that in Britain the middle class and the aristocracy have historically been far more closely allied than elsewhere (e.g. Kocka 20), and that in the course of the nineteenth century even the aristocracy began to represent itself on the basis of the “model of middle-class domesticity” (Nancy Armstrong 74), then it seems eminently appropriate for Iris’s last name to be “King”: the patriarchal pinnacle of the ruling order. Moreover, if Iris’s family name points to the issue of class, her function as guardian of respectability is aptly expressed in her first name, “Iris,” which among other things refers to the part of the eye that controls the amount of light reaching the retina and thus hints at the panoptic power of Iris’s ever watchful, relentlessly judgmental, disciplinary gaze.

Admittedly, the link between the name Iris and the Foucauldian concept of the panoptic gaze may seem far-fetched at first sight, but it ceases to do so once we realize the pervasive emphasis on eyes in Union Street.10 The word eye appears at least once on no fewer than 96 of the 265 pages of the Virago Classics edition of Union Street – a remarkable 36 % – and in many of these cases, vision and sight are quite directly associated with power, panoptic or otherwise. There is, for instance, Lisa Goddard who, after losing her patience and hitting her three-year-old son in the supermarket, “raised her eyes and found a young girl staring at her,” looking on silently, passing judgment (109). There is also Richard Scaife, twelve years old and afraid to be seen too often together with his mother because people might otherwise think of him as a “[b]it of a pouf” (141). And the examples could be multiplied at will: Big Bertha blowing out smoke that gets “into Elaine’s eyes” (91); parents keeping “an eye” on their children (142); or Iris King’s sister Laura, recently institutionalized and treated for schizophrenia, having “staring eyes” that unsettle almost everyone, including the elderly at the old people’s home where she is now employed (178). In each of these cases, the gaze involves a sense of violation or power struggle, thus providing us with a solid figurative basis for interpreting Iris’s first name as linked to her ambivalent role as panoptic matriarch of Union Street.

Identity and the Eye of the Beholder
Precisely because eyes, sight, and the gaze are continually linked to the notion of power in Union Street, they are also related to the construction and maintenance of identity. We find one negative image of this correlation in the scene in which Iris King and Brenda, her daughter, are confronted with the sight of Brenda’s aborted baby:

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10 Michel Foucault develops his ideas about panopticism in Discipline and Punish (1975). The key effect of panoptic power is to induce in the subject “a state of conscious and permanent visibility,” which will in turn serve to discipline the subject’s behavior (201).
At the last moment she [i.e. Brenda] looked down and – “Eyes!” Iris said, putting a hand over her daughter’s face, as the bag of membranes bulged out and burst.

“I didn’t see it, Mam,” Brenda said. “I mean I just caught a glimpse ... ” She stopped.

“I didn’t see it.”

“Didn’t you, love?”

“No. No, I didn’t see it.” (215)

Trying to repress the fact of the baby’s potential humanity and selfhood, Brenda convinces herself that she never actually saw “it” – which implies that looking at the baby would constitute an act of human recognition. This same link between sight and recognition is apparent when Kelly Brown is approached in a local park by a man who, she soon realizes, “had been watching her a long time” (14). Though Kelly is disconcerted by the intensity of the man’s stare, it also exerts an inexorable power:

He looked at her so intently. Other people – her mother, Linda, the teachers at school – merely glanced at her and then with indifference or haste, passed on. But this man stared at her as if every pore on her skin mattered. His eyes created her. And so she had to go with him. She could not help herself. (16)

As readers, we may shrink from the image of Kelly’s only just pubescent body exposed to the gaze of a much older man, “whose eyes created her.” At the same time, the passage makes clear that the gaze and vision are not inescapably threatening, alienating and objectifying; looking at others can also be a sign of recognition, and the narrator suggests that it is precisely the lack of such recognition from those closest to her that renders Kelly vulnerable to other, more dangerous kinds of visual exposure (Brannigan 20).

Put in more philosophical terms, Union Street creates a tension between vision as alienation and what Kelly Oliver has called the look of love. From Hegel through Sartre and Lacan, Oliver contends, there is a long philosophical tradition that regards the gaze as an inherently violent intrusion:

[S]ight only serves to remind us of the abyss separating us from others. In these theories, vision creates a sense of lack, castration, or alienation, the sense of being cut off from the world, or being alone. [...] W]hat we see when we recognize ourselves in or against the other is the distance between us that alienates us, not only from others but also from ourselves [...]. (63)

Against such an exclusive focus on the alienating gaze, Oliver posits a look of love devoid of mastery and domination – a conception she derives from readings of Emmanuel Levinas and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, as well as from feminist philosophers like Julia Kristeva, bell hooks, and, in particular, Luce Irigaray:
Irigaray’s suggestions about the possibility of loving looks turn Sartre’s or Lacan’s anti-social gaze into a look as the circulation of affective psychic energy. The gaze does not have to be a harsh or accusing stare. [...] Loving looks nourish and sustain the psyche, the soul, as well as the body. [...] The caress, and the look as caress, do not fix an object for a subject, but open a realm in which the two remain two but cannot be separated. (71)

While at times Oliver’s prose may be overly mellifluous, she remains convincing on the key point that there is not merely one kind of look; if there is a harsh stare that threatens us with symbolic castration, then by contrast the look of love – the “look as caress” – promises recognition and fulfillment. It is in this light that we must read a terrible scene in Union Street that depicts the death of Muriel Scaife’s beloved husband John, whose eyes, the narrator emphasizes, “rolled about, frenzied and unseeing” (163, emphasis added): unable ever again to offer the look of love to his terrified wife and son (163).

Importantly, in Union Street, the objectifying gaze of mastery and domination is figured as non-seeing and thus death-like as well. For instance, when Iris King learns of her daughter’s pregnancy, she is for a moment “literally blind with rage” (181) – and shortly afterwards she physically assaults her daughter (184). Perhaps the most forceful expression, however, of the link between the alienating gaze and bodily harm is Union Street’s association of non-seeing with rape. The stranger who watches Kelly in the park does not actually hurt her at that point in the story; he even protects her from a flock of geese who suddenly attack the girl when she is feeding the birds at the lake (17). However, when Kelly leaves to meet her friend Sharon at the nearby fun fair, a sense of menace remains, and several times Kelly feels that she is being watched by the man, “dressed all in black as he had been in the park” (19–20). Increasingly panicked and queasy, Kelly leaves the fairground and soon finds herself doubled up, vomiting in the gutter – where suddenly she realizes that the man from the park is standing next to her: “Again she had the feeling that he had been there a long time” (22). Though the man promises to show her the way to a bus stop from where she can get back home, he in fact leads Kelly into an abandoned, derelict part of town. Here, Kelly feels exposed “like an insect crawling over an eyeball” (28), and when she ultimately finds herself trapped in a blind (!) alley, she turns around to look into the eyes of the man who approaches her, finding that “there was nothing there that she could reach”; she “closed her eyes, because his glazed

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11 As John Brannigan has noted (77), the appearance of a man in black at the fun fair is one of many correspondences between Union Street and Pat Barker’s fourth novel, The Man Who Wasn’t There.
eyes and hanging face were too terrible to look at,” but the man forces her to look at and touch his penis: a “single mucoid eye [that] leered at her from under the partially retracted foreskin” (29). This, indeed, is the ‘male’ gaze as the most extreme form of non-recognition: violating, objectifying, and blind to the female subject that has come within the grasp of its impersonal desire. The man rapes Kelly, and climaxing in “a final, agonised convulsion,” he looks at her afterward “as if he hated her more than anything else”; indeed, Kelly sees the thought “form in his eyes” that he could simply kill the object ‘tainted’ by his own lust (29–30). The man, however, refrains from further violating the girl, and with neither lust nor hate left to sustain the alienating gaze, he can no longer bear to look at her, his eyes skittering about “like ants” when Kelly tries to make eye contact (32). The castrating, annihilating, objectifying gaze, and the inability to offer the look of love: it is difficult to imagine a more harrowing juxtaposition of these two conflicting ways of seeing.

*Union Street* makes it clear that one consequence of the alienating gaze, as opposed to the look of love, is a fundamental kind of homelessness – both in Kelly’s case and in the story of Alice Bell. Kelly, after being raped, believes that she “was what had just happened to her. It was between the man and her” – and “he was … nothing!” (32). Later, Mrs. Brown will find Kelly determined to avoid the mother’s concerned look (43). Conversely, other people will find themselves avoiding Kelly’s “eyes of a curious naked amber: an animal’s eyes” (46). Kelly, that is to say, is no longer able either to bestow or to receive the look of love; she is alienated from everyone else, and accordingly the “street was her home now” (48). The story of Alice Bell appears radically different at first sight. For the seventy-six-year-old woman, who unlike Iris used to be better off in the past (234–235), there are two main fears left in life: a pauper’s funeral and the Workhouse (233). These fears explain why Alice, who has recently suffered an incapacitating stroke (245), is terrified by her son’s suggestion that she move to the nearby “Home” (i.e. a home for the elderly):

“But I don’t want to go there.”

“Oh, you’ll soon settle in.” [...] 

“The Workhouse.”

“It’s not the Workhouse now. In your day it was. It’s all changed now.” (257–258)

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12 In a classic essay on mainstream cinema, Laura Mulvey claims that the Freudian notion of scopophilia – the pleasure associated with “taking other people as objects, subjecting them to a controlling and curious gaze” (587) – is a constitutive feature of the male gaze that structures the position of spectators in such films.
Ironically, the Home – which used to be that dreaded place, the Workhouse – is in fact an unhomely space that signifies the fundamental loss of control and belonging for Alice: “Her home. They were taking it away from her” (260). Alison Blunt and Robyn Dowling underline that homes, as sites of memory, continuity, and self-determination can become increasingly important for the elderly as their ability to move becomes restricted (114). And indeed, we learn in Union Street that, for Alice, everything in her home “was steeped in memory” (260) in this house that over the years has become “almost an extension of her own body” (234). John Brannigan thus rightly insists that, for Alice, there is a strong equation between a certain idea of home and her sense of identity, which explains why “Alice clings to what her home symbolizes [...] long after it has ceased to afford her the comforts of a home” (32). Or, as Alice herself sees it: “The dirt and disorder, the signs of malnutrition and neglect which to them were reasons for putting her away were, to her, independence” (260). It is this last symbolic refuge of Alice’s self-determination that is being taken away on the recommendation of a social worker who, like Alice’s son and daughter-in-law, fails to see how important her home is for the old woman: “She now understood the full indignity of rape. That man [i.e. the social worker], the expression in his eyes when he looked at her. The not-seeing” (260). If in Kelly’s case rape undermines her sense of belonging, then in a kind of inverted mirror-image, for Alice it is the loss of the home that feels to her like rape. Moreover, in both cases, there is a refusal by others to recognize the needs and desires of someone who is unable to defend herself: a kind of “not-seeing” that reduces other human beings to mere objects.

A seemingly random episode in Union Street suggests that this kind of not-seeing is related to a worldview in which human beings are seen as mere means, and not as subjects who deserve to be regarded as ends in themselves (cf. the discussion of slavery in the chapter on Absalom, Absalom!). We have seen that Iris King’s sister, Laura, has “staring eyes” and was recently treated for schizophrenia (178). When asked by Mrs. Sullivan, Iris explains the reason for Laura’s temporary institutionalization:

She was cleaning for this old man and one day she just took it into her head to set him on fire. One minute he was sat in his armchair, next he was up in flames. Or rather the chair was. He wasn’t badly burned but [...] at that age the shock could have killed him. I said when I went to see her, I said, What d’ y’ want to do that for, Laura? She just turned around and said, Why not? He was no use. (179)

If others become mere means in a larger process – human resources, as it were – then there is no reason for them to continue existing as soon as they cease to