act of recognizing oneself in a mirrored image is always inscribed by a misrecognition, for the image we see has undergone a double fracturing. It is not only an inversion of the figure it mirrors, but it returns to the subject only by a detour through an intermediary, namely as a representation. It thus harbors a disjunction between body and image [...]. (207; see Lacan, “The Mirror Stage” 78)

Two points are worth highlighting here: on the one hand, the importance of the body as the visible sign of the self, and, on the other hand, the element of disjunction between the body and the image formed on the basis of the reflection of one’s body in the mirror. Indeed, Sean Homer likewise emphasizes the importance of the body in the Lacanian mirror stage, for it is the reflected image of the body as “a total form” which, according to Homer, sustains the infant’s developing sense of mastery over the body (25). The key element of misrecognition lies, in other words, in the fantasy of a self that is not only unified, but also master in its own house: in full control of its own body. If this is so, however, then the use of mirrors in Union Street is not, after all, entirely naïve, for we have seen that one function of mirrors in Barker’s text is precisely to reflect back an image of the body as unruly matter that the ego repeatedly finds impossible to master.

**Unspeakable: Reflections on the Limit of Discourse**

While mirrors symbolize the possibility of recognizing the truth, Union Street nevertheless acknowledges that there are certain limits to its project of representing the real through the use of a fourth cluster of recurring symbols: gaping, spluttering, and speechless mouths. “Death,” Terry Eagleton insists, “is the limit of discourse, not a product of it” (The Idea of Culture 87), and we need to bear this in mind when examining how Barker’s text depicts the death of Muriel Scaife’s beloved husband, John:

She [i.e. Muriel] ran back into the living-room and there was John, blood gargling from his mouth. Above the black hole his eyes rolled about, frenzied and unseeing. The flow of blood seemed to have stopped. [...]  

[...] He was choking on the blood. She began pulling out huge clots of it from his mouth. [...] Her fingers found a thick rope of blood, twined round it, and pulled. The clot slid out of his mouth, with the sound of a sink coming unblocked, and after it flowed a frothy, bright-red stream of blood, looking almost gay against the blackness of the other blood. (163)

If, as argued previously, the horror of John’s unseeing eyes is related to the loss of intersubjective recognition – the look of love gone forever – then this is complemented here by the frightening image of a human being silenced by his
own blood: the body, our most intimate home, as at the same time the cause of suffering and, ultimately, death. It is surely no coincidence that Alice Bell, after her stroke, likewise experiences a profound sense of horror at “the sounds that glugged out of her mouth” – sounds which only slowly regain “some resemblance to speech” (245); indeed, even after Alice has recovered to some extent, when she is excited “her speech went altogether” (246). Scenes such as these, with their emphasis on mouths straining but failing to speak, are best understood as an engagement with the paradox of the unspeakable: to try and express what is in fact impossible to say. In theoretical terms, we would thus be confronted with the Lacanian Real as that which signifies the limits of signification (Homer 83).

This attempt to express the unspeakable surfaces repeatedly in Union Street, and if death constitutes one limit of discourse in Barker’s text, then another is the fact of sexual difference. As Laura Mulvey has pointed out, sexual difference serves a key function in a patriarchal symbolic order: “The paradox of phallocentrism in all its manifestations is that it depends on the image of the castrated woman to give order and meaning to its world [... I]t is her lack that produces the phallus as symbolic presence” (585). From a patriarchal point of view, in other words, women can only serve as that constitutive absence that enables the symbolic order to function. Mulvey’s comments help us unravel the meaning of a scene in Union Street in which George Harrison, after having had sex with Blonde Dinah, decides to inspect the sleeping prostitute’s naked body:

She was lying with her legs apart. [...] He had never actually seen it before. It was funny in a way. You spend your whole boyhood thinking about it, wondering what it’s like; but when you finally get it you don’t really see it.

Almost against his will, he knelt down until it was on a level with his face. The lips gaped, still dribbling a little milky fluid. And there it was. A gash? A wound? Red fruit bitten to the core? It was impossible to say what it was like. (230–231; original emphasis)

The fact that George Harrison refers to Blonde Dinah’s genitals only as “it” already indicates that he lacks a precise expression to refer to the object that has aroused his curiosity. In addition, the term “lips” to refer to Dinah’s labia, as well as the use of the verb “gaped,” further intimate a sense of the unspeakable, as if Dinah’s vulva were a gaping mouth, dribbling fluid, but remaining stubbornly silent. As the passage continues, this sense of something that is impossible to say slowly combines with an undercurrent of violence (“gash,” “wound,” “bitten to the core”) – and of course this makes sense within a patriarchal logic that posits women as the sign of lack and castration. Moreover, we