be of use. It is an extreme view, and explicitly associated with mental illness in Barker’s text. However, as Laura’s inflexible stare is similar in kind to the un-seeing looks in both Kelly’s and Alice’s stories, the political point is, arguably, that there is a larger, social problem underlying Laura’s individual illness: a social system that consistently regards humans as means to ends, to be discarded if they cease to be ‘useful.’

**A Common Vision**

The parallels between Kelly’s and Alice’s stories are emphasized further in a meeting between the two characters that is told twice in *Union Street*, the first time from Kelly’s perspective. Crucially, for Kelly this meeting revolves around the possibility of regaining a sense of home and belonging. At the end of *Union Street*’s first section, on a cold late-winter day, Kelly is walking through the park – the very place where she first met her rapist – and is startled by the sight of the setting sun “obscured by columns of drifting brown and yellow smoke. A brutal, bloody disc, scored by factory chimneys, it seemed to swell up until it filled half the western sky” (64). Experiencing an odd “sensation of moving outside time,” Kelly walks further into the park:

Then a murmuring began and mixed in with it sharp, electric clicks, like the sound of women talking and brushing their hair at once. The noise became louder. She climbed to a ridge of higher ground and there at the centre was the tree, its branches fanned out, black and delicate, against the red furnace of sky. By now the murmur had become a fierce, ecstatic trilling, and when she looked more closely she saw that the tree was covered in birds that clustered along its branches as thick and bright as leaves, so that from a distance you might almost have thought that the tree was singing. (65)

It is a disturbingly beautiful vision, to which we shall return shortly. For the time being, however, the key thing to note is that Kelly does not find any consolation in it because she cannot “break out of that room inside her head” in which she is caught together with her rapist (65). As dusk settles, the lights go on in the houses bordering the park – “Homecomings,” the narrator notes – and this is the very moment when Kelly notices what at first seems to her “nothing but a heap of rags” on a park bench in the cold February air (65–66). Soon, however, the girl discovers that there is an old woman wrapped tightly in these rags, peering back at Kelly “evidently unable to see her properly,” her “eyes milky with cataract” (66). Kelly asks the old woman whether there is anybody expecting her “back home” (67), to which the women replies that she has come here to end her life, freezing to death on this bench in the park – an idea from which Kelly tries to dissuade her:
“At least in a Home you’d get your meals.” She paused. Then burst out, “And they’d see you were warm. They’d see you had a fire.”

“Is not the life more than meat and the body more than raiment?”

She wasn’t quoting. She had lived long enough to make the words her own. (67)

The old woman’s biblical reply (cf. Matthew 6:25; KJV: “Is not the life more than meat, and the body than raiment?”) resonates with Union Street’s general themes, for while the text continually highlights that home must begin with material security, it also acknowledges that this in itself is not sufficient. Accordingly, though Kelly knows that she could disregard the old woman’s wishes and get ‘help,’ she accepts the woman’s claim to a modicum of agency and respect as a subject. “I won’t tell anybody,” Kelly says to the old woman, and if the look of love, according to Oliver, “does not pry or gaze, but caress” (69), then it is significant that the girl now reaches out and touches the old woman’s hand (Union Street 68). Kelly stays with the old woman until her eyes are closed, “in sleep, or unconsciousness, or death,” and then steps away from the bench, out of the park, and back into the streets of her community: “She was going home” (68–69) – and for John Brannigan, this conclusion to Kelly’s story suggests that the girl “resigns herself” to what her imperfect home has to offer (24).

However, while resignation does play a role in the section’s conclusion, it is arguably not the imperfect home to which Kelly resigns herself, but to the notion of human frailty and mortality as such – which makes a crucial difference in political terms. The idea that Kelly’s encounter with the old woman prompts the girl for the first time to confront her own mortality is explicit in Union Street: “[F]or the first time, she found it possible to believe in her own death. There was terror in this, but no sadness” (67). We have seen that Kelly’s traumatic experience of rape leads directly to a kind of homelessness on her part. Now, however, it is the realization that human life as such – not only her own – is vulnerable and exposed to suffering that makes it possible for her to regain some sense of value, to imagine herself as part of, rather than outside, the community, as well as to recover a concern for the others who live around her (Brophy 37).

Crucially, resigning oneself to the idea that human life is fragile and provisional does not mean the same as condoning the kind of violation and dereliction that we find everywhere in Union Street. Rather, it implies that such injustice can only be remedied if first we are willing to face the full terror of human frailty, and the full extent of present suffering, without resorting either to fatalism or despair (“There was terror in this, but no sadness”). Or, in the words of Antonio Gramsci: “It is necessary to create sober, patient people who do not despair in the face of the worst horrors and who do not become exuberant with every
silliness. Pessimism of the intelligence, optimism of the will” (172). Not resignation to the broken state of these working-class homes, then, but a remorselessly clear view of things as they are: human frailty and mortality, the depth of economic privation, as well as the variety of conflicts that exist between working-class women, whose “discordant” voices Kelly hears on her way home (68; see Brophy 37). Realism, in other words, which in turn must serve as the starting point for any progressive politics worthy of the name.

Such a reading helps explain why the implications of the meeting between Kelly and the old woman are so different from the latter’s point of view. The old woman, who remains unnamed in the first section of Union Street, is, of course, Alice, who in the text’s seventh and final section experiences a moment of vision similar to Kelly’s. The description of Alice’s vision repeats parts of Kelly’s almost verbatim, and it is therefore worth quoting at length:

[A] murmuring began, as of the wind through summer trees or waves unfurling on the shore [... When Alice] looked at the skyline she saw that one tree stood out from the rest, its branches fanned out, black and delicate, against the red furnace of sky.

[...] At first, it seemed to be bare like all the others, though with a jaggedness of outline that suggested not winter but death. By now the murmur had become a shout, a fierce, ecstatic trilling; and when she looked more closely, she saw that the tree was full of birds, clustering along its branches, as thick and bright as leaves. And all singing. But then, as she came closer still, as her white hair and skin took on the colours of blood and fire, she saw more clearly, and in a moment of vision cried. It isn’t the birds, it’s the tree. The tree is singing.

The light was unbearably bright, bubbling in every vein, shaking her heart. She could not bear it. She shrank, she fell back. [...]

But there was a child there, now, a girl, who, standing with the sun behind her, seemed almost to be a gift of the light. [...] Then it was time for them both to go.

So that in the end there were only the birds, soaring, swooping, gliding, moving in a never-ending spiral about the withered and unwithering tree. (264–265)

Shrinking away from her overpowering experience, Alice finds Kelly “almost to be a gift of the light” – as if the girl herself were a symbol of solidarity and the continuation of life. Phrases from Kelly’s vision (e.g. “By now the murmur had become a shout, ecstatic trilling”) are echoed very closely in this passage (“By now the murmur had become a shout, a fierce, ecstatic trilling”), which can be seen to suggest that the meaning of the vision is the same for both Alice and Kelly.

Critics have generally assumed that this is the case, though there is disagreement as to the political implications of the two characters’ shared moment of
vision. For Peter Hitchcock, for instance, the meeting between Kelly and Alice is “a strong statement on the sisterhood of class” (56). In a similar vein, Roberto del Valle Alcalá interprets their encounter as a moment that highlights the “irreversibility of resistance” (204), rather than as “a concession of defeat or confirmation of women’s victimhood” (205). John Brannigan, by contrast, is hesitant, arguing that Union Street’s conclusion serves, not “to transcend the bleak depiction of dereliction presented throughout the novel, but to signal the possibility of an imaginative transformation of the structures which produce these material conditions,” thus compelling us “to conceive of the functions and forms of ‘home’ and community anew” (33; emphasis added). Sarah Brophy likewise holds that the final union between Kelly and Alice “is more emblematic than it is political” (36), and Margaretta Jolly even wonders whether such visionary moments in Barker’s work, which appeal to the body and spirit rather than the mind, might also imply that “material change and rational agency” are no longer feasible (236). The debate, in short, is reminiscent of the more general debate on realism as a form, questioning as it does whether the final moment of vision in Union Street carries with it a genuinely utopian impulse, or whether it merely serves imaginatively to dissolve the text’s tensions in a politically void symbolic gesture.

What is lost out of sight in this debate is that, from the point of view of Alice, there really is not much hope left at the end of Barker’s text, beyond imaginative consolation. We learn, for instance, that after Alice’s stroke “it was obvious that the situation could not continue” – obvious “even to Mrs. Bell herself, though she would not admit it” (252). Later, when Alice tries to see herself “through a stranger’s eyes,” she finds it “no wonder they wanted her put away,” and thinks of herself as “[r]ubbish. Ready for the tip” (259). This, accordingly, is Alice’s crucial insight: “She searched among the wreckage for some fragment of hope, but there was none. Her life would not renew” (260). From Alice’s own, single-focus perspective, in short, there truly is no hope left, only imaginative consolation. However, seen from the multiple-focus perspective of Union Street as a whole, the emphasis of Alice’s insight shifts: “Her life would not renew” (emphasis added) – but others’ lives might, including Kelly’s, who thanks to her vision of the tree filled with birds is “alive with hope” when she finds Alice sitting on the bench in the park (67).

Put more abstractly, we may say that solving the interpretive puzzle posed by the meeting between Kelly and Alice involves a shift in focus from its meaning within the two separate stories to its significance for the reader as he or she reconsidered the text as a whole. Paul Ricoeur is one critic who has commented on the effect of symbolism on the reader, and a key point he makes is