Imagined Human Beings

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The End of the Road

While Ibsen's plays clearly lend themselves to Horneyan analysis, it may seem that John Barth's *The End of the Road* is a less appropriate choice. Nora, Torvald, and Hedda are mimetically drawn characters in realistic works, but Jake, Joe, and Rennie have been treated by most critics as illustrative figures in a philosophic tale. Although Barth may not have been aiming at psychological realism, his characters are brilliant mimetic portraits nonetheless. This novel is a little masterpiece that I have taught every year for the past several decades and have found to be endlessly elusive and fascinating. Jacob Horner is an excellent example of the detached protagonist common in modern literature, and the bizarre marriage of Joe and Rennie Morgan will remind us of Nora's morbid dependency on Torvald. It will also help us to understand the equally bizarre relationship between patient Griselda and Walter.

Like Ibsen's, Barth's characters are presented with almost no prior history and would be difficult to analyze with a theory that explains the present in terms of the past. But they display the kinds of defenses and inner conflicts that Horney describes and are intelligible in terms of her structural approach. The plot of the novel evolves from the interaction of the characters' defensive strategies, which both draw them together and cause them to clash. Although there are triangles in Ibsen, his great psychological dramas tend to be focused on a dyadic relationship—between Nora and Torvald, Hedda and Ejlert, Solness and Hilde, Rosmer and Rebekka West. The situation is more complicated in *The End of the Road*, since the Jake-Rennie-Joe triangle is at the heart of the book. There are three relationships to be considered—Jake and Joe, Jake and Rennie, and Rennie and Joe—each of which is complex in itself and must be understood in relation to the other two.

Since this is the text with which readers are least likely to be familiar, I shall tell more of the story than when I discuss other works. The novel's
narrator and central character, Jake Horner, is a Masters candidate in English at Johns Hopkins who becomes psychologically paralyzed in a Baltimore railroad station on his twenty-eighth birthday and is rescued by a black man, known as the Doctor, who prescribes various therapies to treat his condition. Two years later, on the Doctor’s advice, Jake takes a job teaching prescriptive grammar at Wicomico State College, where he becomes friendly with Joe Morgan, who is working on a Ph.D. in History at Hopkins, and with Rennie, his wife. It is Jake’s relationship with Joe that precipitates the action.

Jake Horner is a descendant of Dostoevsky’s underground man and other paralyzed intellectuals in literature, such as Hamlet, Diogenes Teufelsdröckh in Carlyle’s Sartor Resartus, Conrad’s Martin Decoud (Nostromo) and Axel Heyst (Victory), Harry Haller in Hesse’s Steppenwolf, and Sartre’s Antoine Roquentin in Nausea. Saul Bellow’s Moses Herzog follows him within the next decade. One of the most striking similarities between Jake and the underground man is that both see their paralysis as the result of superior intelligence and a heightened awareness of the human condition. The underground man attributes his inertia to the fundamental laws of over-acute consciousness and contrasts himself with the dull, strong-nerved, normal men who are able to act because they fail to perceive that there is no foundation on which to base their choices. Jake Horner attributes his paralysis to “the malady cosmoposis”: when we fix our gaze on “ultimacy,” we see that there is “no reason to do anything” (ch. 6). He contrasts himself with the “short-sighted animals” around him in the railway station who hurry “across the concourse toward immediate destinations” while he sits “immobile on the bench.”

Both Jake and the underground man are paralyzed, it seems to me, not by the intellectual insight and philosophic problems to which they attribute their difficulties, but by psychological conflicts and self-alienation (see Paris 1974). In Karen Horney’s terms, they are predominantly detached individuals who have powerful aggressive and self-effacing tendencies they cannot suppress and that pull them in opposite directions. In order to defend themselves against inner turmoil, they distance themselves from their feelings and withdraw from the external world. They inadvertently become involved with others—the underground man with Liza and Jake with Joe and Rennie—who engage their emotions
and activate their conflicts. Traumatized by their involvement, they become even more detached.

Jake writes *The End of the Road* at the Doctor's Remobilization Farm about two years after the events he describes. The book is an elaborate rationale for his sterile, defensive way of life. Unlike the short-sighted animals around him, Jake sees human beings from a cosmic perspective: they are insignificant creatures living in an indifferent universe, and their values are entirely arbitrary. Not only are the heavens empty, but there is no essential human nature. The Doctor and Jake reject the old humanistic view of man as having a stable self that can generate values and be the measure of all things. There is nothing inside of us that gives direction to our lives; our ego consists only of masks. We must create our identity through our actions, but since we have no essence to begin with, we must choose without a basis for choice. With neither an external nor an internal authority to guide us, it is no wonder that we are inconsistent or paralyzed.

The greatest threat to Jake's rationale is Joe Morgan, who also starts from the premise that nothing has ultimate value but who believes that each person has a set of "psychological givens," an essential nature, that generates values which are "subjective absolutes" (ch. 4). Joe's project is to live coherently, in a way that is consistent with his values, but he does not expect others to approve his decisions since they will be operating from their own psychological givens. From Jake's point of view, the flaw in Joe's position is that it "implies a self, and where one feels a plurality of selves," as does Jake, "one is subject to the same conflict on an intensely intramural level" that Joe posits "between individual points of view": "each of one's several selves [claims] the same irrefutable validity for its special point of view that, in Joe's system, individuals . . . may claim" (ch. 10).

Jake acknowledges that he has always lacked a strong sense of personal unity, but he concludes from this not that he has psychological difficulties but that "the individual is not individual after all" (ch. 10). His entire philosophic position is an effort to disown his personal problems by generalizing them. From a Horneyan perspective, Jake is alienated from his real self, the source of authentic values, and he experiences his tendencies to move toward, against, and away from people as separate selves that dominate him by turns and between which he has no basis for choosing. The Doctor's view of the ego as an assemblage of masks reinforces Jake's rationalizations and makes him more comfort-
able with his neurosis; but the Doctor's therapies cannot help Jake to resolve his problems, since they do not address his self-alienation but merely provide him with techniques for making decisions while remaining detached.

Jake is triumphant in the novel's contest of ideas. His version of human nature proves to be more accurate than Joe's. Joe is as full of contradictions as Jake claims everybody is. He is deluded about Rennie, about himself, and about their relationship, and his intellectual approach to life is inadequate. But Jake is not shown to have a better approach. From a Horneyan point of view, Joe and Jake offer only a choice of neurotic solutions, each of which generates an inadequate view of human nature. Alienated from himself and full of inner conflicts, Jake is bound to deny the existence of a stable, authentic identity. Because he, too, is inwardly divided, Joe is a poor exemplar of his position that each person has a set of psychological givens in terms of which it is possible to live coherently.

In contrast to the two positions spelled out in the novel, Horneyan and Third Force psychology posit an essential human nature that generates a community of values. All human beings have the same basic psychological needs but differ in the ways they pursue them and in their self-actualizing activities. Everyone also has a real self, which is a stable source of direction and value, although most people are in some degree alienated from it. What we see in *The End of the Road* is a clash of neurotic positions, each of which offers itself as the truth about human nature and the human condition.

From a psychological point of view, the main action of the novel is the breakdown of Jake's detachment as he moves against Joe and toward Rennie and its reestablishment in a more extreme form at the end. Jake admires Joe and is drawn to him because he is free of Jake's "least fortunate traits," such as insecurity, "indecision," and "almost complete inconsistency" (ch. 3). Jake envies Joe and wishes he could be like him, but he needs to defeat him in order to ward off self-hate. He is so threatened because if Joe has a unified self in terms of which he can live coherently, then something is terribly wrong with Jake. If Joe also lacks personal unity but does not realize it, then his project is hopeless and he is a fool. Jake's need to undermine Joe is incompatible with his detachment, however, and activates his inner conflicts.
Jake is alarmed by Joe at their first encounter, during his interview for a position at Wicomico State. Joe is “so bright, busy, and obviously on his way up” that Jake realizes “at once that the invidious comparisons to oneself that he could not for the life of him help inviting would prevent one’s ever being really tranquil about the fact of his existence” (ch. 2). Jake hits Joe “where he live[s]” by poking fun at his being a scoutmaster: inspiring a student, he says, is like “making fire with flint and steel.” Unlike the timorous Jake who had circled the drive several times because people were lounging on the front steps, Joe strides “cleanly across the lawn” when they part: “Apparently Joe Morgan was the sort who heads directly for his destination, implying by his example that paths should be laid where people walk, instead of walking where the paths happen to be laid.” We can see how Jake feels about this by his reaction to a student who challenges prescriptive grammar by arguing that grammar books just describe how people talk: “A Joe Morgan type, this lad: paths should be laid where people walk. I hated his guts” (ch. 10). Jake sets out “to rescue prescriptive grammar from the clutches of my impudent Mr. Blakesley, and, if possible, to crucify him in the process.”

After they become friends, Jake attacks Joe indirectly, through Rennie. Joe and Rennie have an unusual relationship, the rules for which have been laid down by Joe. They are to do everything “on the same level, understanding it in the same way, for the same purpose, nobody making allowances for anybody else” (ch. 5). What one takes seriously, “both ought to be able to take seriously,” with their relationship first on the list. They are to make “heavy demands” on themselves and each other, and “they always [have] to be the same demands.” Since Joe can defend his ideas whereas Rennie cannot, Rennie throws out all her opinions and completely erases herself, “right down to nothing, so [she] can start over.” Rennie is Galatea to Joe’s Pygmalion; she tries desperately to be what he wants and would “rather be a lousy Joe Morgan than a first-rate Rennie MacMahon.” For reasons to be examined later, Joe wishes to expose Rennie to the influence of Jake, and he encourages them to go riding together while he works on his dissertation. It is during one of their rides that Jake begins to ridicule Joe and to subvert the Morgans’ relationship.

Jake begins by calling Joe “funny as hell” for hating pity and “silly” for getting upset at politeness (ch. 5). When Rennie becomes troubled and defensive, Jake presses the attack: “For that matter, what could be
sillier than this whole aim of living coherently?” This is really hitting Joe and Rennie where they live, and Rennie is “aghast.” “And boy oh boy,” Jake continues, “what could possibly be sillier than his notion that two people in the same house can live that way!” Jake compares Rennie’s expression at this to “that of the Athenians on the morning they discovered that Alcibiades had gelded every marble god in town.” Joe is Rennie’s god and Jake has tried to emasculate him. Jake claims that his purpose “was not to make a point, but to observe Rennie” and insists that he said “these things without genuine malice, only as a sort of tease”; but it is clear that even two years later he is hiding the truth from himself. Jake is an unreliable narrator who reveals himself so fully that we can see through his self-deceptions.

Rennie tells Jake the history of her relationship with Joe as a way of defending it and of justifying her lack of a separate identity. The relationship begins, as many morbid dependencies do, with a blow to the pride of the self-effacing partner (Horney 1950, 245). Joe and Rennie meet when he is pursuing an M.A. at Columbia and she is working in New York. After some casual dating, Joe tells her that he will not be taking her out anymore: “He said he thought I could probably be wonderful, but that I was shallow as hell as I was, and he didn’t expect me to change just for his sake. . . . He wasn’t interested in me as I was, so that was that” (ch. 5). Terribly hurt, Rennie returns to her apartment, where she and her roommate are having a party, but she now sees everything through Joe’s eyes. She feels that her friends are “just ordinary people,” that “everything they said was silly,” and that she herself is a “complete blank.” Assuming that Joe is “gone for good,” she feels “so awful and useless” that she doesn’t “give a damn what happen[s] to her.”

Once Joe has crushed Rennie’s pride, only his approval can alleviate her self-hate. Drunk and in despair, she goes to his apartment, where he expresses interest in a permanent relationship along the lines described above. Rennie assents to his conditions and strives to fulfill his expectations. Joe has told her not only that she is shallow as hell but also that she could probably be wonderful, and Rennie looks to him to transform her from her despised into her idealized image of herself. She glorifies Joe and becomes his devoted worshipper. According to her, he “thinks as straight as an arrow about everything,” and “even when he makes a mistake, his reasons for doing what he did are clearer and sharper than anybody else’s” (ch. 5).
Given what he wants in a marriage, Joe seems to have made a big mistake in choosing Rennie. He says that they will stay together as long as each can “respect everything about the other, absolutely everything,” but Rennie is not capable of becoming a person Joe can respect. Jake observes that he treats her with condescension, and Rennie is afraid that she will never “really get to be what Joe wants” (ch. 5). How could the straight-thinking Joe have made such a poor choice? He says that he was attracted to Rennie because “she was the most self-sufficient girl I’d ever met. . . . She was popular enough, but she didn’t seem to need popularity or even friendship at all” (ch. 8; emphasis in original). Rennie’s account of herself is quite different. She says that she “lived in a complete fog” until the day Joe told her she was shallow: “I was popular and all that, but I swear it was just like I was asleep all through school and college. I wasn’t really interested in anything, I never thought about anything, I never even particularly wanted to do anything” (ch. 5). In discussing self-alienation, Horney observes that there are many neurotics “who live as if they were in a fog. Nothing is clear to them. Not only their own thoughts and feelings but also other people” (1950, 156). Has Joe interpreted Rennie’s indifference, her remoteness from self and others, as self-sufficiency? “If I thought about myself at all,” she tells Jake, “I guess I lived on my potentialities, because I never felt dissatisfied with myself” (ch. 5). Once Joe’s blow to her pride brings her insecurities to the surface, Rennie becomes a morbidly dependent woman who cannot satisfy Joe’s need for a self-sufficient partner.

In order to comprehend Joe’s mistake, we must understand his character structure and recognize exactly what he wants from Rennie. A perfectionist, Joe has high standards of which he is extremely proud and that he imposes on others. He has no friends because he refuses to make allowances for other people. He wants them “to be sharp and clear all the time,” to live coherently, and to be worthy of respect. These are the demands he makes on himself and on Rennie. Following Joe’s lead, Rennie scraps all her friends because “you had to make all kinds of allowances for them; you couldn’t take them as seriously as all that” (ch. 5). Joe enjoys his position of lofty superiority, but it leaves him feeling alone and unappreciated. He craves recognition from another person, but if that recognition is to have any meaning, it must come from someone whom he respects himself. Because of the intensity of this need, he misperceives Rennie as someone who can become the partner he desires.

Joe makes his marriage the center of his life, with the remolding of
Rennie his primary project, more important to him than “career or ambition or anything else” (ch. 5). His explanation of his subjective ethic is prompted by Jake's observation that Joe regards Rennie and himself taking each other seriously “as an absolute.” Joe acknowledges that his ethic depends upon there being an “ultimate end” (emphasis in original) that gives everything else “its relative value” and that “this ultimate end is rationally unjustifiable if there aren’t any absolute values.” He explains that ultimate ends can “never be logically defensible; they’d be in the nature of psychological given, different for most people” (emphasis in original). These psychological given spring from the individual’s essential nature and are “the subjective equivalent of an absolute.” As an example, Joe observes that if marital fidelity were one of his givens, his “relationship would have lost its raison d'être” if Rennie committed adultery, and he’d probably “walk out flat, if I didn’t actually shoot her or shoot myself” (ch. 4). Joe denies that he is describing his own “psychological make-up,” but he is a man with remarkably little self-knowledge, and he has inadvertently revealed to Jake the importance of Rennie’s fidelity and how he can be undermined.

Joe posits a relativistic universe in which there are subjective absolutes and in which “the most a man can ever do is be right from his point of view.” His philosophy rationalizes his sense of being absolutely right while differing from everyone else, just as Jake’s rationalizes his confusion and inner conflict. Joe’s highest conscious value is acting coherently, in “ways that he can explain, if he wants to.” By this standard he is superior to everyone else, but people with other psychological make-ups will have other values. Joe seems to be at peace with this situation and takes pride in his ability to sustain “a cheerful nihilism”: “When you say good-by to objective values, you really have to flex your muscles and keep your eyes open, because you’re on your own” (ch. 4).

The essential nature Joe posits is unique to the individual, leaving each person alone in the universe. The problem is that Joe cannot stand being on his own. He needs someone else to share his perspective. This leads him to behave in ways that are incompatible with his own beliefs. He declares that each person has different psychological given and that we cannot expect anyone else to agree with us but can only be right from our own point of view. What he is looking for in Rennie, however, is someone who will understand things just as he does, will respect everything about him, and will make the same demands, both on herself and on him, that he makes on himself.
It seems at first that Joe is looking for a clone and that he has found a person who is willing to become one. He tells Rennie that until she gets "into the habit of articulating very clearly all the time . . . most of the reasonable sounding ideas" will be his, and they will "just try to forget about" hers (ch. 5). Rennie has no difficulty with this, once she becomes aware of her own lack of selfhood and is flooded with self-contempt. She can easily give up her identity, since she does not feel that she has one, and she hopes to escape her feeling of nothingness by merging with Joe and participating in his substantiality.

Joe does not want a clone, however, or a mindless devotee. He wants someone who, once she is trained, will independently and spontaneously think exactly as he does. He is drawn to Rennie because he senses her malleability, which he wants to think is combined with an unusual self-sufficiency. This combination would make her an ideal candidate for the kind of relationship he envisions, but after a number of years of marriage (their sons are aged three and four), things have not worked out as he had hoped. Rennie has tried desperately to become like Joe, but she is only a weak imitation: "I'll always be uncertain," she wails, "and he'll always be able to explain his positions better than I can" (ch. 5). She does not even consider having positions of her own. She appreciates Joe, to be sure, but she is so slavish that her recognition is hardly worth having. She was supposed to come to life after he had molded her and to be an autonomous person who happened to be just like himself. Her respect would then be of value, and they could work at leading a coherent life.

We can now understand why Joe throws Rennie and Jake together. He knows he has brainwashed Rennie and fears that she will not become autonomous as long as she is under his influence. He sees Jake as having "a first-rate mind that is totally different from his" (ch. 5) and hopes that exposing Rennie to him will make her think for herself. Perhaps then she will enable him to escape his isolation and reconcile his conflicting psychological needs for consensual validation and unique superiority. Joe's objectives have been unrealistic all along; Rennie was bound to disappoint him because no human being could possess the contradictory qualities for which he was looking. He correctly assessed her malleability and found part of what he sought, but her self-sufficiency and strength were figments of his imagination. Unable to give up his dream, he still misperceives her, exposing her to a situation she cannot handle.
"What scares me," she tells Jake, "is that anybody could grant all of Joe's premises—our premises . . . and then laugh at us" (emphasis in original). Jake astutely replies, "Maybe that's what Joe was after." "It could be," says Rennie, "but if it was he overestimated me! I can't take it."

Rennie's experience with Jake is a repetition of her experience with Joe; he injures her pride and makes her feel like "a complete zero." She has defended herself against her sense of inner emptiness by investing her pride in Joe and their relationship, but Jake threatens this by suggesting that Joe and their marriage are silly, and Rennie becomes frightened when she begins to wonder if Jake is stronger than Joe. She reassures herself by concluding that Jake is unreal because of his inconsistency: "I think you don't exist at all. There's too many of you. . . . You cancel yourself out. You're more like somebody in a dream. You're not strong and you're not weak. You're nothing" (ch. 5). Joe is "the same man today he was yesterday, all the way through. He's genuine! That's the difference." "Joe's real enough to handle you," proclaims Rennie. "He's real enough for both of us." "Nothing plus one is one," says Jake, "agreeably." "That's right," replies Rennie. She can live with her own sense of nothingness as long as she believes in Joe and participates in his strength.

Concluding that Jake is unreal alleviates Rennie's anxiety, but it is extremely threatening to Jake. When she says that Jake is "nothing" and that he doesn't "exist," she is articulating his deepest fears about himself, the very fears Joe had aroused and that had made Jake mock him in the first place. Jake responds by inviting Rennie to spy on Joe one evening when they return home. Rennie insists that Joe is "just reading" and that Jake doesn't "know Joe at all": "Real people aren't any different when they're alone. No masks. What you see of them is authentic." "Horseshit," replies Jake. "Nobody's authentic. Let's look" (ch. 5). Authenticity is the crucial issue for Jake. If Joe is authentic, then Jake is defective, but if nobody is authentic, Jake need not despise himself. His lack of identity is just a manifestation of human nature and the human condition, about which Joe has deluded himself. When Jake and Rennie look in at the window, they see Joe cavorting about the room in an absurd manner and then "masturbating and picking his nose at the same time." Rennie's image of Joe is shattered.

Jake continues his aggression by cuckoldling Joe while he is out of
town (Jake’s namesake is Jack Horner in Wycherly’s The Country Wife). He claims that “the whole business was without significance” (ch. 7), but he is clearly deceiving himself. The next day he becomes engrossed in reading several volumes of plays and gives the matter no further thought: “It was insignificant, unimportant, and, as far as I was concerned, inconsequential.” Jake is protesting too much. He is frightened at having acted out his vindictive feelings and is trying to deny the significance of his behavior and to reestablish his detachment. He also needs to repress the desire for an emotional connection with Rennie that had partly motivated him. He admits to having been curious to learn not only what Rennie was like in bed, “but also what the intimate relationship (I do not mean sexual relationship) would be like which I presumed would be established by our intercourse.”

Jake’s detachment quickly breaks down when Rennie calls to say that she must see him. Assuming that what is “in the offing [is] a polishing of the crown of horns we’d already placed on Joe’s brow,” he experiences “a sudden, marvelous sensation of guilt” while driving to the Morgans (ch. 7). The sensation is marvelous because Jake feels bored and empty most of the time, and the guilt makes him feel alive. His reaction is so intense that he stops being an observer and is caught up in the experience: “What, for God’s sake, had I done? . . . I was anguished, as never before in my life. What is more, my anguish was pretty much unself-conscious: I was not aware of watching Jacob Horner suffer anguish.”

Jake is now in the grip of his inner conflicts. When his self-effacing side is uppermost, he is appalled by the “enormity of the injury” he has done Joe and hates himself for having betrayed “the only man he can think of as a friend” (ch. 7). His detached side makes him hate himself for being afraid of Joe’s “disappointment,” “disapproval,” and “disgust,” “which ordinarily would not bother me.” Rennie asks to see him because she, too, is overwhelmed with guilt (“I couldn’t have hurt him like that”) and wants to confess to Joe. Jake is afraid of what will happen if she does and despises himself for his cowardice.

Jake has violated the shoulds of all his solutions and is tortured by guilt and self-contempt. He has always escaped painful emotions through detachment, but his usual methods do not work: “It was useless to try to read or sleep: there was no slipping into someone else’s world
or otherwise escaping my own, which had me by the throat” (ch. 7). He feels such “loathing” for himself that he begins to think of suicide: “I envied all dead things—the fat earthworms that lay squashed upon the wet sidewalks, the animals whose fried bodies I chewed at mealtimes, people decomposing in muddy cemeteries.” Jake’s “self-revulsion” abates when Joe asks him, “why in the name of Christ did you fuck Rennie?” Having to deal with Joe shifts his attention away from his guilt to defending himself and “salvaging [his] self-respect” (ch. 8).

Once life grabs Jake by the throat, his self-effacing tendencies emerge rather powerfully. In addition to punishing himself for his betrayal of Joe, he begins to have “tender, lovelike feelings” toward Rennie (ch. 9). When she says that she might love him, along with hating his “God-damned guts,” he is “flattered beyond measure”: “I responded easily and inordinately to any evidence of affection from people whom I admired or respected in any way.” His use of the word “inordinately” suggests at once an intense craving for affection and a dread of being overpowered by it. Jake is enthralled not just by the possibility of Rennie’s love but also by her expressions of hatred. In the scene referred to above, Rennie begins by telling Jake that she still despises him. “Thrilled . . . from head to foot,” he becomes “acutely interested in her” and proposes that “we didn’t just copulate; we made love.” When Rennie reacts to this with “abhorrence,” Jake grows “very excited.” Rennie’s revulsion and Joe’s masterfulness bring out Jake’s submissiveness and intensify his attachments. The same dynamics occur in his relationship with the Doctor. Jake describes himself as “thrilled” again when Joe tells him that he has put his Colt .45 on the shelf of the livingroom closet in case he or Rennie want to use it on themselves or anyone else: “Perhaps it was Joe Morgan, after all, that I loved” (ch. 10). There is an emotionally hungry side of Jake that longs to be loved and a masochistic side that longs to be mastered.

Jake’s self-effacing tendencies are in conflict with his detachment. In an effort to understand what has happened, Joe insists that Rennie continue to see Jake, and when Jake says that he might be in love with her, Joe raises the possibility of “a permanent sexual relationship” between them, “a triangle without conflicts or secrecy” (ch. 10). Jake finds that at the very mention of a permanent relationship, he begins “to grow tired of the idea of Rennie.” At this possible threat to his freedom, his detachment reasserts itself. Jake’s conflicting tendencies are some-
times so evenly balanced that he holds contradictory attitudes simultaneously, as when he feels "both guilty and nonchalant about the Morgan affair" (ch. 9).

Jake can no longer feel nonchalant when Rennie becomes pregnant and, not knowing who the father is, says that she will shoot herself if she cannot obtain an abortion. His affection and sense of responsibility drive him to an uncharacteristic frenzy of activity, as he tries to prevent her suicide. Finally, the Doctor agrees to perform an abortion if Jake will give him all his money and come to live at his new Remobilization Farm in Pennsylvania.

After he arranges the abortion, Jake experiences "a reaction" against his "whole commitment." He wants the adventure to teach him that he is

not so consistently the same person (not so sufficiently "real," to use Rennie's term) that I could involve myself seriously in the lives of others without doing damage all around, not least to my own tranquillity; that my irrational flashes of conscience and cruelty, of compassion and cynicism—in short, my inability to play the same role long enough—could give me as well as others pain. (Ch. 12)

The conflicting sides of Jake are all represented in this passage. His detached side is cynical and longs for tranquillity, his self-effacing side is conscientious and compassionate, and his aggressive side is cruel. Jake has had a bad scare. His oscillations have led him to experience guilt, anguish, and a longing for death and have led Rennie to the brink of suicide. He feels that, given his inconsistency, it is extremely dangerous for him to become involved with others. He tells himself that he does not "consistently need or want friends" and that if he is to have them "at all [he] must remain uninvolved—[he] must leave them alone," which is a strange way of having friends. He wants to feel so severely chastened that he will never relinquish his detachment and become involved with other people again.

Jake is anxious because even now he does not feel single-minded: "My feelings were mixed: relief, ridiculousness, embarrassment, anger, injured pride, maudlin affection for the Morgans, disgust with them and myself, and a host of other things, including indifference to the whole business" (ch. 12). Indifference is what Jake wants to feel, but it is clear that he is still in the grip of his conflicts, and in order to escape his anxiety, he contemplates leaving Wicomico: "In a new town, with new
friends, even under a new name—perhaps one could pretend enough unity to be a person and live in the world.”

Jake’s affair with Rennie has destroyed Joe Morgan’s solution as well as his own. Because of his misreading of Rennie, Joe’s effort to make his marriage work as he had envisioned seems to have resulted in its destruction. He claims to be glad the affair happened “because it uncovered real problems [he] didn’t know existed,” and now he will be able to get to the bottom of them (ch. 8). Joe takes pride in dealing with reality, despite the fact that he is out of touch with it, but the reality revealed by Rennie’s affair is one he cannot accept. According to Joe’s version of Rennie and Rennie’s version of herself, the affair could not have happened. Since it did happen, they must correct their version of Rennie, “and right now we can’t see how any version that allows for what happened would also allow for the kind of relationship we thought we had.” With the loss of his illusions about his marriage, Joe is left with no way of satisfying his contradictory needs for Rennie to be an independent person who thinks exactly as he does.

To cope with his crisis, Joe has recourse to his habitual modes of behavior: he will try to think straight, to face “the facts squarely,” to be sharp and clear all the time. He still aims at living coherently. He has, as Jake says, “the delusion that intelligence will solve all problems” (ch. 9). To identify the problem that has to be solved, he feels that he must “know just what happened” and why (ch. 8). He becomes obsessed with the pursuit of this knowledge, regarding it as “a life-and-death business.” Rennie says that Joe is “thinking more clearly and intensely” than ever, and she once again regards him as a god, but Jake feels that “he’s just insane, a monomaniac.” Since one of Joe’s axioms is that our behavior always reflects our most strongly held values, he argues that Rennie believes it is all right to make love to other men, or at least to Jake, whether she wants to admit it to herself or not. If they are to know where they stand, she must act on her “real beliefs” (Joe makes no provision for ambivalence) and continue to have sexual relations with Jake. Jake correctly points out (to the reader, though not to Rennie) that Joe’s position is “entirely illogical,” since Rennie’s single adultery at most “implied that she’d been willing to do it just once” (ch. 9). Joe is not thinking straight and is still not facing the facts.

But he is “behaving pretty consistently with his position,” and, as
Jake observes, “that knowledge can be comforting even in cases where
the position leads to defeat or disaster” (ch. 10). Rennie, however, no
longer has “a position to act consistently with,” and, unlike Jake’s, her
personality seems “to require a position in order to preserve itself.”
Rennie does not want to have sex with Jake, but she feels that she would
be letting Joe down if she did not. If she refused to comply, moreover,
he might walk out flat or kill “himself or all of us” (ch. 9). Joe’s has
been a reign of terror from the beginning, since he has used physical
violence, or the threat of it, and psychological intimidation. Rennie had
been full of rage that she had turned against herself, feeling a failure and
taking the blame for everything, until her disillusionment with Joe led
her to act out her aggression by committing adultery with Jake. Her
guilt makes her all the more desperate for Joe’s approval and disposed
to be compliant, but pleasing him seems more impossible than ever.
Under terrible psychological stress, Rennie tells Jake that she is “desper-
ate” and is “going crazy” (ch. 10).

What saves the Morgans, oddly enough, is Rennie’s becoming preg-
nant. When Rennie says that she’ll do whatever Joe wants, he shouts,
“Think for yourself, or I don’t want anything to do with you!” (ch. 10).
Rennie declares that she doesn’t want the baby and won’t put it up for
adoption: “All right,” says Joe, “there’s the pistol. Shoot yourself.” “I
will if you want me to, Joe.” When Jake suggests abortion as an alterna-
tive, Rennie makes up her mind: “I’m going to get an abortion or shoot
myself, Joe. I’ve decided.” Joe points out the difficulty of finding an
abortionist, Rennie makes a dash for the gun, and Jake prevents her
from reaching it. “You people are insane!” he exclaims. “Do you want
her to blow her damned head off?” “I want her to think for herself,”
replies Joe. He tells Jake that he would kill him for “taking something
as important as this out of the realm of choice.” Jake begins frantically
searching for an abortionist in an effort to save Rennie’s life, but the
Morgans are calm after this. They are waiting for Jake to fail, and then
Rennie will commit suicide.

The Morgans are calm, I believe, because at last their impossible
dream is coming true. Joe has been insisting that Rennie continue to see
Jake because “she’s got to decide once and for all what she really feels
about you and me and herself” (ch. 10). When Rennie “decides” that
she will either get an abortion or shoot herself, she finally becomes what
Joe has wanted her to be, an autonomous person whose choices validate
him. The fact that she does not want the baby because it might possibly
be Jake's signifies her choice of Joe. She would rather die than have a
child that might not be his. Ignoring the psychological pressure to which
he has subjected her, Joe can believe that she is thinking for herself. He
had earlier explained to Jake that what he and Rennie "want of each
other isn't possible unless we assume that we're free agents—pretend
we are even when we suspect we aren't" (ch. 8). He uses the plural pro-
noun, but it is his needs, not Rennie's, that he is describing. Like
God in Paradise Lost, Joe demands obedience, submission, and wor-
ship and is punitive if they are not forthcoming, but they do not con-
tribute to his glory unless he believes them to be given freely. The
God-Satan-Everyman analogy is explicit in The End of the Road,
with Jake in the role of Satan making it possible for Rennie to be a "free
agent."

At the beginning of the novel, Rennie despaired of ever becoming
what Joe wanted, but she has finally succeeded. Like Nora and Hedda,
Rennie feels that she can escape her problems and attain the glory she
seeks through an heroic act of self-destruction. To go on living is to
experience more failure and self-hate, but to die is to actualize her
idealized image so that it cannot be taken away from her. Joe clearly
seems to desire Rennie's death. He threatens to kill Jake if he interferes
with Rennie's free choice, makes no effort to provide an alternative to
suicide, and keeps suggesting that her only option is to shoot herself.
He, too, must be aware that if this crisis passes, Rennie will revert to her
slavish ways.

Thus the Morgans are not overjoyed when Jake announces that he
has arranged an abortion:

"Will you be ready at nine?" I asked her.
"I'll be ready."
"You'll want to come too, won't you?" I asked Joe.
"I don't know," he said dully. "I'll decide later."

It was as though I'd spoiled something. (Ch. 12)

Indeed, Jake has spoiled everything. When he calls for Rennie, she and
Joe are just finishing dinner, and she dies from aspirating her vomit after
the Doctor administers ether. "She must have eaten a big meal before
she came out here," observes the Doctor. "She should've known better."
Is Rennie a suicide after all?

Joe is not crushed by Rennie's death. Tears pour down his face, "but
he neither sobbed nor made any kind of noise" (ch. 12). When he calls
Jake later to ask what he thinks about things, his voice is “bright” and “clear.” Rennie’s apparent free choice of him has given Joe the confirmation he has sought, and her death, undergone for his sake, preserves his sense that his solution has worked. He is once again living in a world of his own, one that is no longer vulnerable to the intrusions of reality.

Although Jake is triumphant in the contest of ideas, it is Joe rather than Jake who is intact at the end. When Joe asks him what he thinks about things, Jake replies, “God, Joe—I don’t know where to start or what to do!” “Tears ran in a cold flood down my face and neck, onto my chest, and I shook all over with violent chills” (ch. 12). Contrast this with Joe’s reaction to Rennie’s death. Jake had not meant to keep his promise to the Doctor, but he is driven by his distress to become a resident of the Remobilization Farm, permanently perhaps, like the Doctor’s other patients, the old men in the dormitory.

Once he had arranged the abortion, Jake reacted against his commitment, wanted to be chastened, and considered adopting a new identity and trying to “pretend enough unity to be a person and live in the world.” After Rennie’s death, this is no longer a possibility: “‘We’ve come too far,’ ” I said to Laocoön. ‘Who can live any longer in the world?’” (ch. 12). At the end of the novel, Jake is once again weatherless, devoid of emotion. Having retreated from his feelings, he secures his tranquillity by retreating from the world and submitting himself to the Doctor’s authority. At the Remobilization Farm he will no longer be at risk of becoming involved with others, thus activating his conflicts and incurring self-hate. He so distrusts himself that he has chosen a kind of living death. The last line of the novel suggests that his case is “Terminal.” So, of course, does the title—*The End of the Road.*

Like Dostoevsky’s underground man, however, Jake protects his pride by turning his neurotic condition into a source of superiority (see Paris 1974). The underground man admits to being an antihero but comforts himself with the thought that “we are all cripples, every one of us, more or less.” He is better than the others because he has “carried to an extreme what you have not dared to carry halfway, and what’s more, you have taken your cowardice for good sense, and have found comfort in deceiving yourselves” (pt. 2, ch. 10). Jake also feels more perceptive than his fellows. He is paralyzed at the end because his limbs are “bound
like Laocoön’s—by the serpents Knowledge and Imagination, which, grown great in the fullness of time, no longer tempt but annihilate” (ch. 10). Jake cannot live in the world because he has “come too far”; he is more highly evolved than the others, more gifted—and cursed—with knowledge and imagination. Those who can live in the world are short-sighted creatures with simple-minded beliefs who do not perceive the bewildering complexity of life. As is frequent in the detached solution, both Jake and the underground man console themselves for the emptiness of their existence by taking pride in their ability to see through everyone else’s illusions, but they are blind to their own self-deceptions.

When we look at them closely, Barth’s characters, too, are amenable to motivational analysis, especially from a Horneyan perspective. Our sense of what is mimetic depends in part upon the breadth of our understanding; often characters seem unrealistic simply because we do not comprehend their motivations and personalities. Both psychoanalytic theory and literature enlarge our sense of what is human. Jake, Joe, and Rennie behave in extreme ways, but so do many characters in great works of fiction.