling provides a striking figurative representation of the way in which the

politico-religious system in Saudi Arabia obscures or negates female presences in public spaces, those shared “common” spaces in which Rancière argues participation in the political system must necessarily take place. However, it is not the only instance in the novel where certain subjects are depicted as possessing a mode of non-present presence. The representation of the domestic servants who quietly populate the text of *Eight Months* provides a crucial insight into how the Wahhabi regime actively produces social ghosts.

In his book *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics* Rancière discusses how certain categories of individuals, for example women and workers, have been excluded from the social by virtue of an insistence upon their association with the domestic sphere (38). The consequence of this occlusion of certain groups by virtue of the spaces they occupy is to render them unable to claim the position of political subject, of a “person” fully occupying the realm of the sensible. This denial of personhood is strikingly demonstrated in the opening chapter of *Eight Months* as Frances discusses with an air steward the possibility of her taking a taxi when she lands in Jeddah:

‘It’s bad news, a man picking up a strange woman in a car. They can gaol you for it.’

‘But he’s a taxi-driver,’ [Frances] said. ‘That’s his job, picking up strange people.’

‘But you’re a woman,’ the steward said. ‘You’re a woman, aren’t you? You’re not a person any more’ (29).

This exchange posits an alarming impending transformation in which womanhood and personhood shift from being two mutually compatible categories to mutually exclusive categories. The representation of veiling in *Eight Months* is symptomatic of a text which articulates the position occupied by the women of Jeddah as being profoundly compromised; in public and thus in the eye – and I use that word advisedly – of the law, they are non-present presences. Situated outside of the realm of the sensible, unable to be fully seen, they are also situated outside of the realm of knowledge; they cannot be known and comprehended because they are surplus to the sensible

order. When we consider that the spectre as phenomenon can in part be defined by its refusal of discrete ontological categories and its troubling of the notions of the sensible, occupying as it does a liminal space between sensibility and insensibility and existing outside the order of knowledge, unable to be wholly apprehended, Mantel's use of spectralisation as a figure for political disenfranchisement comes into sharp focus. The metaphor is perhaps most potently inscribed in her representation of the domestic servants depicted in *Eight Months* who are depicted as being so peripheral that they appear as phantasms rather than subjects in their own right. Through this peripheral positioning the servants of *Eight Months* are rendered non-persons, a group whose members cannot be addressed individually, not because they defy definition but because they have not been granted any subjective identity. Throughout the novel the names of domestic staff prove slippery and ungraspable to their employers and rather than attempting to master the difficult syllables, Frances's friends perform dominating acts of renaming:

'What is your maid's name?' Frances asked.

Samira told her. But she was no wiser. It sounded like 'Sarasparilla'. But that was not possible. In answer to her questioning look, Samira merely shrugged. 'I did try to call her something simpler,' she said. 'But she won't answer to it.'

[. . .] The girl slid out of the room, seeming to melt into the shadows of the heavy furniture (124-125).

Mantel's description of Sarasparilla's apparent immateriality, her "sliding" from the room and "melting" into the shadows, signals a systematic placement of those in service in Saudi Arabia as less "present" in some crucial way than their employers. This lack of presence, which is in fact a lack of acknowledgement, a failure to be fully admitted to the realm of the sensible that Frances also endures, is symptomatic of a spectral existence. Indeed, Frances's first discussion with Yasmin about the lives of domestic servants in Jeddah prompts Yasmin to state that "they are trying to commit

suicide [. . .] They throw themselves off balconies" (68), a generalised description which creates an image of the maids in question as perpetually between life and death, "trying" to commit suicide rather than "committing" it, always in the act of falling between the domestic space and a post-mortem existence. While literary depictions of servants frequently draw upon the spectral metaphor (Peeren 5), the mode of ghosting performed by the servants in *Eight Months* has a religiously freighted specificity. Yasmin mentions the fact that many of those in service have been forced by economic necessity to leave their children behind and also emphasises their perceived lack of morality. Shortly after her conversation with Yasmin regarding her maid Frances reads the correspondence column in a newspaper in which one writer asserts that "[t]he Kingdom's social and cultural heritage does not allow women to mix with men either in life activities or in work. The right place for a woman is to look after her husband and children" (73). In having to leave behind their family units to take up paid work which will unavoidably bring them into contact with men to whom they are not related, either by birth or marriage, the female domestic servants of Saudi Arabia are depicted as necessarily situated outside of the purview of religion and the law. In order to carry out their jobs they must be considered to be not merely non-persons, as is apparent in Frances's exchange with the air steward wherein womanhood and personhood are posited as being mutually exclusive, but must also be denied their status as "women" or else be in perpetual violation of the laws of the Kingdom. Possessed of an existence and yet denied personhood, denied their own names and spaces, the domestic servants of *Eight Months* are depicted as having no option but to live as social spectres.

Clearly, *Eight Months* is a text that engages compellingly with Rancière's suggestion that a lack of visibility frequently equates to a lack of agency and enfranchisement. Yet if Rancière insists that visibility is what guarantees participation in the political and legal system he neglects to address the fact that the very invisibility that is used to disenfranchise and exclude certain groups mirrors the invisibility possessed by those organisations responsible for reinforcing the apparently "natural logic"

of the partition of the sensible (Rancière, *Dissensus* 139), a logic which is in fact wholly artificial and available for dispute. This paradox can be illustrated by comparing two symmetrical incidents within the text. The presence of a group of veiled women who stray in front of the car carrying Frances and her neighbour almost results in a traffic accident; the car “screeche[s] to a halt”, the driver “[stabs] his foot on the break” (92). Yet when Frances ventures out of her house without wearing the full veil and attempts to cross a main road, a motorist deliberately tries to run her down (238). While the presence of the veiled women is critically compromised, it is this compromise that permits them partial access to the public sphere; only if they are apparitional will they be tolerated. Conversely, Frances’s very visibility problematises her presence within the common space of the street and places her in danger. The spatial aspect of these two instances of road crossing is important. For Rancière, the degree to which a subject is deemed to belong to the realm of the sensible is predicated upon “what they do and the time and space in which this particular activity is performed” (*Dissensus* 139). The Jeddah of *Eight Months* is no exception to this formulation; the occupations open to women are tightly circumscribed, restricted to roles accommodated by the domestic sphere, and these roles are precisely situated outside of a common space. The movements that can be made by the women of Saudi Arabia are tightly controlled and this politico-social circumscription is emblematised by the design of Jeddah’s pavements which reinforce these rigid restrictions as Frances finds out:

Every few yards it was necessary to step down from the eighteen-inch kerb and into the gutter; the municipality had planted saplings, etiolated and ill-doing plants inside concrete rectangles, and it did not seem to have occurred to anyone that the saplings would block the pavements, and that pavements are for walking on. But clearly they are not for walking on, she thought. Men drive cars; women stay at home. Pavements are a buffer zone, to prevent cars running into the buildings (74-75).

This passage articulates clearly how the conspicuous yet anonymous restriction of certain people's movements to certain spaces and times is a major preoccupation, not just in this passage but in Mantel's Saudi Arabia generally. However, it is the anonymity and nebulous quality of the agency that insists upon these regulations which is perhaps the most striking element of the above passage. Its powerfully present absence provides an indication of how the paradox in Rancière's thinking regarding agency and invisibility identified above, can be resolved – by returning, through Althusser, to Lacan and his concept of the big Other.

Spectral Surveillance and the Gaze – Rancière with Lacan

When Althusser describes the process of interpellation which “recruits subjects from individuals” (48) he asserts that for this interpellation to take place “a unique and Other Subject, i.e God,” is necessary, a “Subject with a capital S to distinguish it from ordinary subjects with a small s” (52). Graphically and conceptually this “Other Subject” calls to mind another figure central to Lacan's thinking: that of the big Other. In Lacanian thought the big Other comes to constitute the figure to whom we attribute the functioning of the Symbolic order, “the locus of speech and (potentially) the locus of truth” around which our social interactions are notionally structured (Lacan 129). As Žižek lucidly points out, for Lacan “the absolute ‘big Other’ [is] God Himself” (Žižek, *Big Other* 2). The narrator of *Eight Months* observes that the unyielding, repeating geometry of a rug in Frances's neighbour's home recalls “the unfathomable nature and eternal vigilance of Allah himself” (84). This description of Allah articulates perfectly the big Other's unapprehensible nature and, crucially its omniscient scrutiny. As the novel's narrator states early on in the text “all-seeing Allah will observe” (32). It is this scrutiny that is made manifest in Lacan's conception of the gaze. The gaze here should be understood as the sense that one is observed, seen by something that one cannot see observing. It is a gaze “that circumscribes us, and which in the first instance makes us beings who are looked at,” “not a seen gaze but a gaze imagined by me in the field of the Other” (Lacan 75, 84). As we will see shortly, the gaze of the big Other renders legible the invisible quality of the ultimate arbiters of

power structures. However, this gaze also needs to be understood in the context of *Eight Months* as being involved in the same nexus of invisibility, spectrality and agency discussed above with reference to the figure of the veiled woman and to be acknowledged as constituting a spectre in its own right.

The Lacanian gaze can be described as “a point of failure in the visual field [. . .] a point where perception breaks down” (Krips 2); it is unapprehensible (Lacan 84). If we consider for a moment the location of the spectre within the visual field, the point it occupies can be defined as “the space in which representation is fragmented” (Gasché 172) – the spectre is by its nature never fully apprehensible and thus cannot be accommodated by traditional modes of representation or perception. Likewise, both spectre and gaze can be understood as that which resists being perceived and can only be acknowledged “at the limit of comprehension” (Wolfreys 6). The spectral quality of the gaze is established in Mantel’s text from its opening chapters. On her first morning in Jeddah Frances is left in their apartment alone by her husband. In his absence she takes a tour of her new accommodation. She draws back her curtains to reveal wooden blinds which are raised to give a view onto a brick wall. The glass in her kitchen door is frosted, as is that in her bathroom window which slides open to reveal yet another wall (45). Frances cannot see out and nor can anybody see in order to look at her. Yet when she retires to her sitting room she is overcome with self-consciousness, feeling “as though someone were watching [her]” (47). Even as she is cloistered from the world by her opaque windows and locked doors, shielded from any human stare, the gaze, apparently emanating from a disembodied “someone”, continues to exert pressure on Frances who “[does] not feel at all in possession of the ground” (46) of her flat. Her constant movements – switching on lights, changing positions, abandoning her attempts to read (an activity which combines the visual quality of the word “see” with its alternate meaning of “to understand”) in favour of unpacking – provide an illustration of the ways in which an awareness of the gaze causes the subject to “tr[y] to adapt himself to it” (Lacan 84). The surveying presence Frances experiences so profoundly renders her incapable of establishing her flat on Ghazzah Street as her home. It

thoroughly displaces her in a movement which recalls Julian Wolfreys' assertion that the ghost displaces us where we ought to feel most secure: within the domestic scene (Wolfreys 5). In the world of *Eight Months* such security is precluded from the start by this spectral surveillance.

As the novel progresses Frances feels herself haunted by this disembodied gaze both inside and outside of her home. Even when putative watchers are identified, these figures constitute only placeholders for the haunting and persecutory gaze of the big Other. One example of these misrecognitions, in which the power of observation is attributed to an object which has eyes but does not "see", can be found in the dead fish served to Frances at supper which "look[ed] up at her with a small, dead, prehistoric eye" (223) and the tiles that decorate Frances' hallway and which seem to resemble "[s]mall faces, each with its splash of scarlet, its swirl of black" and leave Frances feeling "as if she were being watched by bloodied eyes; by the victims of some Koranic punishment" (202). It is in this final sentence that the potential source, if not identity, of the surveying presence is posited. The "Koranic punishment" that Frances imagines implicates the political and legal authority constituted by Islam in Saudi Arabia in this process of observation and neatly encapsulates the "confusion" between Althusser's "law which interpellates individuals" and "religious subjection" (Rancière, *Dissensus* 37) which is perpetually taking place in Saudi Arabia where no difference is drawn between the religious and the legal. This surveying religious and legal presence is embodied earlier in the novel when Frances and Andrew visit the site of the building Andrew is helping to construct in Jeddah. Already anxious about committing any inadvertent indiscretion, Frances observes that she and her husband are being watched: "'Andrew –' she swivelled a glance over her shoulder, uneasy – 'there's a policeman across the road, he's staring at us'" (101).

To fully understand the significance of the presence of the police officer in the passage it is useful to return to Rancière and examine his conceptualisation of the police. Rather than constituting just one of the multiple apparatuses which exist as "social function[s]" "in relation to the requirements

of legal practice” (Rancière, *Dissensus* 36; Althusser 11), the police are defined by Rancière as “the symbolic constitution of the social”, stating that “the essence of the police lies neither in repression nor even in control over the living: its essence lies in a certain way of dividing up the sensible” (*Dissensus* 36). The authoritative stare of the police officer which discomforts Frances initially appears to constitute the voyeuristic gaze of an individual subject. However, just as the “eyes” in the above passages were misidentified as the true source of surveillance, this understanding of the police officer’s stare is also not entirely accurate; it is not an individual that looks through the eyes of the police officer; rather, his gaze is possessed by the discarnate presence of legal and religious authority: behind the individual police officer, Mantel positions the Rancièrian police. In a rhetorical move which darkly satirises the use of retaliatory punishment or “qisas” in Saudi Arabia and the related aphorism “an eye for an eye will make the whole world blind”, the omniscient and haunting stare of the religious authorities depicted in *Eight Months* is paralleled by a focus on Frances’s own specific mode of blindness which takes both deliberate and involuntary forms. The frustration Frances feels at the novel’s outset when she struggles to gain a view onto the outside world from her flat is reprised at the midpoint of the text when she is forced to leave her blinds closed all day, ostensibly to facilitate some repair work to her apartment. She complains that she has been “blinkered” (99) and speaks of her desire for “a third eye [. . .] one that would see more deeply than the other two” (216). This latter statement plays deliberately with the double meaning of “seeing” and as the novel gathers pace the dangers of such “insights” are repeatedly re-iterated to Frances, whose interrogation of and confrontations with the secrecy and occlusions that characterise life in Jeddah form a source of anxiety to those around her until eventually she concedes to “[listen] without hearing. [Look] without seeing” (236-237). Yet the gaze is only one element of how the phantasmal big Other functions in this text. Shortly after Frances’s encounter with the police officer at the building site she reads an article in a local newspaper about capital punishments carried out that week. The article states that “[w]hile giving out details of the offence and punishment, the Interior Minister made it clear that the government would vigorously implement the Sharia laws to

maintain the security of the land and to deter criminals . . . The executions were carried out after Friday prayers” (105). This final sentence ominously confirms how the invasive power of political and religious authority can, in an instant, move from the visual register to the material, from looking to touching.

Political Poltergeists

This shift from looking to touching is clearly inscribed in an incident that takes place as the novel draws to a close, an episode which constitutes the culmination of Frances’s determination to undertake her own “redistribution of the sensible.” Early on in the novel Frances becomes curious about the flat that sits, ostensibly empty, above her own. Despite assurances that the apartment is unoccupied, on several occasions she is troubled by the sounds of weeping and of voices issuing from it. Andrew informs her of a rumour that the space is used by a couple having an adulterous affair, an explanation which attributes the haunted quality of the flat to the necessity of occulting certain activities from the spectral surveillance of the religious authorities. Yet Frances is not content with this explanation and throughout the narrative her combined curiosity and apprehension regarding the purpose of the flat gathers momentum: “I must know,” she states “Who walks about in the dark?” (214). Beyond the door of the “empty” flat she hears someone moving (214). Later, while out on the roof of her apartment building, she sees that a large crate has been inexplicably erected on the vacant apartment’s balcony, a crate which then appears to have been moved by the struggling of someone or something enclosed within it (221). Having caught her neighbour’s maid about to enter the vacant flat with a meagre portion of food, and been met with frightened dissembling when she asks for an explanation, Frances comes to the conclusion that “I have been told lies, I have been lied to all along, or rather I have been in error as to what I chose to believe” (220). Despite warnings from multiple individuals Frances continues her attempts to reveal the truth

as to the nature of the “empty” property, demanding answers from Andrew’s boss, Eric Parsons, whose response is chilling:

‘You know, you were told, about the empty flat. And you were told to be careful. [. . .] if you involve yourself – if you are thought, Frances, to be making a nuisance of yourself, to have come into possession of any information that you shouldn’t have – then it will be Andrew who bears the brunt of any indiscretion. [. . .] I am first in the firing line, my dear, and there are some things that I cannot afford to know. Once past a certain point, you see, you become an undesirable person, and then who knows what happens? Because there comes a certain point where they don’t want you here, and if you see what I mean, they don’t want you to leave either’ (240-241).

What takes place here is clearly a rebuttal of Frances’s attempt to disturb the partition of the sensible by breaking the silence imposed around the “empty” flat on Ghazzah Street. Parsons’s response to Frances constitutes nothing more than a reaffirmation of the “taken for granted configuration of perception and meaning that [. . .] defines the conditions in which arguments can be made, recognized as such and engaged” (Ruez 1128). Indeed, when Frances asks Parsons “[w]on’t you even listen to me?” he responds with a categorical “No.” (241) shutting down any possibility for an argument to take place. This exchange vividly inscribes a confrontation between police and politics as Rancière defines them. Parsons’s refusal to “hear what issues from [Frances’s] mouth as discourse” (Rancière, *Dissensus* 38) lucidly illustrates that “political struggle is not a matter of rational debate between multiple interests [but rather] a struggle to have ones voice heard and to have ones voice recognised as a legitimate partner in debate” (Corcoran 9). As Eric Parsons continues to support the existing partition of the sensible by placing the mystery of the empty flat outside of those phenomena that can be acknowledged, let alone debated, he adheres to the “principle” of the police, that is the maintenance of an “absence of void and of supplement” which

ensures that everything has its allotted place in the realm of the sensible and that which has not got a proper place must be excluded (Rancière, *Dissensus* 36). Meanwhile, Frances's insistence upon gaining access to the flat's concealed truth is an attempt to perform a profound act of dissensus, the political action constituted by the "demonstration (manifestation) of a gap in the sensible itself [. . .] mak[ing] visible that which has no reason to be seen" (Rancière, *Dissensus* 38). Yet, crucially, the empty flat remains an occluded space, its residents or prisoners are unknown and, though Frances conjectures "an arms cache, a hideout, a torture chamber, a mortuary?" (240) as potential functions, the purpose of the space remains ambiguous. Unlike the locked rooms of gothic novels, whose doors swing open to reveal corpses, crucial documents or sequestered relatives, offering up family secrets whose concealment has been the driver of the narrative, the enigma of the 'empty' flat on Ghazzah street persists. Through Francis the reader builds up a catalogue of contradictions and denials relating to the apartment but ultimately all Frances is capable of revealing is the fact of a concealment having taken place taking place. In this way the space comes to emblematised the ways in which visibility and invisibility instantiate power and agency, as Mantel manipulates the form of her novel in such a way as to have it enact the very instances of concealment and avoidance that the narrative relates.

It is following her exchange with Parsons that Frances and Andrew return to their apartment from a shopping trip to discover that they have apparently been burgled: "The wardrobe gaped open; some of their clothes had been dragged from the hangers, flung about the room. Drawers were pulled out. 'Our camera's gone,' [Frances] said" (244). Yet as Frances and Andrew progress through the house they discover that their "housekeeping money", a significant sum, has not been taken. Indeed the only thing of monetary value to have been stolen is the Shores' camera, an object capable of capturing the visible, of holding it to account and providing evidence. Bearing in mind this function of a camera, its theft signals an intention by the invading presence to regulate the gaze and restrict

its deployment. As the passage continues, the burglars' point of entry into the Shores' flat becomes a point of contention:

It was obvious how the burglars had got in. They had come through the big window with its sliding panel; the length of wood that should have blocked the track lay on the carpet. It had been removed from the inside. 'You forgot to put it back,' Andrew said. He saw her face. 'I'm not blaming you. I know you want a breath of air sometimes. [. . .]'

'If I want air I go to the roof. I didn't take the wood out.'

'You must have. Who else could it have been?'

'No one' (244).

This characterisation of the subject who opens up the Shores' home "from the inside" and leaves "no greasy finger prints [. . .] no smudges" as "no one" (249) begins to position this scene of home invasion rather as a scene of spectral home possession wherein the items which are damaged and stolen possess a symbolic value within a matrix of acts of vandalism and disruption designed to displace and disturb. Frances observes that "[t]hey've taken the Thamaga candle sticks. Some food has gone, out of the fridge" (245). She later discovers that the intruders have "mauled and despoiled [her] summer frocks" and that "her soapstone tortoise [is] gone from the bedside table" (245). With the theft of the candle sticks, structures for supporting illumination, the visual field is metaphorically thrown into uncertainty and it becomes more difficult to "see" clearly. The destruction of Frances's "summer dresses", items of clothing which she cannot publically wear in the Kingdom, indicates the incursion of religious and legal restrictions into the private sphere of the home. Indeed, the dispossession of the Shores within their own home, the removal of "the small valueless things that [they] cannot bear to lose" (246) along with food items which are symbolic of the Shores' ability to sustain themselves within their domestic space, constitutes a wholesale "destabilization of the domestic scene" (Wolfreys 5), a destabilisation which we have seen was

already in play in the flat on Ghazzah Street from the moment Frances arrived. The “someone” Frances sensed watching her on that first morning has, through the burglary, been given flesh, affirming once and for all that the Shores’ flat could never constitute “home” as Julian Wolfreys has defined it – “that place where we apparently confirm our identity, our sense of being, where we feel most at home with ourselves” (6).

The scene, framed as a burglary in the first instance, a criminal act, quickly takes on the sensation of poltergeist activity, the chaos caused by a persecutory ghost who seeks to displace living tenants from their homes, however, this haunting has a specifically politico-religious inflection. Having come to terms with their material losses, and decided not to involve the Saudi police, Andrew and Frances seek to settle their nerves with a drink. Alcohol being prohibited in Saudi Arabia, the bottle of Scotch they received as a present is secreted under their kitchen sink and their home-brewed wine stowed in the bathroom:

Andrew glowered over the remains of the bottle of Scotch; smashed, it lay on the draining-board. [. . .] [He] turned quickly and made for the little bathroom where they kept their wine supplies. As soon as he opened the door a ripe heady odour from the upturned jerry cans rolled past them. Almost tangible, it billowed down the passageway, and washed through the flat. [. . .] There had been twenty-four bottles, in a cardboard box; even the box was ripped to shreds, and its remnants bobbed on a frothy tide from the jerry cans, a scum of yeast and water and half-fermented fruit (247).

The methodical destruction of the Shores’ alcohol positions the invasion of the flat as constituting spectral law enforcement. This disembodied yet potent force is registered in the use of smell in the passage, causing the presence of the anonymous intruders to linger phantasmally after the corporeal perpetrators have departed. The presence that has occupied and vandalised the flat is

“almost tangible”, pervading the entire property and yet immaterial. Present but incorporeal, the “ripe, heady, odour” causes the Shores to reassess the status of their domestic space in relation to the Saudi authorities, of whom it had been previously stated that “[they] do not enter private homes on a whim. They’ll come if you attract attention to yourself” (63), and to acknowledge that the “stench of fermentation” only partially masks the overarching “smell of violence” (248). Mantel’s use of the word “washed” in the passage invokes a paradoxical image in which these acts of destruction on some level constitute an act of cleansing. Indeed, that this passage at least partially figures a religiously motivated act is explicitly stated:

‘I think,’ Frances said, ‘that we have been left a message.’

‘Message? Rip off the *khawwadjis* and save them from sin, is that what you mean?’ (248).

In the wake of this spectral incursion, Andrew angrily repeats that he “is not going to be frightened off by the vagaries of [his] bloody imagination” (248). If, as Peeren asserts, “the ghost’s power is mostly exercised through the imagination,” (3) then Andrew’s declaration indicates that the spectral functioning of political and religious ideology similarly takes place primarily through the imagination’s “Interior Ministry.” Andrew’s statement also anticipates the persistence of the phantom home invasion, if only in Andrew’s mind where its implications and the possibilities for its repetition, have the potential to be endlessly rehearsed, repeatedly returning as revenant par excellence. Andrew’s statement makes apparent that this is law enforcement carried out by the most intimate of “interior ministries”, who can not only watch and act without being seen but whose offices are internalised and whose actions are as potent and persecutory as those carried out by their embodied representatives.

“Who knows what’s under the veil?” (170)

Throughout *Eight Months* confrontations arise between the novel's Western protagonists and their conservative Saudi environment. Perhaps the most powerful of these can be located as the novel draws to its close when, returning home from a trip to the doctor, Frances discovers a veiled stranger in the stairwell of her apartment building:

Someone was in the hall [. . .] a veiled figure, going upstairs. I no longer believe in the veiled lady, she thought; I know she is a fiction, a lie. [. . .] The figure moves, not at a visitor's pace, but headlong: not furtive, decisive: and the momentary glimpse she caught seemed to contradict some observation that she had once made.

[. . .]

The visitor stopped dead. An outline of features beneath black cloth [. . .]. The visitor was tall; a strapping lass. Frances raised her hand. The visitor pulled back but she had made contact. She tugged at the concealing *abaya*, felt it part, felt something cold, metallic under her hand. She reached up, with her other hand, and clawed at the veil. But a veil is not something you can pull off [. . .] because the black cloth is wound around the head. The head strains back, and then she is pushed away with all of the visitor's ungirlish strength, sent flying against the wall. [. . .] Frances stood up shakily. Surprisingly, she felt no pain; no evidence of her encounter, except the chilly bar of flesh in the palm of her hand, where she had touched the metal of the gun's barrel (234-235).

This passage is powerful not least because it at first appears to adhere to the logic of haunting that permeates the novel before violently undermining that logic. The events that lead up to this confrontation all contribute to this passage appearing initially as an instance of haunting. As discussed above, from Frances's very first morning in her flat the presence of something or someone in the flat above her own comes to typify a feeling of occulted figures and forces in operation in her new country. As in a classic ghost story, footsteps and voices are overheard in supposedly

unoccupied rooms, objects, whose purpose is unclear, appear, move, and disappear impossibly. The apartment building becomes a haunted house, the empty flat a forbidden enclave embedded within the narrative, whose spectral inhabitants can neither be identified nor fully repudiated.³ Throughout the novel events take place which have the structure of a haunting, individuals are positioned as phantoms and Saudi Arabia itself is spectralised. Even the name Frances selects for the mysterious visitor that she has observed coming and going in the apartment on Ghazzah Street, the “veiled lady”, recalls the monikers given to the phantoms in folk narratives of haunting, the “Grey Lady”, the “White Lady” etc. Frances herself comes to constitute a quasi-gothic heroine and nowhere is this more apparent than in her final confrontation with the veiled intruder she discovers in the stairwell; only a few lines prior to the encounter she has returned from a futile medical appointment, the result of which she suspects will be “a little bottle of tranquilizing pills”, conjecturing further that she will be required to make a self diagnosis of a “neurotic imagination” (234). All of this evidence makes it possible to read the passage as a failed exorcism, an attempt to banish the phantom that has been haunting the apartment. Yet this would be to miss the crucial significance of the extract.

As related above, in the early chapters of the novel Frances is disturbed to learn of a rumour that the purpose of the vacant flat above her own is to facilitate an adulterous affair. This rumour at first appears to be supported by the repeated image of various veiled women ascending the staircase in the apartment building, in various states of distress and anonymity. These incidents and the lack of significance attributed to them by any of the other characters underline the way in which the domestic sphere in general is frequently de-politicised, the communications (“groans or cries”) issuing from it only deemed capable of “expressing suffering, hunger or anger” rather than actual speech demonstrating “a shared aesthesis’ that would demand acknowledgement and consideration or more broadly indicate a belonging to the realm of the sensible (Rancière, *Dissensus* 38). Yet, in a strategy which echoes the crime fiction authors Frances reads so avidly, Mantel’s “veiled ladies” turn

³ This is not the first instance in which Mantel embeds an enigmatic haunted enclave within a domestic space: see also the ‘spare room’ of 2 Buckingham Avenue in *Every Day is Mother’s Day* and *Vacant Possession*.

out to be red herrings; as the narrative progresses Frances becomes convinced that the adulterous couple is a fiction, that the “rumour [. . .] was tailor-made [. . .] for Westerners, with their prurient minds” (220). This notion of a narrative “tailor-made” for “Westerners” is significant. Rather than a confrontation between a spectre and a subject, the clash between Frances and the veiled figure should be read as signifying a connection between the Western notion of spectrality through whose lens Frances views the events that unfold and a very specific Middle Eastern milieu by which the notion of the ghost and the concept of haunting are not accommodated.

The spectres of Ghazzah street are profoundly metaphorical, they are the socially dead, the government “spook”. This knowing deployment of what Esther Peeren would term “the spectral metaphor” indicates an intersection between the cultural context of the novel and the cultural background of its writer. Many forms of Christianity accommodate the notion of a “ghost” and ghosts are certainly spoken about with reference to Christian religious practice, even if interpretations of scriptural evidence of ghosts forming a part of Christian dogma are conflicted and ambiguous.⁴ Islam on the other hand does not have the same familiar relationship with the notion of the ghost and indeed there is no such thing as a ghost mentioned within the Koran, wherein it is understood that the dead “can never return, either to right past wrongs or to communicate with the living” (Smith and Yazbeck, 32). Rather, the Koran describes an impermeable barrier (*barzakh*) raised between the dead and the living until judgement day (Koran 23:100). The most closely related phenomenon to be found in Islamic culture is that of the djinn, a supernatural, shape-shifting creature capable of both disruptive and altruistic magical feats. Crucially, however, the djinn is not understood to be the spirit of a dead person. Rather it stands outside of the binary of life and death as a non-human presence. At one point in the text the lack of superstition within the Wahhabi community is remarked upon by one of Frances’s neighbours: “You must know, Frances, that here they are Sunni Muslims [. . .] They don’t go for shrines and tombs and processions. They would call

⁴ See the passage concerning Saul and the witch of Endor, First Book of Samuel, 28:3-25.

these things superstition” (145). This is echoed in non-fictional accounts of the historical destruction of tomb decorations or visible structures by Wahhabi adherents (Algar 34), supporting the sense of a community in which the dead and their ghosts have no place, as Islam “hurries to inter the dead” (292) who are immured behind the purgatorial “veil” of *barzakh*, incapable of ingress into the world of the living (Idleman, Smith & Hadad 7). This being the case, Mantel’s creation of a haunted Jeddah populated with manifold spectral inhabitants could be interpreted as an attempt to speak about a culture using terms that don’t apply to it, or as an ethnocentric imposition. Yet to pursue these readings would be to fail to grasp the true extent of Mantel’s spectral strategy in this novel, in which no clash or contradiction is orchestrated without purpose.

Lost in Translation – Turning the Screw of Ethnocentrism

The notions of translation, of language and access to knowledge are at the heart of this novel. When her neighbour, Yasmin, provides Frances with a translated copy of the Koran she apologises saying “[y]ou must understand that the very language of the Holy Koran is sacred, and so this Penguin Book is just a little lacking the nuances” (118). Later, upon enquiring how Frances is getting on with the book, she reasserts this stating “[o]f course, you do not get the full idea in translation” (127). This exchange is just the beginning of a series of difficulties Frances encounters with “translations” relating to Saudi culture and society. Frances is a cartographer by training but the impossibility of mapping Jeddah is one of the first things she learns about her new home, her flight attendant assuring Frances that “[she is] redundant. [The Saudi’s] don’t have maps. [. . .] The streets are never in the same place for more than a few weeks together” (27). This assertion is borne out later in the novel when Andrew brings her maps of Jeddah which turn out to be completely inaccurate: “the shape of the coastline is different”, roads run into the sea and the apartment on Ghazzah Street is just a vacant lot (81). From this “cartography by Kafka” (81), as Frances describes it, the inability to translate the geographical reality of Jeddah into a legible document, and Yasmin’s repeated

insistence upon the inadequacy of linguistic translations, a sense emerges of the struggle Frances faces to translate the Wahhabi beliefs and doctrines that shape Saudi society into a form that she, as an outsider, can fully grasp, a struggle that repeatedly proves futile as the problems inherent with the process of translation continue to present themselves.

By creating Frances Shore in the mode of a gothic protagonist, the young female character “who is simultaneously persecuted victim and courageous heroine” (Marinovitch 192), and by casting the apartment building on Ghazzah Street as the classic haunted house, complete with forbidden enclave, Mantel orchestrates a situation in which the gothic narrative of the search “for the centre of a mystery [. . .] following clues that pull [the protagonist] onward and inward” (Kahane 335) can be played out within the context of Saudi society. Unlike the gothic novel, however, *Eight Months* stubbornly maintains its ambiguity until the text’s close, encouraging the epistemological drive towards the resolution of a mystery that typifies gothic narratives but ultimately refusing to show or tell. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the appearance and violent disappearance of Adam Fairfax, a work colleague of Andrew’s. Fairfax’s arrival is foreshadowed in the earliest pages of the novel, when Frances overhears two fellow passengers on her flight to Jeddah discussing someone of the same name. His eventual appearance at the Shores’ apartment combines the arrival of a romantic hero, bearing flowers, with the entrance of a phantom; he is “quite insubstantial”, possessed of a “transparent pallor” and a “transparent smile”, even his suit is “lightweight” and his hair “as fine as cobwebs” (252). Having celebrated Fairfax’s arrival with a meal and several bottles of wine Andrew and Frances retire to bed leaving Fairfax asleep on the sofa. Frances wakes to find the front door of the flat open and Fairfax, drunk and distressed, crouching in the stairwell of the apartment building having attempted to get onto the roof for some fresh air. Yet, when she tries to discover the cause of his shock and fear, Fairfax is incapable of articulating what he has seen and by the time Frances and Andrew wake in the morning Fairfax has disappeared from the flat (260-264). The incident appears to narrate a somewhat commonplace inability to find words to describe a

shocking and frightening sight. Yet the scene of “unspeakability” is more nuanced than this. Fairfax’s presence brings into circulation notions of England and Englishness that have been largely absent from the novel up until this point, though Yasmin’s description of the translation of the Koran she gives to Frances as a “Penguin book” very much roots their conversation about translation within the context of an historic English publishing house. The group discuss Frances and Andrew purchasing a flat in London and Fairfax describes his home in the English village of Cumbernauld. This evocation of Englishness borders on parody as Fairfax is described as looking “like a schoolboy who had been given the task of imitating [. . .] the governor of the Bank of England” (255). This “bubble” of Englishness that Fairfax creates, referencing as it does Mantel’s own description of ex-pat communities in Saudi Arabia (Mantel, *Last Morning*), positions Fairfax’s inability to describe what he has seen or explain what has happened to him very specifically as a failure of cultural translation. Following Fairfax’s disappearance Andrew arrives at work to be given a transcription, in Arabic, of a telephone message from Fairfax. Complaining that he can’t read the “Arabic scrawl”, he hands the note back to his colleague Hasan who reads it out to him:

He says, go up to your roof last night and saw two men with box and down the stairs carrying a person who is dead. I am advise you to leave that place.’

Andrew reached out and snatched back the piece of paper. He stared down at it, the loops and squiggles that defied comprehension (266).

Andrew’s inability to comprehend, to read from the original source, is both literal and symbolic and the translation provided leaves behind only enigmatic remains; the individuals Fairfax sees remain anonymous, their actions and intentions stubbornly mysterious. Indeed, two pages later Andrew breaks the news to Frances that Fairfax is dead, apparently killed in a car accident on his way to the airport, at which point Fairfax’s corpse comes to profoundly embody these “enigmatic remains” as Frances and Andrew struggle to obtain an explanation for what has taken place and to locate his

body. Finding and viewing the corpse can only be achieved through the efforts of a translator and Fairfax's body proves in itself "meaningless" (292), providing no clarity as to the events that led to his death. Yet when walking out of the mortuary Frances passes two anonymous, shrouded corpses, their winding sheets knotted around their heads (289). This image, evoking the veils that in themselves prove so ambivalent and problematic in this novel, brings us to what is ultimately at stake in Mantel's use of spectrality to speak about a system in which the spectre is not accommodated. Recall Frances's acknowledgement of the impossibility of tearing off a veil (173) and the failure of her own attempt to do so (235); these scenes provide a powerful metaphor for the inability of any attempt at the translation of another culture, another politico-religious system, to be complete and the inevitability of such attempts resulting in ambiguous and enigmatic traces that persist and discomfort. These traces are inscribed in the image Fairfax's broken body, refusing to disclose the circumstances of death. They are found in the empty rooms of the apartment block on Ghazzah street at the novel's close, which retain the residues of lives that were never wholly comprehensible to Frances or the reader, where the "smell of goatflesh, of onions and herbs, of chemical air-freshener and baby powder" has "a thick tangible quality, as if it were a tapestry with which the walls had been draped" (295). The most striking manifestation of these ambiguous remnants is perhaps the final chapter of the novel itself. Depicting Frances and Andrew as human leftovers, the last vestiges of a "golden age" of construction in Saudi Arabia, living in a "ghost town" (297) of a compound on the outskirts of Jeddah, the brief chapter provides an enigmatic postscript at the close of the novel which leaves the reader wrong-footed and denied the traditional scene of elucidation which conventionally rewards the reader of the gothic novel. Whichever way they turn the reader, like Frances in the final paragraph of the novel, is left looking down blind alleys and roads that appear to lead nowhere:

I look out through the glass, onto the landscape, the distant prospect of travelling cars. Window one, the freeway: window two, the freeway. I turn away, cross the room to find a different view. Window three, the freeway, window four: the freeway (299).

“She would never know more than she knew now [. . .] but the story is not over.” (292) Unhappy
(un)endings and the Politics of the Unfinished

Clearly, it is not possible for Francis to comprehend what is happening in Jeddah within her own cultural framework; her symbolic universe is insufficient and so despite her attempts to reconcile and interpret what she sees and hears on Ghazzah Street, she is always left with occluded elements whose opacity refuses to yield to interpretation. The significance of this impenetrability and the repeated “failures of translation” in the text are best elucidated through a consideration of what is described by Rancière as the “mute letter.” The text of Fairfax’s note, twice translated and unfathomable, provides an excellent example of this phenomenon; the letter that “[goes] its way without a father to guide it [. . .] that [speaks] to anybody without knowing to whom it had to speak and to whom it had not [. . .] that [speaks] too much and endows anyone at all with the power of speaking.” (Rancière, *Dissensus* 157). Indeed, from the moment when Eric Parsons’s driver, Hasan, is asked to read the letter he becomes an articulate subject in the narrative, offering advice and an interpretation of events, stepping from a ghostly background existence within the narrative into the flow of discourse. It is perhaps one of the most political moments in the novel, a moment in which the accepted order of who can speak and be heard is radically disrupted. By reading *Eight Months* with Rancière it becomes possible to understand the novel not as a piece of life- or travel-writing, but as political fiction on Mantel’s own terms, wherein she understands the political as an issue of who and what can be seen and heard. Mantel’s propensity for “privileging the unseen” allows her to “frame a new fabric of common experience, a new scenery of the invisible and a new dramaturgy of the intelligible” (Rancière, *Dissensus* 141). In other words, *Eight Months* forces the reader to

question whose experiences are being excluded from the realm of the socially visible and provides a space in which the “sensory self-evidence of the natural order” is, for a moment overturned (Corcoran 7), allowing the presence of those subjects, statements and events previously deemed insensible and thus incomprehensible by the prevailing social order to be acknowledged even if they cannot initially be fully comprehended. Mantel’s utilisation of haunting and spectrality is the mechanism through which she achieves a series of acts of dissensus, critiquing the haunted operation of politico-religious authority in Saudi Arabia and bringing to light previously occulted experiences in a narrative which skilfully demonstrates that “there is no straight path from the viewing of a spectacle to an understanding of the state of the world.” (Rancière, *Dissensus* 143) Likewise, as Frances learns from her multiple encounters with the “veiled lady” of Ghazzah street, nor is there a straight path from an encounter with a spectre to an understanding of the implications of their spectrality. Unlike the detective stories Frances devours, unlike the gothic novels whose structures resonate throughout *Eight Months*, Mantel’s text embodies the antithesis of Rancière’s police, embracing “void and supplement” (36) and ultimately insisting upon its own unfinished nature.

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