need to bear in mind that the perspective here is a man’s: George Harrison, the only male character who serves as a main focalizer in the seven sections of *Union Street*, and whose inquisitive, objectifying gaze is directed at a prostitute: the very embodiment of woman as merely a commodity (Brannigan 22).²⁵

However, if womanhood as such is unspeakable within a patriarchal framework, then motherhood and the maternal may constitute a related, even more fundamental limit to discourse. According to Julia Kristeva, “the abject confronts us, on the one hand, with those fragile states where man strays on the territories of animal,” but also, on the other hand, with our earliest attempts to release the psychological hold of the maternal (*Powers of Horror* 12–13; original emphasis). Paradoxically, then, the womb as our earliest home simultaneously figures as deeply unhomely in our psychic imaginary: the site of primal repression. It is thus hardly a coincidence that, in addition to death and sexual difference, the moment of birth also figures as well-nigh unspeakable in *Union Street*. In the case of Lisa Goddard, for instance, the protracted pains of labor ultimately render her inarticulate: “as the day wore on speech became too much of an effort” (128). In a similar vein, in the course of her abortion procedure Iris’s daughter Brenda grips “the head of the bed, mouth wide open, lips stretched to splitting, like the other lips between her legs” (215). Lacan’s Real and Kristeva’s abject thus feature as limits to discourse and representation in *Union Street*. Sarah Brophy describes Pat Barker’s texts as “[n]either realist novels nor psychoanalytic case studies, but partaking of and revising both genres” (25). However, if one agrees with Terry Eagleton that the achievement of Freudian psychoanalysis lies in providing us with “a materialist theory of the making of the human subject” (*Literary Theory* 141), then it is perhaps better to say that *Union Street* uses the insights of one materialist lineage of thought – psychoanalysis – to complement and reinvigorate that older materialism implied in the empiricist epistemology of realist aesthetics.²⁶

**The Body and Labor**

The embodied nature of human existence is a necessarily central materialist concern, and we have seen that the body as unruly matter features prominently

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²⁵ Roberto del Valle Alcalá also argues that, in Barker’s novel, the two extremes of rape and prostitution frame the “circumscription of life itself within the axis of capitalist accumulation. While rape embodies the most direct and extreme form of primitive accumulation, prostitution [...] represents the proletarianization of women’s reproductive labor power” – even as sexuality remains a site “also of resistance” (199)

²⁶ The fact that realism has not always succeeded in staying true to this materialist project should not lead us to posit that it is an inherently idealist genre.
throughout *Union Street*. Indeed, Margaretta Jolly argues that, in Barker’s work more generally, the body functions as “the visible face of psychological and social unreason” (235). In *Union Street* the best starting point for a detailed discussion of this claim is the relation between the female body and labor. More specifically, we can begin to understand how social pressures affect individual subjects by focusing on how *Union Street* exploits the dual meaning of labor as signifying both ‘work’ and ‘giving birth.’ This, for example, is how Barker’s narrator describes the increasing intensity of Lisa Goddard’s labor pains:

There was something mechanical about their strength, their remorseless regularity. She felt them as extreme heat, as though she were being forced to stand too close to a furnace, to watch the door open, slowly [...].

This rhythm went on hour after hour for most of the day until her whole being was subdued to it. (128)

The act of giving birth is couched here in language associated with industrial labor (“mechanical,” “regularity,” “furnace”), and John Brannigan rightly notes that such images indicate the extent to which factory work extends “into the mental and emotional life of the community” (26). The public, material conditions of working-class life appear, in other words, as powerful forces in the shaping of these characters’ supposedly private interiority.

In this way, *Union Street* incorporates the Marxian notion that alienated labor affects human beings in their totality, including in their relations with one another. We can see this, for example, in a scene in which Joanne Wilson tells her unsuspecting boyfriend that she is pregnant. Ken, though far from pleased at the news, assures Joanne that they are “in it together” (99). However, when subsequently they have sex in an underpass, Joanne realizes that something is amiss:

Ken was panting, and thrusting into her as though he hated her, grinding and screwing and banging hard enough to hurt. She was afraid for the baby and immediately knew what he was trying to do: he was trying to screw it out of her. She went cold, pressing herself back against the wall, but he fastened onto her with a terrible, monotonous power.

There was something exciting in being used like this, in giving way to this impersonal, machine-like passion. (101)

Just like Lisa Goddard’s labor pains, sex here is drawn into the sphere of industrial labor (“grinding and screwing and banging,” “monotonous power,” “machine-like passion”), setting up a parallel between capitalist production and biological as well as social reproduction. The same, moreover, is true for an earlier
scene, in which Joanne, while working on the conveyer belt in the local cake factory, is trying to decide whether or not to keep her baby:

She began the sequence of actions that she would perform hundreds of times that day. It took little effort once you were used to it and [...] it could be done almost automatically.

Almost. But not quite. Now that she was alone – for in this roaring cavern of sound each woman was alone – she wanted to think about Ken, she wanted [...] to work out exactly how she was going to tell him about the baby. She couldn’t do it. Each half-formed thought was aborted by the arrival of another cake. (85; original emphasis)

In terms of content, the passage makes clear that Joanne’s working conditions affect her entire being, both interrupting her process of thought and isolating her from other women (with such isolation from others being a key effect of alienated labor for Marx). At the same time, the phrase “to work out” emphasizes that thinking itself is best conceived as intellectual labor, with Joanne’s material surroundings thwarting her potential for mental creativity, and her thoughts continually “aborted” like unborn children (Rawlinson 27).

The relationship between creation, (re)production, and alienation is, however, as Susan Brophy has noted, illustrated most forcefully in the case of Lisa Goddard and her struggle emotionally to relate to her new-born daughter. Early on in Lisa’s story, we learn that she barely manages to make ends meet because her occasionally violent husband is out of work and tends to spend far too much money on drink. It is difficult enough, under such circumstances, to take care of two little boys, and the mere idea of soon giving birth to a third child is virtually impossible for Lisa to bear: “She did not want this baby” (112); indeed, “[w]hen she first learned she was pregnant she had asked for an abortion,” but the “doctor had told her there were no grounds” (132). Lisa, in other words, is neither provided with sufficient resources to take good care of the baby, nor legally granted control over her pregnant body. In this sense, it is entirely fitting that Lisa at first fails to recognize the baby as her own (133); to use Sarah Brophy’s words, “Lisa is alienated from the baby, the product of her body and labor” (31). There is, in short, nothing natural or automatic about feelings of motherhood in *Union Street*, as Lisa finds to her dismay.

The political point here is that motherhood as such also ought be appreciated as cultural and, indeed, physical work. Kath Woodward, following feminist theorists like Adrienne Rich and Luce Irigaray, insists that motherhood “involves more than carrying a foetus and giving birth, although the stresses, strains and joys of delivery should not be underestimated”; more particularly, while “at some point there has to be a woman’s body,” motherhood is an eminently cultural
concept (128) – as evidenced, for example, by the fact that societies expend an enormous amount of regulatory fervor to distinguish between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ mothers (131). This latter fact also documents that the supposedly natural phenomenon of motherhood is in many respects the result of (self-)discipline and work. Lisa Goddard, at any rate, is aware of the extraordinary effort that motherhood involves: “It took her all her time to cope with Kevin and Darren, whom she loved. How would she manage to care for this baby for whom she felt nothing?” (136). Under conditions of alienated labor, even such seemingly foundational and unshakeable social relations as the one between mother and daughter may thus slowly wither and die.

Crucially, it is the idea of common labor – in the sense of shared suffering and struggle – that ultimately allows Lisa to overcome her alienation from the baby daughter. Lisa experiences the first “stab of recognition” when one of the Sisters working at the hospital gives the baby a bath:

Seeing it, red and howling, struggling in the nurse’s hands, Lisa thought, Yes. And when it rose from the bath with dark and streaming hair the pain was so extreme that she had to turn aside; she could not bear to look.

The feeling vanished. But it had given her hope. The time she spent simply staring at the baby increased. And then, one day, as she was changing its nappy, she found a smear of blood on the cloth. […] Her heart contracted with fear. (137)

Seeing the baby struggling against adversity, Lisa for a brief moment recognizes something of herself in the daughter’s pain. Margaretta Jolly is thus right in insisting that the body is also “a figure of hope” in Pat Barker’s work (235), as it is in part the recognition of common suffering that serves as the basis of identification with others. Moreover, Lisa’s “fear” for the baby’s health arises as a by-product of the labor of caretaking that she devotes to her daughter’s physical needs, as only the act of changing the baby’s diapers makes it possible for her to discover the potentially worrying “smear of blood.” To her relief, Lisa learns from a nurse that it is common for female infants to ‘menstruate’ at some point after being born: “All the female hormones in your blood get across to her, you see. Then when they stop, she starts to bleed” (137). And it is at this moment, after having both recognized herself in the baby’s suffering and worked for the infant’s physical well-being, that Lisa finally manages to accept the child as hers: “My daughter” (139; original emphasis).

But, one might object, is this not a misguided attempt once again to reduce femininity to women’s reproductive and maternal functions? This kind of biological reductionism has, after all, been a strong tendency at least since the Age of Enlightenment (Outram 89–90), and women’s supposedly natural role as the
bearers of new life has frequently been used by men to deny them various rights (e.g. the right to vote and full citizenship; see, for example, Frevert 424–425). Ian Haywood is one critic who has raised such objections to the depiction of women in *Union Street* (146), but Margaretta Jolly insists that these criticisms fail to do justice to the complexity of Barker’s text:

[The] “feminine experience” of the body is problematized through its performance of unconscious social desires of class and sexuality. […] A critique of “biological reductionism” […] ignores the fact that within the societies in crisis that Barker explores, *biological* questions of physical survival – “stoicism,” recovery, or simply birth itself – are fundamentals that must not be underestimated. For the poor, ill, or war-torn, the birth of new life and physical resistance are not necessarily “reductive” so much as astonishing. (242; original emphasis)

Rather than shying away from the body altogether, that is to say, *Union Street* uses those problems of human existence that arise from our embodied nature – birth, the need for sustenance and shelter, sexual difference, labor, and death – as a starting point for the recognition of commonality.

Moreover, *Union Street* does not posit such recognition as inherently comforting, but instead acknowledges that it may at times be downright frightening. This becomes clear in a harrowing scene that takes place right after Kelly’s rape. When the rapist, after violating Kelly, wants her to leave as quickly as possible the girl refuses, not wanting “to go home yet” (30). Instead, Kelly demands that her rapist treat her to a drink at a nearby restaurant, threatening to shout for help if he refuses to come with her. Soon, we thus find the two of them – victim and perpetrator – sitting at the same table in a fish-and-chip bar whose walls are “lined with mirror-tiles,” so that wherever Kelly looks, hers and the man’s eyes meet:

[A]s she continued to stare, she saw a slight movement, a crumbling almost, at the corner of the lids. Something was happening to his face. It was beginning to split, to crack, to disintegrate from within, like an egg when the time for hatching has come. She wanted to run. She didn’t want to stay there and see what would hatch out of this egg. But horror kept her pinned to her chair. And the face went on cracking. And now moisture of some kind was oozing out of the corners of his eyes, running into cracks that had not been there a minute before, dripping, finally, into the open, the agonised mouth. She watched, afraid. And looked away. But that was no use.

From every side his reflection leapt back at her, as the mirror-tiles filled with the fragments of his shattered face. (33)