that symbols involve what one could call communicative excess: a symbol “says more than it says” and therefore “invites us to think, calls for an interpretation” (The Conflict of Interpretations 27–28; emphasis added). Franco Moretti in fact has made an intriguingly congruous suggestion, arguing that whereas ‘pure’ narrative is syntagmatic – in the sense that it concentrates on the relentless forward-flow of events (i.e. ‘What comes next?’) – symbolic scenes could be called paradigmatic because they entail an “urge to classify,” and hence a more analytical attitude (i.e. ‘Where does this fit, in the larger scheme of things?’; Way of the World 158). If this is the case, then the symbolism of Union Street’s ‘twice-told’ final scene constitutes a kind of wake-up call, akin to Slavoj Žižek’s provocative advice in his book On Violence. There, Žižek suggests that too often a “fake sense of urgency” pervades contemporary discourses on violence and humanitarian crises – an urgency that is fundamentally anti-theoretical in that it discourages us from inquiring into the underlying causes of such crises: “There is no time to reflect: we have to act now” (5–6; original emphasis). However, Žižek continues, it may sometimes be more productive not to let oneself be drawn into the flow of current events, and instead to pause and reflect. In a similar vein, Union Street’s symbolical conclusion serves to redirect readers’ attention, away from the forward-movement of the plot, and toward that tertium quid of conception which, according to Rick Altman, constitutes the crucial interpretive quest of multiple-focus readings in general.

Female Identity: Birds of a Feather

Ricoeur’s ideas imply that symbolism may lead to a kind of alienation effect, making it impossible for readers to feel too comfortably at home in the fictional world of the text. Instead, symbols force us to examine the text from a certain critical distance – as exemplified by the discussion in this chapter of the symbolical role of eyes, sight, and visions in Union Street. If we now shift our attention to another figurative leitmotif in Barker’s text – birds – we must therefore bear in mind Yuri Lotman’s point that, in the case of symbols, to stop and think means at least two different things: on the one hand, to consider the symbol’s “cultural memory” as it runs “vertically through the whole course of human history,” and, on the other, to examine the network of symbolism as it is established and developed in one particular text (86). Put differently: though we must follow the general trajectory of symbols as they have historically migrated from one text to the next, we also need to find out how, precisely, these symbols are deployed in the particular text under study.

Starting with the symbolism of birds in cultural history in general, one key point for us to note is simply the wide array of meanings associated with avian
imagery. Most dictionaries of symbols agree that in various cultures birds are linked to the soul, poetic inspiration and flights of fancy, as well as to prophecy: the winged messengers between Heaven and Earth (Cirlot 25; de Vries 47; Ferber 26; Lurker 773; Ronnberg 238). If we add to this Juan Eduardo Cirlot’s description of the Tree of Life, with birds perched on the tree’s branches representing the souls of the faithful (27), then we are immediately reminded of Union Street’s final vision of hope and renewal. Another component of this first cluster of symbolical meanings is that birds are frequently associated with freedom, or at least the desire for it (e.g. Ronnberg 240), pointing to a sense of possibility, transformation, and transcendence that forms part of the cultural memory stored in avian imagery. Moreover, a second cluster of avian associations revolves around femininity (e.g. de Vries 47), with the egg as a symbol of creation and regeneration (de Vries 158), and words like chicks even used colloquially to refer to girls or young women (OED). Evidently, this gendered history, too, would render birds an appropriate symbol for Union Street and its focus on the lives of seven women. Meanwhile, a third and final cluster of associations relates birds to the notion of community and home, both because many birds build nests and because migratory birds leave but also always return home (Ferber 26, quoting Lévi-Strauss; cf. Ronnberg 238). In short, we have three clusters of symbolical associations – transcendence (or at least the longing for it), an association with femininity, and the link to the concept of home – that all seem admirably suited to Union Street.

However, at the same time we need to bear in mind that there is a complex and contradictory history of symbolism associated with individual birds (e.g. the albatross, the dove, or the eagle). In this regard, the most basic observation to be made is that, in Union Street, the more ‘aristocratic’ birds – the eagle, nightingale, and owl, for example – tend to be missing (with the exception of swans, which appear twice; 16, 98), while the more common and ‘homely’ birds (geese, sparrows, and seagulls) take center stage. And once we think about it, this is not really surprising, as it ensures that the text’s avian symbolism does not clash too forcibly with its realist aesthetic. It would, in other words, put a rather significant strain on the reader’s willing suspension of disbelief to include soaring eagles and singing nightingales in the Northern-English industrial setting of a text like Union Street.

13 chick, n’, 3b (OED Online, 3 August 2017; 2nd 1989).
14 A fuller list would include the albatross, cock, crow, cuckoo, dove, eagle, falcon, goose, hawk, lark, nightingale, owl, peacock, pelican, raven, sparrow, stork, swallow, and swan (see Ferber 27–28; Lurker 774; cf. Ronnberg 244–261).
This last point also leads us away from the more general cultural history of avian imagery to its particular use in *Union Street*, where birds appear in each of the seven sections (either as symbolical objects in the fictional world, or on the level of discourse, as metaphors and similes), and where there is a clear tendency for figurative fowl to be linked to female characters – though the connection is not entirely unequivocal. This becomes readily apparent from a (selective) survey of the many examples from *Union Street’s* seven sections:

1. When feeding “the ducks and geese and swans” at the lake in the park, Kelly Brown is attacked by the geese (17). At one point after having been raped, Kelly is tempted to kill an injured bird (63–64). Kelly is also moved, however, to find Alice Bell’s throat “as vulnerable as a bird’s,” and later a group of women talking in front of a factory gate seem to her to make “a sound like the starlings had made” (68).

2. Near the lake in the park, Joanne Wilson tells her boyfriend Ken that she is expecting his child, and shortly after some geese and swans “begin sailing towards them in search of food” (98). Later in the story, Joanne confesses to a friend that sex with her boyfriend was brief and disappointing: “A sparrow couldn’t’ve farted quicker” (104).

3. Lisa Goddard remembers that her husband once talked about the “bloody seagulls” that seemed drawn to the factory where he used to work (“a pest”); sometimes, a dead seagull would drop from the sky like a stone – killed, presumably, by the toxic fumes emanating from the factory’s chimneys (121). Later in the story, Lisa gives birth to a baby daughter, to whom at first she does not feel any emotional connection. Eventually, however, Lisa manages to accept the baby daughter as her own; she then walks to the hospital window, carrying the girl in her arms, and sees “patches of trapped sky. Shadows of clouds and birds drifted across them” (139).

4. When Richard Scaife tells his father that he is reading a book about birds, he shows him the picture of a heron. The father, John, replies half-jokingly that this kind of knowledge is useless because “round here” there are no herons: “Only sparrows and starlings. And seagulls” (157). The father then points to a photograph in the newspaper of a woman posing naked and adds: “Only birds I ever fancy are in here” (ibid.).

5. Iris King, who is angry with her sixteen-year-old daughter for being pregnant, accidentally breaks an egg when working in the kitchen (201) – which
seems doubly significant, given that the word *ovary* appears several times in this section of *Union Street* (205, 209). In addition, Iris uses the word “cock” (i.e. a male fowl) as a term of endearment for her daughter (217) – a usage derived from the word’s metaphorical meaning as one “who fights with pluck and spirit” (OED).  

6. George Harrison uses the phrase “hawking it” (OED: “to carry about from place to place and offer for sale”) to refer to Blonde Dinah’s continuing to prostitute herself even at her advanced age (225). George later has sex with Dinah, also spends the night with her but in the morning leaves before Dinah wakes up, feeling invigorated and encountering some birds on his way home: “Seagulls screamed and dived in the air above the river. And one detached itself from the rest to fly under the steel bridge; wings, briefly shadowed, gleamed in the restored light” (231).

7. Birds feature both in Alice Bell’s mysterious vision (264) and in the very last sentence of *Union Street*, “soaring, swooping, gliding” around a “withered and unwithering tree” (265).

There are at least three things worth noting here. First, while it is possible to unify the various instances of avian imagery under the single umbrella term *birds*, we could also choose to emphasize difference: seagulls as opposed to sparrows, herons, or geese, for example. Second, though some images convey a sense of liberation (Lisa seeing birds drifting across the sky after finally finding an emotional connection to her baby daughter; a seagull whose wings gleam in “restored light”; or the birds we find “soaring, swooping, gliding” in the text’s final sentence), others create an atmosphere of threat and oppression (Kelly being attacked by geese, but also herself tempted to kill a bird; seagulls falling dead from the sky; and Iris breaking an egg). Third, it is true that most of the images are related to female characters, yet some at least include a male perspective (Richard’s father referring to women posing naked as birds; George Harrison thinking of Dinah as “hawking it”), and at least one instance is quite clearly directed at a male character (Joanne likening sex with her boyfriend to a sparrow farting). In fact, if we accept that Iris King is in thrall to a patriarchal, middle-class ideology, then it is peculiarly apt that she is the character who uses a term of endearment for her daughter – “cock” – that derives from the aggressive fighting spirit of a *male* bird and is also a slang term for *penis*. At any rate, given the strong, but not entirely straight-forward link between femininity

---

16  cock, *n*¹, II.8 (OED Online, 3 August 2017; 2nd ed. 1989).
and birds in *Union Street*, Ricoeur’s notion that symbols invite us to stop and think appears more pertinent than ever.

Perhaps what these somewhat equivocal clusters of identification imply is that female identity is best conceptualized along the lines of what Ludwig Wittgenstein calls “family resemblances.” According to Wittgenstein, when we look at a given category – for instance, the various kinds of objects we refer to as games – then we will find it impossible to determine a set of features shared by all the items belonging to this category. Instead, what we find are various degrees of relatedness – “a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing” – and for Wittgenstein this kind of relationship is analogous to the network of resemblances that links members of the same family to each other (i.e. some have similar noses, others have similar ears, etc.; 36, § 66). Interpreting the figurative pattern of birds in *Union Street* in the light of these ideas, we can thus surmise that it is impossible to find one single set of characteristics that truly unites all women. Rather, there is a fuzzy set of features that signify femaleness, and each individual woman will share some (but not, as a rule, all) of these features. This not only makes it possible for two particular women to have virtually no characteristics in common and yet still remain associated with the category of woman as such; the fuzziness of the set also allows for its boundary to remain porous and permeable, so that one or several of the characteristic features of womanhood could, at the same time, be part of the fuzzy set that defines masculinity or manhood. In other words, if in *Union Street* the female characters are subliminally presented as ‘birds of a feather,’ then the complexity of the text’s avian imagery also suggests that this does not at all imply an essentialist reduction of womanhood to a single core that stands in stable, binary opposition to manhood or masculinity.

Before proceeding to a third cluster of symbols in *Union Street* – mirrors, this time – let us take stock of the argument so far. We have seen that, in Barker’s text, the precarious state of the built environment finds a parallel in the “derelict” state of human bodies, as well as in the fragmentation of the text into semi-independent stories. Moreover, *Union Street* places strong emphasis on the conflicts between women, whether from the same family (e.g. Iris King physically

---

18 “Wir sehen ein kompliziertes Netz von Ähnlichkeiten, die ineinander übergreifen und kreuzen” (36; § 66).

19 The notion of fuzzy sets has recently come to great prominence in the study of literary genres (e.g. Marie-Laure Ryan 28. See also Michael Basseler on genre in general and the short story in particular (58), as well as Terry Eagleton on the genre of tragedy, which he sees as constituted “by a combinatoire of overlapping features rather than by a set of invariant forms or contents” (*Sweet Violence* 3).