The Vitality of Allegory

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Embedded Allegory

I HAVE heretofore focused my attention on entire works of fiction—whether novels or short stories or parables—that we can label one kind of allegory or another (strong or weak), but allegory does not always and only manifest itself as a complete, self-contained narrative. Indeed, I contend that some of our problems in dealing with allegory, and some of our resistance to it, stems from our general insistence on applying the conventional designation “allegory” or “allegorical” only to entire works. As Honig claims, “The form of an allegory must also be the form of the medium (prose or poetry, drama or novel) conveying it. But in whatever medium, it is a form that characterizes the allegory as a totally achieved literary creation” (14). I resist the idea that allegory must be “a totally achieved literary creation” (though this is possible, as in the case of the strong and weak allegories I discussed in the preceding chapters) and submit instead that especially in modern and contemporary narrative fiction, allegory is more often than not an important aspect of other such creations. Recognizing this fact will allow us to see allegory as a complex feature of literature and will allow us to make better sense of certain modern texts that have proved especially challenging to interpretation.

Moving toward a rhetorically inflected approach to allegory can help us make sense of a variety of narratives that make use of allegory in some way but that do not produce the same kind of allegorical effect that more traditional allegorical narratives do. We commonly find allegory present in a work of fiction, for example, as a narrative embedded in but marked off from
the primary narrative.¹ Such embedded narratives—which might take the form of dreams, stories related by characters or narrators, or speeches—raise important issues about our treatment of allegory, the most germane of which is whether the presence of such an embedded allegory necessarily makes the primary, host narrative allegorical. Honig broaches this question early in *Dark Conceit* when he wonders “whether in [Shakespeare’s] *Coriolanus* Menenius’ famous body-versus-belly speech is an allegory or in any sense allegorical” (10). Honig decides that the speech is allegorical primarily for two reasons: because it appeals to an “ideal” concerning the operation of government,² and because it “functions as a trope on at least two levels of meaning. The anatomical analogy makes of a civil insurrection and a physiological disorder one and the same thing” (10–11). Thus, Honig declares the speech to be allegorical; however, he resists calling it an allegory because he reserves that term for “the full-length, inclusively figurative work [i.e., Shakespeare's play] and [for] the literary type which comprises such works” (11).

Honig treats the allegorical speech in *Coriolanus* as if he were adopting the kind of rhetorical approach I am advocating. Immediately after stipulating that his work will focus only on the genre of full-length allegorical narratives, he notes that “Menenius’ speech shows how an allegorical trope extends itself and, further, how it serves as a guiding motif in a longer work” (11). This speech, he continues, “[exerts] a . . . pressure of figurative predetermination” in the context of the entire play (12). But this is all that Honig has to say on the subject of this embedded allegory, and I believe the concept deserves fuller treatment. In examining other examples of embedded allegories we will see that a rhetorical approach can help to explain that “pressure of figurative predetermination” in the cases where such pressure does exert itself, but it will also allow us to recognize that not all embedded allegories do function within the primary narrative in the way that Honig’s claims imply that they do.

When we shift our discussion from allegory as narrative to allegory in narrative, we must look at allegory in a very different way; embedded allegories are themselves textual phenomena, part of the feedback loop of interpretation. My aim in this chapter is to document the various kinds of embedded allegories and to explore the range of rhetorical impact that each produces, both on the reader and within the context of the primary narratives in which

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¹ In Gérard Genette’s terms, such an embedded narrative would be a metanarrative (“a narrative within the narrative”) that constitutes a metadiegesis (“the universe of this second narrative”) (228). As I find Genette’s use of “meta” to be somewhat misleading, however, I will simply use the term “embedded” in the discussion to follow.

² This concept of an “ideal” is central to Honig’s understanding of allegory. Indeed, he characterizes the allegorical genre as one that “refers to many different works that engage an ideal encompassing the problematic nature of human existence” (14).
they are framed. I identify three varieties of embedded allegories. For the first two, I fall back on the grammatical terms “independent” and “dependent” as classificatory aids. As with clauses in a sentence, independent and dependent here distinguish elements that can and cannot exist alone. Thus, an independent embedded allegory is conceivable as a separate narrative, one that could exist autonomously, while a dependent embedded allegory cannot function without the structure in which it is embedded. I call the third type of embedded allegory “interdependent,” a designation that refers to an intertextual figural narrative, one that an author borrows from another author and embeds in his or her own story. These embedded allegories are changed and often reinvigorated in their new narrative surroundings, but they also remain tied to—and to some extent defined by—their original context.³

There is some overlap between what I am calling embedded allegories and the phenomenon that has come to be called *mise-en-abyme*, a term generally credited to André Gide that derives from ancient heraldry and that refers, in literature, to the instances in which some smaller part of a larger work reflects that larger work. Lucien Dällenbach, whose *The Mirror in the Text* stands as the most comprehensive work on this topic, defines *mise-en-abyme* as “any aspect enclosed within a work that shows a similarity with the work that contains it” (8, emphasis in original).⁴ In the examples of embedded allegories below, we will find instances that meet the criteria necessary to be labeled *en abyme*; this will be most apparent in my sections on independent and dependent embedded allegories.

Despite the affinities between several of my categories and examples of embedded allegory and *mise-en-abyme*, I do not want to adopt this term—which, as McHale notes, “is not a very felicitous [one]” (189)—for my work on allegory because it describes what seems to me to be considered a largely monolithic narrative phenomenon. The term *mise-en-abyme*, in other words, does not currently allow for different kinds of embedded narratives, or at least for the different kinds of embedded narratives that I have identified. Dällenbach does devote a short chapter to different types of *mise-en-abyme* (chapter 8, “The Emergence of Types”), but I do not find his categories

³. For the most complete general discussion of the concept of embedded narratives, see William Nelles’s *Frameworks: Narrative Levels and Embedded Narrative*. Nelles’s work is very helpful from a descriptive standpoint.

⁴. Other critics have modified this definition. Moshe Ron, for example, claims that “Any diegetic segment which resembles the work where it occurs, is said to be placed en abyme” (436). Brian McHale identifies two criteria that characterize the phenomenon: “First, there must be a demonstratable relation of analogy . . . between the part en abyme and the whole, or some substantial aspect of the whole. . . . [And] the part en abyme must be inset one or more levels ‘down’ or ‘in’ the primary world” (190). Whatever the specific definition, critics are in general agreement that the embedded piece must somehow reflect or mirror the larger narrative in which it is placed.
 conducive to the sort of rhetorical analysis to which I am committed because his categories depend on “the degree of analogy between the ‘mise-en-abyme’ and the object it reflects [typically the larger narrative]” (110, emphasis in original). I have found, on the other hand, that I need to subdivide the concept of embedded allegory according to the nature of its relationship to the embedding narrative. This method of distinguishing types of embedded narratives better enables me to describe the rhetorical impact of the different types of embedded allegorical narratives that I have identified.

A rhetorical approach to the phenomenon of narrative embedding—a broad category that would include both *mise-en-abyme* and embedded allegory—might add an important dimension to our understanding of this narratological category. The adjectives “dependent,” “independent,” and “interdependent” that I employ below might ultimately prove not just to be helpful in analyzing embedded allegories but also to be relevant and useful in the future theorizing about *mise-en-abyme*. At the same time, I do recognize that the work that has been done on this phenomenon can augment my own theoretical enterprise, and I will indicate below the various points at which I see my ideas intersecting with those that have been put forth in the service of developing a theory of *mise-en-abyme*.5

**Independent Embedded Allegory: Achebe and Kafka**

As Edwin Honig rightly claims, an allegorical tale that has been embedded in a larger narrative tends to exert an appreciable hermeneutic force on both the reader and the text; this is what he calls the “pressure of prefigurative determination.” There might be a natural tendency on the part of readers to be influenced by this pressure because it facilitates a complementary relationship between the embedded narrative and the primary narrative. Such a relationship undoubtedly has a certain hermeneutic appeal, the appeal of finding the meaning of the entire narrative packaged neatly in a metonymic allegorical interlude. This is an expectation, I suspect, that has been reinforced—if not fostered—by the way in which critics have tended to talk about *mise-en-abyme*. Dällenbach proclaims, for example, that “its essential property is that it brings out the meaning and form of the work” (8), and two of the three “dimensions of modeling” that McHale identifies take us in a similar direction—toward using the embedded narrative as a way of making

5. I am grateful to Brian McHale, who initially pointed out the convergence of my theory of embedded allegories with the idea of *mise-en-abyme*.

6. Ron lists this claim as one of his “Nine Problems in the Theory of Mise-en-Abyme” and asks some penetrating questions regarding it, including, “what if it fails [to do so]?” (419).
sense of the larger text. We can see the lure of this approach by examining the effect produced by such an embedded narrative in two well-known novels, Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* and Franz Kafka’s *The Trial*.

Achebe’s novel focuses on an Igbo man named Okonkwo whose personal story intersects with the beginning of European colonial expansion into Africa and, more specifically in this case, Nigeria. In Achebe’s narrative, Okonkwo’s personal trajectory is downward. He begins as a respected member of his village and the surrounding region, a man whose “fame rested on solid personal achievements” (3). As the novel progresses, however, Okonkwo struggles with some personal demons (issues with his dead father and with a son of whom he does not entirely approve) as well as with the changes occurring within his tribe and his culture as the twentieth century draws near. At the midpoint of the story Okonkwo inadvertently shoots and kills a fellow clan member and, as punishment, accepts exile for a period of seven years from his village. He relocates, with his family, to his mother’s village to serve out his sentence.

When Okonkwo finally returns to his own village, he recognizes that both it and his position in it have changed during his seven-year absence. Personally, he has lost his place as one of the traditional “nine masked spirits who administered justice in the clan” and the respect that would have allowed him “to lead his warlike clan against the new religion, which, he was told, had gained ground” (171). That new religion, of course, explains the changes in the village itself; the Christian missionaries have made inroads, attracted followers (including Okonkwo’s son), and brought with them a government and their own system of justice. Okonkwo is eventually arrested and imprisoned for his part in destroying a Christian church. His detainment and his treatment at the hands of the interlopers serve to increase his anger and, after his release, he exacts his revenge by killing a messenger who has come on behalf of the white men to break up a meeting of the clan. When the district commissioner arrives with a small group of his men to arrest Okonkwo, we learn that he (Okonkwo) has committed suicide by hanging himself.

Okonkwo is generally seen as a tragic figure, a good—though certainly not perfect—man who proves incapable of dealing effectively with his changing situation. In this regard, he also seems to represent the Igbo society more generally. As Arlene Elder argues, even more than being an interesting individual character, Okonkwo has a “larger symbolic function in the novel as representative of the suicidal fragmentation of Igbo society” (64). This fragmentation and its potentially devastating results are thematically
central to Achebe’s novel. Summing up the problem as the narrative draws to a close, Okonkwo’s friend Obierika laments the insidiousness of the white man’s presence among the Igbo as he rebuts Okonkwo’s argument in favor of fighting: “How do you think we can fight when our own brothers have turned against us? The white man is very clever. He came quietly and peaceably with his religion. We were amused at his foolishness and allowed him to stay. Now he has won our brothers, and our clan can no longer act like one. He has put a knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart” (176). Since no clear consensus on how—or even whether—to combat the colonizers emerges from the clan members, Okonkwo decides to act individually if necessary, a decision that leads to his tragic ending.

As is the case with most good tragedies, a certain amount of ambiguity survives the narrative’s end, even if the protagonist does not. Could the outcome have been different for Okonkwo and his people? How could the Igbo have prevented the fragmentation of their society that seems to have opened the door to the missionaries? Given the presence of these white men, how could the native peoples most effectively resist them? Achebe offers no clear answers to any of these questions, and from that silence springs the ambiguity. Yet perhaps because we are dealing with a text that involves political issues of colonialism by an African writer, readers tend to assume that Achebe must be trying to make some political point (it is difficult to imagine that he intended for Things Fall Apart to be “simply” the mimetic representation of the existence of one fictional character at a given historical moment); therefore, we look either to transcend the ambiguity through allegorical interpretation (what is ambiguous on the literal level might clearly signify on the allegorical) or to weave the ambiguity into an allegorical interpretation, as some critics do with the weakly allegorical Kafka. If Achebe is trying to make some larger point, but has not overtly told us what that point is, then many readers will find themselves tempted to view the work as an allegory.

One way to arrive at an (allegorical) interpretation of the entire narrative is to extrapolate from one’s interpretation of an embedded narrative. In Things Fall Apart we find an independent embedded tale that has the potential to be revealing. Ekwefi, one of Okonkwo’s wives, relates the fable of “The Tortoise and the Birds” during an evening in which each of Okonkwo’s wives and their children tell folktales. In this tale, the birds are preparing to attend a feast in the sky during a time otherwise marked by famine. Tortoise, who has “not eaten a good meal for two moons” (96), notices the preparations and devises a way to get himself included. He convinces the skeptical but good-hearted birds that he has reformed from his days of cunning and mischief, and they each give him a feather out of which he fashions two wings. Prior to the feast, Tortoise, who is obviously a skilled orator, is selected to be
the spokesman for the group, and he convinces the birds that custom dictates that each of them take a new name for such a special occasion. Tortoise takes for himself the name All of you.

When the group arrives at the feast, Tortoise asks the hosts for whom they have prepared the repast, and the reply is “For all of you” (98). Reminding the birds that this is his name, Tortoise eats first, leaving only the scraps that he has thrown on the floor for the others. The angry birds retaliate by repossessing the feathers they had “lent” him, leaving Tortoise “in his hard shell full of blood and wine but without any wings to fly home” (99). Trying to figure a way out of his predicament, Tortoise asks the birds to take a message to his wife. Each predictably refuses until Parrot, “who had felt more angry than the others, suddenly changed his mind and agreed to take the message” (99). Tortoise wants Parrot to tell his wife to construct a landing pad of soft material from their house, but Parrot instead tells her to bring out all of their hard items, which she does. The list includes “hoes, machetes, spears, guns, and even [Tortoise’s] cannon” (99). Unable to discern from above the nature of his landing site, and trusting that Parrot has delivered the message he intended, Tortoise jumps. He survives, but shatters his shell, which is pieced back together by the neighborhood medicine man.

The story is a traditional tale that purports to explain “why Tortoise’s shell is not smooth” (99). As such, this fable falls into the category of strong allegory; it transforms a phenomenon of the natural world (the appearance of the tortoise’s shell) into a highly figurative narrative for an explanatory purpose. This embedded allegorical story is also an independent one because it can stand on its own as a narrative, and indeed has its own history as a fable in African culture.

But, as Barbara Harlow asserts, “In the context of Things Fall Apart, the traditional fable of the tortoise and the birds represents more than indigenous folk wisdom and its interpretation of the natural phenomena of the village world” (74).

According to Harlow, Achebe’s novel is

an analysis of the colonial moment in African, Nigerian, and Igbo history in which the traditional folktale of the tortoise and the birds is recoded as an allegory of resistance. In such an allegory, Tortoise represents colonial power. The birds, who are his victims, signify the colonized population that remains subject to manipulation until it learns to command the weapons the colonizers have used against it: words, machetes, spears, and a cannon. The folk wisdom of the animal fable reveals a political message: both rhetoric and armed struggle are crucial to an oppressed people’s organized resistance to domination. (75)
Although Harlow’s allegorical interpretation does not work in every detail, her general claim that the meaning of the embedded narrative changes when it is viewed in relation to a primary narrative seems to me to be a valid one. This change itself, however, is less interesting—after all, arguing that context can affect interpretation is not exactly a radical claim—than the fact that the allegorical status of the embedded narrative produces such a strong rhetorical impact; the embedded allegory in Achebe’s novel can determine the interpretation of the entire narrative.

This effect in Things Fall Apart is so pronounced because Achebe has clearly set off the allegorical tale from the main story. The action of Achebe’s primary narrative is interrupted, the fable is presented entirely and without comment regarding its potential connection to that primary narrative, and the primary narrative resumes following a clearly marked end to the embedded story. The lack of any exegetical commentary from author, narrator, or character that would tie the “why story” to the novel’s primary narrative ensures that neither the ontology nor the meaning of the embedded narrative has changed simply as a result of its inclusion in the larger work.

That is not to say, however, that Harlow is unjustified in claiming that the tale of the tortoise and the birds does take on new meaning in the context of Achebe’s novel. Nor is it to deny that Achebe seems to invite a particular (re)interpretation simply by including this particular fable, as opposed to some other. The agonistic relationship between the characters and the theme of retribution or revenge for a group that has been wronged both have

7. I say that the interpretation is not entirely convincing because it works only in the most general sense. One can accept, perhaps, that the tortoise and the birds might represent, respectively, colonizer and colonized. And Harlow’s belief that “the birds’ refusal to provide [the tortoise with the help he needs to get back down], once they understand the conditions it entails, is . . . a radical critique of the continued cultural and economic dependency fostered by Europe’s ‘underdevelopment’ of Africa” (78) seems plausible enough if we accept that the tortoise and the birds do in fact stand for Europe and Africa. Harlow’s claim that the birds use rhetoric against Tortoise, on the other hand, strikes me as dubious. Parrot does deceive Tortoise’s wife, but that requires no clever use of words, and certainly nothing approximating the rhetorical acumen that Tortoise demonstrates. Similarly, the claim that this fable somehow demonstrates that the birds have engaged in and embraced “armed struggle” as a means of resistance is not borne out by the embedded narrative itself. The birds never actually possess or employ the weapons mentioned; in fact, it is the Tortoise’s own wife who chooses to bring out the machetes, spears, guns, and so forth. Moreover, Ekwefi’s commentary at the end of the story points only to its explanatory powers—it’s ability to explain why the tortoise has a shell that is not smooth—and not to any lesson concerning the power dynamic that obtains between Tortoise and the birds, although we should note that this embedded allegory precedes the arrival of the missionaries in Achebe’s narrative.

8. Jacques Derrida makes a similar claim regarding Kafka’s “Before the Law” parable, which I will discuss below. Outside the primary narrative of The Trial, Derrida states, the embedded narrative becomes “another institution” (140).
obvious connections to a novel about colonial Africa. Nevertheless, the act of recoding the fable is left to the reader, and Harlow has recoded this particular one in order to make the embedded narrative complement what she believes Achebe is “really” trying to express through the primary narrative.

In order to sustain a reading that makes the embedded allegory complement the primary narrative, Harlow must assume that both of these narratives bear the mark of the author and are meant to work together to convey his rhetorical purpose. Despite the fact that the embedded narrative is characterized by what Genette calls external focalization (the narrator simply re-presents the story that Ekwefi tells), Harlow refocuses it through what she imagines to be the point of view of the author. The assumption that the point of view must ultimately be the author’s is what we might call the assumption of an implied, fixed focalization, and it of course rests on certain assumptions about the implied author. If this assumption is plausible, then the embedded narrative can be made to stand in a synecdochical relationship to the narrative in which it is embedded, thereby allowing the reader to obviate at least some of the latter’s ambiguity.

In this regard, the embedded narrative that has been transformed from a fable that explains why the tortoise’s shell has the texture it has into an allegory about how best to resist colonial rule allows Harlow to transform the primary narrative from one that deals primarily with why Okonkwo falls into one that, like the embedded narrative, is about how to resist. For Harlow, in short, the embedded narrative has assumed the role of the master narrative. In a claim that indicates the extent to which her allegorical reading of the embedded narrative has colored her interpretation of the primary narrative, Harlow states that “The final incidents of Okonkwo’s life and the resistant history of the other villagers reenact the fable of the tortoise and the birds” (78). In order to make this analogy work, however, Harlow has to claim that Okonkwo’s suicide at the end of Things Fall Apart “causes the people of Umuofia to debate their strategies of resistance to the colonizers’ increasing influence” (78). But we cannot validate this claim with any direct textual support. Indeed, Okonkwo’s suicide could be seen as a response to what he assumes is the clan’s decision not to resist. After he murders the

9. This might help to explain Harlow’s inaccurate claim that Okonkwo “dismisses the parrot’s story, which demands the overthrow both of inherited paradigms and of the colonial system, as a tale told by women” (76). In fact, there is no mention of Okonkwo’s reaction to this story, though it is true that he is dismissive of “women’s stories” generally. Harlow believes, however, that for Achebe, “Okonkwo’s personal failure represents the inadequacy of recalcitrant traditionalism in responding to the exigencies of the present or elaborating a vision of the future” (76). If this is so, then Okonkwo’s rejection of the story as Harlow has allegorized it would make sense. There is, however, no textual basis for this assertion.
messenger, Okonkwo, the narrator tells us, “knew that Umuofia would not go to war. He knew because they had let the other messengers escape. They had broken into tumult instead of action. He discerned fright in that tumult” (203). Although war is obviously not the only means of resistance, there is, Harlow’s claim notwithstanding, no mention of a discussion of possible alternatives in what remains of the narrative.

When we draw on a case such as this one to reconsider allegory, we can see the utility of using the narrative and rhetorical frameworks that I have been advocating. As a textual phenomenon, an embedded allegorical narrative strongly inclines readers toward allegorical interpretation more generally. In the case of *Things Fall Apart*, the allegorized interpretation of the embedded narrative can be extended to the primary narrative and can literally determine one’s interpretation of the entire text. To read the embedded fable as Barbara Harlow does also seems to be in keeping with the “Jamesonian” approach to narratives written from the perspective of the colonized. It can be difficult for readers to imagine that Achebe does not have some broader political aims in writing this novel, so when we combine our knowledge of the historical context of the novel and its author with an allegorical fable such as the story of the tortoise and the birds, we wind up with significant positive feedback for an allegorical interpretation. Ultimately, Achebe’s presentation of the fable allows for, perhaps even encourages—even if it does not completely validate—the recoding of the story in the manner that Harlow has chosen.10

My own sense is that Harlow has granted the embedded allegory too much “prefigurative determination,” to go back to the phrase that Honig used in his discussion of Shakespeare. While the fable of the tortoise and the birds certainly alerts readers to allegorical potential, the other sources of “feedback” do not, in my opinion, fully justify Harlow’s strong figurative reading. Achebe himself and his narrative style are the two elements that most mitigate the allegorical potential introduced by the fable. Achebe does not actually advocate for anything in this novel, and his detached style of

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10. Julian N. Wasserman’s essay “The Sphinx and the Rough Beast: Linguistic Struggle in Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*” indirectly opens up a second path to arrive at a similar allegorical reading. Wasserman does not spend much time on the tale of the tortoise and the birds, but he does offer it as an example of the kind of “folk oratory” that characterizes Achebe’s novel (81). According to Wasserman, “linguistic etiquette among the Ibo, as with most oral cultures, is characterized by a verbal strategy of indirection rather than directness in speech. . . . Within Ibo speech, objects are not only called by names other than their own but subject matter is often introduced by seemingly irrelevant material” (80). If we accept this anthropological claim about the context from which the author of the novel emerged, then we might deduce that Achebe’s use of the tale is an indirect way of making the very point that Harlow claims for him; however, I am not inclined in this direction.
narration conveys to me a mimeticism that contrasts sharply with an allegorical novel. The embedded fable seems to me more likely to be a representation of the kinds of stories that the Igbo people tell, and the contexts in which they tell them, than a figurative pronouncement from the author about how to resist colonial rule.

At the same time, the fact that Harlow can see the relevance of this fable to the general political situation that obtained at the turn of the twentieth century in Nigeria can hardly be a coincidence. I suspect that Achebe does want his readers to see armed conflict and subterfuge as options, and thus to have the fable resonate with those readers—as it surely would have with Okonkwo, if he were inclined to listen to the stories that women told—but I am not convinced that Achebe’s purpose was to advocate a particular mode of resistance, and I do not find *Things Fall Apart* to be allegorical, despite the presence of an embedded allegorical narrative.

My primary point here is that the kind of extension or extrapolation exhibited in the Harlow interpretation of the fable and its relationship to the narrative in which we encounter it might be a “natural” reaction of readers long accustomed to making this hermeneutic move. In fact, I contend that we have been conditioned to make such moves by our repeated exposure to texts that invite them and by the kind of interpretive work that has emerged from the study of *mise-en-abyme*. From Homer and the Homeric simile to the most thoroughly postmodern narratives, we repeatedly encounter texts in which extended metaphors, parables, fables, dreams, and the like, are unmistakably meant or are made to be representative of the larger, primary narrative, or both. As the example of *Things Fall Apart* illustrates, we are not always meant to make this interpretive move. Another of Kafka’s texts, on the other hand, will present us with an example of an embedded narrative that does speak for the larger narrative.

We encounter another well-known example of an embedded allegorical narrative in Kafka’s *The Trial*, but before getting to the import of that embedded allegory we need to analyze the novel as a whole. This is a work, of course, with a famously disquieting first line: “Someone must have been telling lies about Joseph K., for without having done anything wrong he was arrested one fine morning” (1). And the remainder of the narrative revolves around K.’s attempts to uncover why he has been arrested—even though his “arrest” does not stop him from going about his daily activities—and to navigate the bizarre and obscure legal system of the unnamed jurisdiction in which he lives. Of course, things do not end happily for K.; and as for the readers, we
are left in an interpretive predicament similar to the one we experience while reading *The Metamorphosis*.

Like much of Kafka’s work, *The Trial* is an enigmatic novel, highly allusive and inviting of thematic readings. As a result, Ingeborg Henel has claimed, “The question has repeatedly been raised whether we are dealing, in Kafka’s works, with allegories, with symbols, or with a special kind of myth” (40). While critics have yet to agree on a definitive answer to Henel’s question, the fact that she lists the three possibilities that she does tells us much about Kafka’s reception. The three terms “allegory,” “symbol,” and “myth” all point to narratives that are highly figurative and intensely thematic. My own reading locates *The Trial* in the realm of weak allegory, one of those works that transform some phenomenon “poorly” or distractedly, or with some or much irrelevance and indeterminacy, into a narrative structure. As we saw in my chapter on weak allegory, such narratives *evvoke* allegory while at the same time withholding commitment to it and undermining confidence in it.

A quick glance at a cross section of Kafka criticism leaves little room for doubt that his novels and stories do indeed evoke some kind of allegory. Critics such as Henel have long noted a quality in Kafka’s works that draws us toward an allegorical reading, or something approximating it. Henel herself concludes that “Kafka is far less a realist, a surrealist, or a purveyor of mere absurdities than he is an allegorist or symbolist” (40). Edwin Muir—an influential figure in introducing Kafka to English-speaking readers through his translations—claims that Kafka’s evocation of allegory springs naturally from the kind of thinker he was. In Muir’s mind, Kafka was a “profound religious thinker” whose thoughts manifested themselves “in concrete images” (33). These allusive images, then, form the basis of his fiction. Thus, Muir contends that the author’s “semiallegorical stories are really the most simple and unaffected expression that could be found for his genius; not in the least a form of mystification, though to many people they must read somewhat like that. Given Kafka’s special kind of imagination and complete honesty in following it, something like this was inevitable, and there is no help for it” (34). Muir’s term “semiallegorical” might well convey the same phenomenon that I am trying to get at with “weak allegory.” Kafka’s concrete images tempt readers into a game of trying to figure out what, in the context of an entire narrative, they represent. What, in other words, is the big idea that Kafka wants to transform through his narrative? The fact that many (perhaps even most) readers find something allegorical in Kafka’s works combined with the lack of a definitive answer to the question of what his works are allegories of provides strong empirical evidence in support of the designation weak allegorist.

When we turn to *The Trial* as a specific example, we see broad agreement
that this novel is on some level and to some degree allegorical. Heinz Politzer contends that “The novel is a parable” and that Kafka intended it to be “a simile of human existence” (173). It is fitting, therefore, that Politzer understands Joseph K. as “an Everyman” (165). Kafka, according to Politzer, “has given him [K.] only as many of his own individual characteristics as were necessary to prevent the figure from dissolving into the mist of abstraction” (165). Likewise, Charles Osborne finds this novel to be “a huge, exhausting and tragic parable of the human condition . . . which can have only one outcome” (76). Though they are both obviously correct in asserting that we all die, even if our deaths do not play out in the same ignominious way that K.'s does, Politzer and Osborne must share a rather gloomy outlook regarding the human condition if they want to maintain that K.'s experience is a representative one.

Other critics, however, offer some resistance to the idea that Kafka is fundamentally an allegorist, and this resistance bolsters my claim that Kafka's narratives, including The Trial, present us not with strong allegories, but weak ones. Disagreement on the matter of whether what we are reading is an allegory or not reinforces the notion that a work has allegorical aspects but lacks the strength necessary to consolidate critical opinion. Ronald Gray gives voice to the allegorical skeptics in his critical biography, Franz Kafka:

The universal applicability some readers find [in The Trial] was not put there by Kafka. That most men undergo a trial is not a sufficiently close parallel to justify seeing in his novel a parable of the human condition. On the other hand, the false trial to which many submit at one time or another, substituting imagined guilt for real guilt, supplies enough affinities to give this novel a telling power. The rest of us do know what this trial of K.'s is; what is required is that we should not confuse it with a more generally significant one. (125)

11. Osborne and Politzer take a very general approach in their interpretations, a fact that bolsters my claim that The Trial is a weak allegory. Arguing that this novel is a “parable of the human condition” makes the phenomenon transformed (the human condition) a very large one indeed. The fact that we cannot be more precise in identifying what it is that Kafka allegorizes indicates to me a certain weakness in the allegory itself. Osborne notes, interestingly, that “Whether one understands [the phenomenon at the center of Kafka's novel] as the gnawing away of a fatal disease, or as neurosis worsening into self-destructive psychosis, or as man struggling with his original sin, its poetic and emotional meaning is unaffected. What it says may well be conveyed in different ways by different words, but meaning lies beyond words, and the meaning of Kafka's profound and gloomy creation is irrefutable” (76). I am not as sure as Osborne is that Kafka's narrative produces such an obvious meaning, although it might do so if we could be certain that the author meant to transform the effects of a fatal disease, the deterioration of a neurotic man, or the modern effects of original sin into a fictional narrative. If we could do this irrefutably, then we would have a strong allegory.
Kurt Fickert in *Kafka's Doubles* likewise stands firm against the allegorical tide, but he also understands the temptation to allow it to sweep one away: “Equating guilt with a fall from grace or establishing it as the measure of man’s distance from God,” Fickert remarks, on the possibility of reading *The Trial* in the same way that we read *Everyman* or *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, “the interpreter of *The Trial* is free to conclude that Kafka is close to presenting an allegory about the sinful state of man, according to which Josef K. is an everyman and a pilgrim in search of grace” (56). But he also acknowledges other possibilities, recognizing that “Because of the novel’s open symbolism there are occasions for insisting, as does Osborne, on the viewpoint that Kafka has transcribed a nightmare or has written a case history about a victim of dementia praecox or tuberculosis” (59). Like Gray, Fickert pushes back against these allegorical approaches and argues for a tack that would work well with my conception of weak allegory: “In fact,” he concludes, “*The Trial* deserves to be read for what it suggests rather than for what it means . . .” (59). What it suggests, I would add, is allegory, but what exactly Kafka transforms through his narrative—what it “means”—remains somewhat obscure.

But why does *The Trial* suggest allegory, and why do so many critics want to call it a parable? Unlike *The Metamorphosis* this narrative does not involve an insect with human consciousness, the kind of personification that usually functions as a clear marker of allegory. And why do so many critics see Joseph K. as a modern incarnation of Everyman? After all, despite Politzer’s claim that K. comes perilously close to “dissolving into the mist of abstraction” (165), he often looks surprisingly like a character whose mimetic qualities predominate.¹²

To answer some of the questions the novel raises about allegory, we can start with the plot, for *The Trial*’s plot contains elements that make the narrative as a whole seem conducive to an allegorical interpretation. These elements include an arrest, an impending trial, a struggle with bureaucracy, and a death. In addition to being central components of the plot of Kafka’s novel, these elements also tend to appear with some frequency in what H. Porter Abbott calls masterplots, which he defines as “recurrent skeletal stories, belonging to cultures and individuals[,] that play a powerful role in questions of identity, values, and the understanding of life” (192). From the perspective of plot, then, *The Trial* appears to be a strong candidate to

¹². For example, K. has a real job; he has particular relationships with women; we know exactly how old he is (thirty at the time of his arrest, thirty-one at the time of his death). We do not, it is true, have much in the way of detail regarding K’s physical appearance, but this could be as much due to the fact that K. is the focalizer of the narrative as to any allegorical lack of specificity on Kafka’s part.
be called “an allegory” because the events of the narrative correspond to a familiar, cultural, extradiegetic narrative.

When we move beyond the rudimentary elements of the plot, however, and examine the progression of that plot, the case for calling *The Trial* a strong allegory becomes less convincing. Unlike *Everyman*, Kafka’s narrative does not develop in such a way as to reveal the phenomenon that the author seeks to transform through his narrative. In *The Transformations of Allegory*, Gay Clifford argues that the concept of the Law in *The Trial* is a symbol and that “K.’s involvement in the process of law” is an allegory (12). I contend, on the other hand, that the concept of the Law makes it seem as if K.’s involvement with it should produce a strong allegory, but that it finally fails to do so. K.’s “arrest,” his subsequent appearances before the “court,” and his meetings with legal counsel do follow the general trajectory of an individual’s experience with the law, but, as we have seen in the varying interpretations of the text, we have no consensus that this experience is what Kafka intended to transform into an allegory.

The allegorical difficulty with *The Trial* is exacerbated by issues of character. It is never entirely clear who K. is supposed to be or to represent, and this makes it difficult to derive a satisfactory secondary narrative from the literal one that Kafka has provided. Abbott argues that “A masterplot comes equipped with [character] types” (45). This is indeed often the case with what I call strong allegories, but not so for weak ones. K., for example, does not seem to fit any particular type. Nor, as I argued above, does he seem to be something like an “Everyman”; he is too idiosyncratic—with his distinguishing sexual “issues” and slightly abrasive personality—to be a character that readers are likely to accept as a symbol for all of Western society. On the other hand, if we take K. to be a representation of the author himself (which would at least partly explain and justify the idiosyncrasies), then we are left with a kind of psychological (persecution) narrative that falls short of “allegory” in the way that we usually think of that term.

In *The Trial* we confront a novel that suggests allegory but frustrates allegoresis. We have allegorical images, to use Frye’s terminology, but they never coalesce into a coherent narrative that makes clear what has been transformed. One can, I think, legitimately claim that Kafka’s protagonist finds his experience with the law confusing and frustrating and that he finds life in a bureau-technocratic society perplexing, senseless, and dehumanizing. Similarly, we might legitimately make the same claims about our lived reality. The simple fact of that correspondence, however, does not make Kafka’s narrative a strong allegory. At the end of *The Trial* we are left, just as we are at the end of *The Metamorphosis*, with a weak allegory, and this weakness can be troubling to readers precisely because we want to know with some certainty what
phenomenon Kafka intends to transform through his figural narrative. Just as we often use narratives to make sense of our worlds and our lives, so too do we use narratives—often the secondary phenomena transformed through allegory—to make sense of other narratives.

This issue of the use of narratives to comment on other narratives brings me to what I consider to be the piece of textual evidence in Kafka's novel that does the most to convince other readers that this work is a strong allegory—a famous short parable known as "Before the Law" embedded in the novel. The "Before the Law" section of *The Trial* has all the trappings of traditional allegory: it is narrative, and its use of concepts such as the Law and traditionally symbolic images such as doorways and doorkeepers make it obviously suggestive of meanings beyond the literal. Furthermore, the allegorical passage is followed by interpretive commentary that seeks to resolve the strangeness and ambiguity of the embedded narrative. The narrative itself is simple and in keeping, thematically, with the primary narrative of Kafka's novel: a man seeks admittance to the Law, but a doorkeeper informs him that he cannot enter "at this moment" (213). The man, hoping eventually to gain access to the Law, waits for years, occasionally trying to bribe the doorkeeper, but in vain. Finally, as death closes in, the man asks the doorkeeper why no one else, during all the time he has been waiting, has tried to gain entry to the Law. The doorkeeper responds, chillingly: "No one but you could gain admittance through this door, since this door was intended for you. I am now going to shut it" (214–15). Following the story, K. and the priest who relates the parable-like tale engage in a discussion concerning its ultimate meaning.

Not surprisingly, given his own difficulties negotiating the labyrinthine legal system that has forced him to defend himself against unspecified charges, K.'s initial response is to believe that the man has been deceived by the doorkeeper. The priest, on the other hand, offers an academically informed history of the various interpretations of "commentators," a history of often contradictory readings that stand in stark contrast to K.'s "hasty" judgment. The end result of the priest's lengthy exegetical survey is K.'s confusion and exasperation: "He was too tired to survey all the conclusions arising

13. Prior to the novel's appearance—which occurred only after Kafka's death—the author extracted "Before the Law" and published it separately as a piece of short fiction in the collection titled *A Country Doctor*.

14. In *The Transformations of Allegory*, Gay Clifford suggests that a certain sense of strangeness is central to allegory. The strangeness of allegories often "derives not from exoticism, but from the fact that they are so neutral, so indefinite, and yet immediately suggest that they mean something important" (2). I find this an apt description of the feeling one gets from reading the "Before the Law" section of *The Trial*. 
from the story, and the trains of thought into which it was leading him were unfamiliar. . . . The simple story had lost its clear outline, he wanted to put it out of his mind . . .” (220–21).

In this case, the embedded narrative has a clear connection to the larger narrative of the novel; indeed, the two story-worlds present some striking similarities, including, most obviously, a protagonist struggling to gain access to—or at least some understanding of—a vague and confusing entity called the Law. The strong connection between the two narratives has made this a very common example in works on mise-en-abyme. A second, no less important similarity is an ultimate sense of indeterminacy, a failure to find conclusive meaning in a narrative that invites us to search for it at every turn. In the case of The Trial and its embedded allegory, therefore, the embedded allegory has a complementary relationship with the primary narrative; the diegesis of the embedded narrative synecdochically represents the main diegesis.15 This is the type of relationship that Edwin Honig examines in Dark Conceit, and he finds such embedded allegories significant primarily because they demonstrate how “an allegorical trope extends itself and, further, how it serves as a guiding motif in a longer work” (11). In terms of their effect on the primary narrative, Honig finds, as we have seen, that the embedded allegories “exert a . . . pressure of figurative predetermination” (12). In other words, the message carried in a part of the narrative corresponds with the meaning of the entire narrative.

How do we explain, on narratological grounds, this correspondence? There are several contributing factors. First, as I have already indicated, the two diegeses share the same thematic content—the inaccessibility of the Law. Second, the essential plot structure of the two narratives is similar: a relatively benighted man seeking something (access, knowledge, redemption) is frustrated by an impenetrable and inscrutable “system” and dies with his desire unfulfilled.16 Third, and I think this might be the most crucial point, the primary narrative and the embedded allegorical narrative are both filtered through the same third-person heterodiegetic narrator. And although the story of the man from the country and his struggle to cross the threshold of the Law is related by the priest, Kafka’s narrator provides only the direct speech of this figure, denying the reader any access to his thoughts.

15. Heinz Politzer has argued that "the parable serves as a symbolic master plan for the novel as such. The initial situation of the novel is repeated here; this time it is couched in the form of an intellectual exercise, rather than as a part of the plot. K. loses out both here and there" (180).

16. The two plots are not, however, identical. One significant difference is that K. is forced to confront the Law because of his arrest, while the allegorical protagonist’s motivation is unexplained.
As a result, the focalization remains fixed and internal. The reader, in other words, is still closely aligned with K. and has access only to his thoughts and feelings. We know, for example, that K. is tired by the end of his exegetical discussion with the priest and that “he wanted to put [the story] out of his mind” (emphasis added). As far as the priest is concerned, we never know with any certainty what he is thinking, only what he says.

The closest we come to the priest’s internal consciousness is the narrator’s claim that the priest, in allowing K. to stop talking and thinking about the allegorical story, has shown “great delicacy of feeling . . . although undoubtedly he did not agree with” K.’s decision to do so (221). (The original German tells us that the priest “mit seiner eigenen Meinung gewiß nicht übereinstimmte” [188].) The “undoubtedly” (gewiß) here indicates the suppositional quality of the claim; given the circumstances and what the Priest has already said, the narrator seems to be saying, one can only assume that he would disagree with K. in this instance. Ironically, a word that is meant to convey certainty functions, in this case, as a means for marking a guess or supposition. More importantly, however, it maintains the integrity of the internal focalization that characterizes Kafka’s text and that contributes to the complementary relationship that obtains between the primary and the embedded narratives.

The importance of maintaining the internal focalization of the narrative becomes even more evident when we learn, at the end of the chapter in which we find the allegorical embedded narrative, that the priest is actually the prison chaplain (Gefängniskaplan), a fact whose significance is implicitly underscored by his own interpretation: “‘That means I belong to the Court,’ said the priest” (222). Both K. and the reader might logically assume that the priest, as a part of the legal system to which K. is trying to gain access, possesses potentially helpful information, information that, if he does indeed have it, he withholds. This puts the priest in the role of the doorkeeper, which gives added significance to the final—as in last, not definitive—interpretation of the allegory that he puts before K. The priest claims, ultimately, that the doorkeeper may be “incomparably greater than anyone at large in the world. The man is only seeking the Law, the doorkeeper is already attached to it. It is the Law that has placed him at his post; to doubt his dignity is to doubt the Law itself” (220).

Honig’s approach of treating the embedded narrative as a synecdoche for the primary narrative works relatively well with Kafka, and with The Trial in particular, because the embedded allegorical narrative potentially bears out Honig’s claim that Kafka is putting on trial, figuratively speaking, the reality experienced by his heroes. “[It] is this world that is on trial,” Honig writes, “with its superstitious worship of bureaucracy and its inert irritatio-
nality which the hero attempts to understand; but its nature is inexorably to
defeat him just when he is about to receive some revelation that would have
done him no good even if he had succeeded in receiving it” (162). Such an
interpretation is certainly plausible both for the “Before the Law” section of
*The Trial* and for the novel as a whole.

But as we have seen, there are other, contrariwise, interpretations of both
the novel and the parable. Ingeborg Henel, for example, shares the view that
the parable rightly determines how one should read the novel, but she arrives
at a dramatically different interpretation of both. She rejects outright Honig’s
claim that Kafka’s novel has something to say about his “world,” arguing
instead that

Kafka is . . . far removed from a critique of his age or his society. After Josef
K., at his first interrogation, has concluded his speech of accusation against
the court, the Examining Magistrate points out to him that he has, with his
speeches, deprived himself of the advantage of a first examination: Instead
of exploring his inner self, he has criticized the external world. K.’s accusing
words constitute, then, not a valid criticism of the authorities, but a cover-
up of his own guilt. . . . (49)

In Henel’s reading, this novel—and, indeed, all of Kafka’s work—emerges
from the author’s attempts to deal with his personal feelings of guilt, and
readers who fail to recognize this, Henel argues, will miss the point of his
fiction entirely:

In contrast to most confessional novels, Kafka’s works are neither the apo-
logia of the hero nor that of the author, but rather a judgment on himself.
This demands a new attitude from the reader. He must not naively identify
with the hero, as Josef K. identifies with the man from the country; for then
he falls into the further error of Josef K. (into which in fact many readers
and critics repeatedly do fall) of indicating the negativity, absurdity, and
devilishness of the world, instead of “endorsing the world” and carrying
out the judgment on oneself, as Kafka insists. (54)

To say, however, that Kafka “insists” on such a reading surely over-
states the case. Granted, Henel supports her claim with reference to some
relevant passages from Kafka’s diaries and from his other works of fiction,
but the “Before the Law” parable stands as her primary piece of evidence;
this “legend,” she contends, “becomes the key to the novel” (54), and so
her reading of the parable will determine her reading of the narrative writ
large. Her explication of the novel and the parable’s significance in it is in


many ways a brilliant one, but its brilliance does not make it determinant. We would be well advised to keep in mind Henel’s comments regarding the presentation of the parable through the priest as we consider her own exegeses of it: “As in the Bible, Kafka has the exposition follow the parable. But his explanations do not have the same status as Jesus’ interpretations of his parables: They are mere learned exegeses, and thus lacking in authority, ambiguous, and even contradictory. Hence they must be understood, not as absolutely valid statements, but rather as experimental attempts to lead the listener, through assertion and counter-assertion, to an independent judgment” (41–42).

The parable itself, because it is a weak allegory and thus inherently indeterminate, naturally produces readings that might themselves be ambiguous and even contradictory. This is the case not only in the text, as the priest relates different interpretations of the legend, but also outside of the text, as different critics of Kafka’s novel arrive at different conclusions about the meaning of the parable. As I proposed in my earlier discussion of The Metamorphosis, I doubt that Kafka wanted to provide us with an interpretive “key”; the entire trajectory of the novel tends toward confusion and ambiguity. The net effect of Kafka’s embedding in The Trial a weak allegory that shares so many structural and thematic similarities with the larger narrative is to encourage readers to see it as a kind of synecdoche for the novel as a whole, and thus to read the novel as an allegory. Like the embedded allegory, the embedding allegory turns out to be a weak one, and this is, I suspect, as Kafka intended it.

In cases such as this one the presence of an (obvious) independent allegorical narrative—even if it is a weak one—as a textual phenomenon within the primary narrative seems to function as an interpretive clue pointing the reader toward the conclusion that the entire work must be allegorical, and that its deeper meaning must be related to the allegorical meaning conveyed through the embedded narrative; this is precisely the dynamic that, according to critics who focus on the mise-en-abyme, often obtains when the larger narrative is “reflected” in the embedded narrative. Henel takes this one step further, proposing that we can use Kafka’s parables as a kind of key to deciphering his corpus as a whole. “On the basis of his short parables,” she argues, and these parables of course include “Before the Law,” “which at least stylistically present no puzzles, it should thus be easier to gain an understanding of the images of Kafka’s world” (40). The temptation to see the relationship between an embedded allegory and its host narrative in this light is indeed strong, but even if we follow this interpretive path, we end up at a point of profound uncertainty regarding the meaning of Kafka’s parable and the text in which he has embedded it.
Recalling Peter Rabinowitz’s claim in *Before Reading* that Kafka might well have been “consciously trying to confuse” in *The Trial* can help us to recognize the use-value of an embedded weak allegory for his purposes. Weak allegory holds out the general promise of significant meaning but withholds commitment to any particular interpretation, and this state of affairs suits Kafka perfectly. As Kafka’s perceptive biographer Reiner Stach attests, “Kafka points, but if we follow his finger with our gaze, a veil descends on the spot. His court [in *The Trial*] has a visible surface; what we see only refers to things that are both essential and unimaginable: ‘the supreme judges,’ ‘the law.’ The less we know, the more we speculate” (474). This combination of things both essential and unimaginable is characteristic of weak allegory, and the speculation that the combination engenders speaks to its power.

It is precisely this speculation without the promise of resolution that Kafka sought to wring from his readers, and that seems to have characterized his own state of mind throughout much of his life. “The more striking the semiotic phenomenon,” Stach continues, “the greater the obscurity that lurks behind it. Every detail says, ‘I mean something, but I am not saying what’” (475). This statement applies not only to details such as “the law” and “the judges,” but also to the textual phenomenon of the embedded allegory. The presence of this weak allegory incites heightened speculation from both the protagonist and the reader, but neither can solve the riddle that it presents. Kafka uses the embedded allegory as a means of allowing the reader to identify with the character’s hermeneutic plight, if not his legal one. Indeed, Kafka pushes us toward such identification by using the embedded narrative to put his protagonist in the position of the reader trying to make sense of an enigmatic text. Ultimately, this rhetorical situation helps to underline Kafka’s primary rhetorical purpose—the creation of a text laden with “significant” semiotic and textual phenomena that refuses to yield any final, determinative meaning.

**Dependent Embedded Allegory: Barth**

At the other end of the rhetorical continuum I would place dependent embedded allegories. These I will classify as essentially mundane allegories situated within a larger narrative. I use the term “mundane” to connote a nontranscendent quality to these embedded allegories. In other words, unlike the other embedded allegories we have analyzed thus far, a dependent embedded allegory confines itself to the story-world of its host narrative; that is the sense in which it is mundane.

This distinction offers another opportunity to point out the overlap between my conception of embedded allegories and some of the theoretical
work that has been done on *mise-en-abyme*. In his essay “En Abyme” Brian McHale makes a signal contribution to this area of study by pointing out the “cognitive potential of *mise-en-abyme*” (191), and he identifies “three dimensions of modeling by *mise-en-abyme,*” each of which can contribute to the reader’s understanding of some entity (191). McHale analyzes “cases where *mise-en-abyme* yields knowledge of the text itself by modeling its form”; “cases where *mise-en-abyme* yields knowledge of how the reader engages with the text—in other words, where it models the reading process”; and cases where *mise-en-abyme* can yield knowledge of the extratextual world, serving to model or map that world cognitively” (191). While I would not want to delimit what my different conceptions of embedded allegory have the potential to do for readers, I do see some potential correspondence between McHale’s cognitive functions and my types of embedded allegories; dependent embedded allegories are likely to contribute to textual understanding, while independent and interdependent embedded allegories might tend more toward the transcendent. To delve further into these and related issues, I turn to John Barth and his first novel, *The End of the Road*.

*The End of the Road* chronicles approximately six months in the life of Jacob Horner, a thirty-year-old former graduate student in English literature who takes a job teaching grammar and composition at a Maryland teachers college at the suggestion of his therapist, who believes that the structure of a regular job will benefit his patient. Jacob serves as both the protagonist and the narrator of his story, a story that focuses on his relationship with Joe Morgan—a teaching colleague—and Joe’s wife, Rennie. The plot’s climax involves Jacob’s adulterous affair with Rennie; a pregnancy and unresolved questions concerning paternity; and, finally, Rennie’s death following a botched abortion.

The catalyst of the plot is Jacob’s mental condition, one that leaves him occasionally “immobilized” as the result of a paralyzing realization that “there is no reason to do anything” (323). When this knowledge weighs too heavily on Jacob, he literally shuts down, as happens for the first time at Baltimore’s Pennsylvania Station. On his twenty-eighth birthday, Jacob, who has just completed his oral exams but has yet to begin his master’s thesis, checks out of his university-owned room with his bags packed and his mind made up to “take a trip somewhere” (322). He credits “simple birthday despondency” for the desire to leave, recounting that, at that instant, “I had no self-convincing reason for continuing for a moment longer to do any of the things that I happened to be doing with myself as of seven o’clock in the evening of March 16,
As a result, Jacob inquires of the ticket agent the furthest destinations—by bus—to which his twenty dollars will grant him access. Informed that his choices are Cincinnati, Crestline, Dayton, or Lima, Ohio, Jacob retires to a bench to “make up [his] mind” (323). “And it was there,” he relates, “that I simply ran out of motives, as a car runs out of gas” (323).

After spending the night immobilized on the bench, Jacob is finally roused by a doctor who serendipitously happens by and who will become his therapist. The doctor, an unnamed African American, operates a “Remobilization Farm” where he employs what we might generously call unconventional methods of treatment on paralytic patients. These unsanctioned methods, combined with the doctor’s race, force him to maintain a low profile and to relocate his clinic with some regularity. Nevertheless, Jacob becomes a regular patient, and he clearly has some confidence in the doctor’s motives and abilities, even if he is not always comfortable with or confident in the means he employs. The novel opens with Jacob the narrator writing from one of the Remobilization Farm’s dormitories, looking back on the Jacob Horner who took the doctor’s advice about two years earlier to find a career, “a lifework” (257). As the Farm and the teachers college were in the same town at the time of Jacob’s initial treatment, the doctor suggests applying there, but he directs Jacob not to teach literature—the focus of his graduate studies—because, as a discipline, it lacks discipline. “There must be a rigid discipline,” the doctor advises, “or else it will be merely an occupation, not an occupational therapy” (259). The doctor finally settles on grammar, but insists on prescriptive rather than descriptive grammar: “No description at all. No optional situations. Teach the rules. Teach the truth about grammar” (259).

The doctor’s insistence on prescription over description is intended to minimize Jacob’s exposure to situations in which no clear choices exist; this pertains to what he calls “Informational Therapy,” which relies on the premise that knowledge of the world can, in some cases, mitigate the need to make choices. The doctor illustrates his point by asking Jacob to think about how many people Cleveland’s Municipal Stadium seats: “If you don’t simply know how many people can sit in the Cleveland Municipal Stadium,” he explains, “you have no real reason for choosing one number over another, assuming you can make a choice at all. . . . But if you have some Knowledge of the World you may be able to say, ‘Seventy-seven thousand, seven hundred,’ just like that. No choice is involved” (330). Armed with enough information, Jacob just might be able to avoid his spells of choice-induced immobility.

Avoiding situations that require choices, however, will not, the doctor indicates, solve Jacob’s problem, for, he explains, the inability to choose “is
only theoretically inherent in situations, when there's no chooser. Given a
particular chooser, it's unthinkable” (331). In other words, steering clear of
certain situations might allow Jacob to reduce the frequency of his symp-
toms, but it will not cure him. As the doctor explains, regarding Jacob's
first bout of paralysis, “the fault lies not in the situation but in the fact that
there was no chooser. Choosing is existence: to the extent that you don't
choose, you don’t exist” (331). In Jacob’s case, the doctor wants to simplify
the patient’s life, to reduce the number and the complexity of choices so
that one, such as Jacob, who struggles to make them can still function as an
agent. The overarching term for the treatment that Jacob’s doctor prescribes
is “Mythotherapy.”

“Mythotherapy,” according to the doctor’s description of it, is a combi-
nation of existentialist philosophy and pragmatist utility. It is, he explains,
“based on two assumptions: that human existence precedes human essence,
if either of the two terms really signifies anything; and that a man is free not
only to choose his own essence but to change it at will. Those are both good
existentialist premises,” the doctor tells Jacob, “and whether they’re true or
false is of no concern to us—they’re useful in your case” (336). These prem-
ises are potentially useful to Jacob because the doctor has used them as the
foundations of his Mythotherapy, which is a way of living a “fictionalized”
version of one’s own life. One who practices Mythotherapy adopts a role for
him or herself and allocates supporting roles to those with whom he or she
comes into contact. When Jacob became immobilized at the bus terminal,
the doctor hypothesizes, he was simply “no character at all” (338). The solu-
tion, then, is to convince and enable the patient to adopt any number of dif-
ferent life-scripts and to don the mask appropriate to that script. Knowing
who he is supposed to be in any given situation and knowing where the plot
of any particular script leads will allow Jacob to act in any given circum-
stance and allow him to function in society as if he had a viable self. The
doctor believes that with Mythotherapy as a way of managing his personal
life and teaching grammar as a way of grounding his professional life Jacob
should manage to function—more or less effectively—in the world.

As we have already seen, Jacob’s doctor posits making choices as an
ontological necessity (“Choosing is existence: to the extent that you don’t
choose, you don’t exist” [331]); Jacob's difficulty in making choices, there-
fore, threatens him, at least according to the doctor, not only with immo-
bilità but with annihilation as well. But the issue of choices is only part of a
larger existential conundrum for Jacob, one that is signaled by the opening
line of the narrative: “In a sense, I am Jacob Horner” (255).

Jacob’s decision to hedge his bets as to his identity works, then, on two
readily apparent levels: it is in keeping with a “character” that is inconsistent
and wholly unable to commit to much of anything, and it is in keeping with
certain prevailing twentieth-century notions of identity and selfhood, which
manifest themselves in character and in (literary) characters. For the most
part, however, very few make the leap from the idea that we do not have
a stable, immutable, and persistent self to the claim that we do not exist.
Rather, we have learned to accept that words such as “self” and “identity”
work better metaphorically than literally; we cannot say that they denomi-
nate some “thing” precisely and unerringly, but we can be relatively certain
that we know what tenor we intend to conjure when we utter our own names
as vehicles. *The End of the Road*, however, presents Jacob with problems that
transcend those related to identification, going so far as to call into question
his actual existence.

Fittingly, Barth provides Jacob with a dream that functions as an
embedded allegorical narrative to illustrate his existential dilemma. As Jacob
describes it, he once “had a dream in which it became a matter of some
importance to me to learn the weather prediction for the following day”
(286). In order to find the forecast he tries newspapers, the radio, the tele-
phone company’s weather number, and even the weather bureau itself, but
without success. Finally, he calls the chief meteorologist at home, only to
learn that “There isn’t going to be any weather tomorrow” (287). The con-
cept of weather in this short anecdote corresponds to what Jacob calls his
“moods,” and he uses the strange dream narrative to demonstrate a short-
coming in the commonly employed weather–moods analogy as well as to
illustrate what he recognizes to be a personal oddity: “a day without weather
is unthinkable, but for me at least there were frequently days without any
mood at all” (287). On these days without moods, he tells us, “Jacob Horner,
except in a meaningless metabolistic sense, ceased to exist, for I was without
a personality. Like those microscopic specimens that biologists must dye in
order to make them visible at all, I had to be colored with some mood or
other if there was to be a recognizable self to me” (287). As an intellectual,
Jacob admits to being aware of the fact that his “successive and discontin-
uous selves were linked to one another by the two unstable threads of body
and memory,” of the fact that “in the nature of Western languages the word
change presupposes something upon which the changes operate,” and of the
fact that just as the “dye is not the specimen,” neither is the mood the self
(287). These facts, however, hold no interest for him; on his “weatherless
days” he feels bereft of self.

In the context of the novel, Jacob’s subconscious has transformed the
phenomenon of his intermittent sense of existence into a meteorological
narrative. What, then, should we make of Jacob’s dream, which functions as
a dependent embedded allegory? We should begin by noting that the dream
itself has all of the markings of strong allegory. Jacob’s own exegesis makes it clear that he reads the dream as the transformation of the idiosyncratic role of moods in his life into a narrative in which “weather” represents those moods. The dream seems strange to Jacob and to us because it presents us with a bizarre possibility: a day without weather. And while Jacob claims that he uses this dream to illustrate a shortcoming in the weather–moods analogy, his explanation and interpretation indicate that the dream of a weatherless day corresponds exactly to an occasional state of his existence: a day without moods. Furthermore, we have no evidence to suggest that we readers should not accept this interpretation, thus effectively eliminating the possibility that Barth’s narrator speaks in a voice that would oppose his own authorial one.

Despite its strength, however, this embedded allegory remains entirely dependent on the narrative that houses it. In other words, the dream helps us to understand Jacob, but it is not applicable to anything beyond him; this embedded allegory is primarily a tool of characterization. Unlike the “Before the Law” section of *The Trial* or the story of the tortoise and the birds in *Things Fall Apart*, Jacob’s dream does not offer the possibility of transcendence, the prospect of being transported beyond the confines of the narrative into another realm. Moreover, unlike these other two embedded narratives, the allegorical nature of Jacob’s dream depends on its context. Certainly, the metaphor of being “weatherless” makes sense outside of *The End of the Road*, but the dream narrative relies on the particular character established in the embedding story for its full allegorical effect. Kafka’s “the man from the country,” by way of contrast, can be interpreted as standing in for K., but the designation is sufficiently vague to apply to anyone. Indeed, the priest who relates the parable to K. makes it clear that the story predates K.’s own existence, appearing in “the writings that preface the Law” (213). And, moreover, Kafka actually published the parable as an autonomous short story. Thus, any attempt to equate K. and the frustrated figure in the parable becomes an exercise in finding correspondences *ex post facto*, as it were. In Barth’s story, on the other hand, the person in Jacob’s dream is—and can only really be—Jacob.

Even if we interpret Jacob as a figural rather than as a mimetic character, as a number of critics have, then the embedded allegorical dream still lacks the hermeneutic import of the independent embedded allegories cited above. One could argue, for example, that Jacob and Joe are so simplified as to be little more than one-dimensional stand-ins for certain ideas or philosophical positions. Jacquelyn Kegley, in fact, finds that “Barth makes no attempt to delineate characters. . . . The central characters, in fact, have stock and symbolic names: Jacob Horner, who sat in the corner and mindlessly
pulled out plums, and Joe Morgan, whose name probably alludes to J. P. Morgan, the tough, energetic American financier” (116). If Kegley is correct in her assertion,17 then we might see the weather dream as way of ensuring that Jacob Horner represents the idea that Barth intends. In works such as *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, *Everyman*, and the *Psychomachia*, traditional strong allegorical narratives, the characters bear the names of particular qualities, and the fates of these characters are invariably determined by the relative merits of the qualities that give them their names. Thus, in Prudentius’s *Psychomachia*, virtuous qualities including Faith, Modesty, and Patience engage their respective nemeses Idolatry, Voluptuousness, and Anger on a field of battle and ultimately defeat them.

The very names they bear serve to overdetermine these characters; they are what they are, and never anything more or less. Moreover, these characters are, by definition and by nature, static. In a strong allegory, Faith cannot naturally or mimetically become something other, and Idolatry cannot recognize the error of her ways and gain a measure of redemption.18 This overdetermination, therefore, results in a feeling that the characters are underdeveloped, at least in comparison to those who inhabit the more mimetic fiction to which readers have grown accustomed. When Prudentius describes Faith, for example, each of her various aspects serves as a way to elaborate her most salient trait; the progressive revelation of character does add to our knowledge of that character, but it does so primarily by adding depth to our understanding of that central trait rather than adding breadth and complexity by revealing the character’s multiple traits. Thus, we learn that Faith moves toward her battle with Idolatry in “careless rustic dress, with shoulders bare, / With flowing locks and naked arms exposed; / For in her sudden zeal for new conflicts, / She takes no thought of weapons or of shield, / But trusting her stout heart and unclad limbs, / She risks the hazards of a savage fray” (22–27). That Faith does not feel compelled to gird herself in the customary way for battle attests to her faith, to the confidence that lies in her “stout heart.” We do not learn what Faith as a “person” is like here, but we do learn something about that quality that she represents and that ultimately (over)determines her.

As S. Georgia Nugent argues in *Allegory and Poetics: The Structure and*

17. Kegley does not speak for all readers when she claims that Barth’s characters in this novel are essentially allegorical. Indeed, Bernard J. Paris contends that “often characters seem unrealistic simply because we do not comprehend their motivations and personalities” (81), and that, when read carefully we can see that, in this novel at least, Barth’s “characters are brilliant mimetic portraits” (64).

18. That is not to say that change is impossible in allegory; however, this kind of change, when it does occur, usually happens through divine or magical intervention.
Imagery of Prudentius’ “Psychomachia,” the representations of these characters “becomes largely a matter of securing univocality” (17). In order to guarantee the unambiguous nature of his characters and what they represent, “Prudentius loads attributes on his allegorical warriors with a heavy hand. He understands that, in the rhetorical economy of allegory, it is only by such an excess of apparently anomalous—and therefore telling—detail that one can certify meaning” (17). Ultimately, the overdetermination of character allows Prudentius to ensure that his figures clearly and faithfully convey what he intends them to convey: “The careful orchestration of each adjective and verb to harmonize in one monochromatic whole enables Prudentius to transform a state of mind into a condition of the body” (17).

Seen from this perspective, the reader might construe Jacob’s dream as providing one of those “anomalous” and “telling” details of the character’s true identity. Even so, Barth’s embedded allegory reinforces our understanding of a character but does not fundamentally shape how we interpret the entire narrative. Dependent embedded allegories such as this one operate as aspects of some textual phenomenon (character, in this case) rather than as independent textual phenomena.

Interdependent Embedded Allegory: Barth and Coetzee

To this point I have been working with discrete examples of embedded allegories in respective texts. Fictional narratives, however, might well contain multiple instances or several kinds of embedded allegorical narratives. Barth’s *The End of the Road,* in fact, employs both dependent embedded allegories and what I am calling interdependent embedded allegories. Interdependent embedded allegories are intertextual figural narratives, ones that an author borrows from another author or another narrative and embeds in his or her own story.19 Given Barth’s interest in embedded narratives and

19. In her excellent work *The Language of Allegory,* Maureen Quilligan identifies a similar phenomenon that she calls a “pretext,” which she defines as “the source that always stands outside the narrative . . . ; the pretext is the text that the narrative comments on by reenacting, as well as the claim the narrative makes to be a fiction not built upon another text. The pretext thus names that slippery relationship between the source of the work and the work itself” (97–98). Quilligan’s insights are valuable and clearly relevant to my own ideas. I have not adopted her terminology, however, for two reasons. First, the term “interdependent” works better in conjunction with the two related terms—dependent and independent—that I am also putting forward. Second, Quilligan understands the pretext as being a pretext for another allegory. I submit that interdependent embedded allegories can be found in texts that are not themselves allegorical.
with literary history, we should not be surprised to find such a textual phenomenon in his own narratives. So, we return to *The End of the Road.*

Armed with the doctor’s advice, the occasionally moodless Jacob submits a letter of application to be an instructor at the Wicomico State Teachers College, and, following an interview, he is hired. At the interview, Jacob meets the college’s history teacher, Joe Morgan,

a tall, bespectacled, athletic young man, terribly energetic, with whom one was so clearly expected to be charmed, he was so bright, busy, and obviously on his way up, that one had one’s hands full simply trying to be civil to him, and realized 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, to say nothing of becoming his friend. (268)

Despite the pessimistic nature of his first impression of him, Jacob does become friendly with Joe and with Joe’s wife, Rennie, as well; the relationship among these three is the primary concern of Barth’s novel and Jacob’s narrative.

The friendship begins auspiciously, with Jacob deciding after their first social engagement that he would have to revise his first impression of Joe, attesting that “it was clear in a very short time that if I remained in Wicomico we would be friends” (284). The characteristics that immediately appeal to Jacob are Joe’s intelligence, his deliberative nature, his analytical acumen, and his ability to live by his philosophy. That philosophy rests on classic twentieth-century antifoundationalism and the concomitant recognition of relativism, and contingency. “In my ethics,” Joe explains, “the most a man can ever do is be right from his own point of view” (296). The closest that Joe comes to holding an absolute, as Jacob points out to him, is his belief that one must always take others and their ideas seriously (296). And, indeed, Joe does adhere to this prescription; he works tirelessly to articulate his own position on any matter and to understand that of his interlocutor; in this regard, he displays intellectual strength and energy reminiscent of Socrates, strength and energy that one must have if one is to lead the kind of “examined life” that both men advocate. As Joe explains,

20. See, for example, his “Tales Within Tales Within Tales.”
the more sophisticated your ethics get, the stronger you have to be to stay afloat. And 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. It takes energy: not just personal energy, but cultural energy, or you’re lost. Energy’s what makes the difference between American pragmatism and French existentialism—where else but in America could you have a cheerful nihilism, for God’s sake? (298)

Joe applies his philosophy not only to his own life, but to his marriage as well, and this results in an interpersonal dynamic that looks strange from the outside. “I’m not a man who needs to be married under any circumstances,” Joe explains to Jacob, “—in fact, under a lot of circumstances I couldn’t tolerate being married—and one of my conditions for preserving any relationship at all, but particularly a marriage relationship, would be that the parties involved be able to take each other seriously” (296). For Joe, taking people seriously entails both being able to “respect” them and “not making allowances” for them (296); he must be able to consider them his equals in all respects. Toward this end, Joe can justify having “popped [Rennie] one on the jaw” when she acted in such a way as to threaten his ability to take her seriously (297). His hitting her is, in his mind, a demonstration of his respect for her (treating her as an equal rather than as “merely” a woman) and his way of showing her that she has acted in way that he would interpret as being beneath her. The result of Joe’s application of his philosophy to his marriage is a wife who, as Jacob remarks, seems to be his own creation, a modern version of Pygmalion’s Galatea (283). Despite his professed belief that he can only ultimately be right from his own point of view, and that other points of view are potentially no less valid than his own, Joe proves unwilling to take seriously anyone who does not share his general perspective, anyone, in other words, who does not reason through things as he does. One would not necessarily have to arrive at the same conclusions, but the process itself is nonnegotiable. Recognizing this, Rennie felt compelled, early in her relationship with Joe, to effect radical changes in herself in order to meet his standards: “I think I completely erased myself,” she explains to Jake, “. . . right down to nothing, so I could start over. . . . I’d rather be a lousy Joe Morgan than a first-rate Rennie MacMahon” (311–12).

Jacob, like most readers, I imagine, has some difficulty embracing Joe’s approach to his marriage, even if he can appreciate, in theory, the fact that Joe strives to live a life consistent with his principles and refuses to accept the intellectual laziness of others. As the novel progresses, Jacob becomes increasingly skeptical of Joe’s applied philosophy and Joe’s unrelenting seriousness about it. As a result, Jacob begins to take Joe less and less seriously,
finally finding something “silly” about such a dogmatic adherence to a philosophy—even if it is based on tenable principles—that leaves no room for irony or whimsy and that countenances no truck with social convention. Both Joe and Rennie recognize Jacob’s growing skepticism, and Rennie in particular finds it threatening: “What scares me,” she admits, “is that anybody could grant all of Joe’s premises—our premises—understand them and grant them and then laugh at us” (314). Although she assumes that Joe is strong enough to withstand the threat that Jacob represents, she is scared by the prospect that someone could be astute enough to understand what she and Joe are doing and ultimately not take it—and them—seriously.

Rennie’s fears ultimately manifest themselves in an embedded allegory, one that becomes central to our understanding of the novel from this point forward. Because Joe spends much of his free time working on his dissertation (he teaches at the teachers college as an ABD [All But Dissertation]), he suggests that Rennie offer Jacob horseback riding lessons on her parents’ nearby land. During one of their rides, Rennie relates that she has either dreamed or imagined while daydreaming, “that for the last few weeks Joe had become friendly with the Devil, and was having fun arguing with him and playing tennis with him, to test his own strength” (317). Jacob obviously corresponds to the Devil in what Jacob rather patronizingly calls Rennie’s “pretty conceit” (317), and Rennie has already made it clear that, even though she recognizes that Jacob will find it “ridiculous,” “[she] think[s] of Joe as [she’d] think of God. Even when he makes a mistake, his reasons for doing what he did are clearer and sharper than anybody else’s” (312).

Rennie’s dream clearly alludes to a previous cultural narrative—the struggle between ultimate good and ultimate evil—and so its resonance and its rhetorical impact depend on the reader’s familiarity with that previous story. Yet while Kafka and Achebe put forth the “Before the Law” parable and the story of the tortoise and the birds, respectively, as autonomous narratives simply nested in the primary narrative, Barth has woven the story of the battle between God and Satan—a story that is well known to a Christian audience—into the host narrative in such a way that it does not function as a “story within a story.” Instead, the prior Manichaean narrative—which might not be allegorical at all, depending on one’s theological inclinations—has been rewritten in terms of the embedding narrative; the character-pairs Joe–God and Jacob–Satan have been overtly conflated, and both the setting and the plot of the story have been altered to suit the purposes of the embedding narrative. This act of narrative integration does not efface the preexisting narrative, but rather brings it into a state of interdependence with its host.

We should note that—as was the case with *The Trial*—the basic structure and the primary figures of this embedded allegory are similar to what
we find in the primary narrative. In both cases, a figure who is an invited interloper—the Devil or Jacob\textsuperscript{21}—has a destabilizing effect on Rennie and Joe’s relationship even as the actual existence of that figure is called into doubt.\textsuperscript{22} Would we be justified then in accepting Rennie’s characterization of the roles played by the various figures? And if so, would this embedded allegory have the same force as those that we have examined in the Achebe and Kafka texts? Or is its effect more localized, as we saw with the dependent embedded allegories?

The amount of hermeneutic force that interdependent allegories carry depends on how readers see them squaring with the implied author’s perspective. These embedded narratives can produce a strong allegorical effect even as they lack the mystical or transcendent appeal of the independent embedded allegories if they can be made to resonate with the values or aims of the implied author. Thus, Barth’s interdependent embedded narrative has the potential to produce readings such as Kegley’s, readings in which the characters appear one-dimensional and flat. Such interpretations indicate that Kegley and the numerous other critics who read Barth’s novel in this way have succumbed to the same temptation that we saw in the case of Barbara Harlow’s interpretation of \textit{Things Fall Apart}. Kegley, for example, argues that \textit{The End of the Road} is essentially a novel about order versus chaos, and that Barth has constructed one-dimensional thematic characters to play out this battle. I, on the other hand, find Kegley to be too willing to allow Rennie’s “pretty conceit” to stand for the larger narrative.

In Kegley’s defense, there is considerable pressure to adopt just such a reading; indeed, the doctor’s “prescription” for Jacob is precisely to view the world in similarly clear-cut binary terms and to simplify his own sense of self, to become something akin to what E. M. Forster has called a “flat” character (68), a character, in other words, who is unburdened by complexity or ambiguity and who never surprises because he or she always follows a predictable script. The true import of the novel for me lies in the fact that it shows finally and clearly that this “black and white” approach to life, or

\textsuperscript{21} In the embedded allegory, Joe invites or conjures the Devil in order to test his strength, and one has a sense that Joe might have done the same with Jacob, whom he does perceive as a worthy intellectual challenge. And it is the case that Joe and Rennie are more eager to develop a relationship with Jacob than he is; he admits, in fact, to having no other friends and to being generally disinclined to maintain close relationships with other people. Thus, he does play the role of an interloper, but he has also been prodded, enticed, and encouraged to do so.

\textsuperscript{22} Although I do not have the space to examine it in detail here, the question of Jacob’s particular existence—and what it means to exist more generally—is a central theme in this work. This is reflected not only in Jacob’s bout of immobilization and the doctor’s counsel about “choosing,” but also, as I mentioned earlier, in the enigmatic opening line of the narrative: “In a sense, I am Jacob Horner” (255).
to interpretation, or to other people, or to ourselves, cannot be maintained without doing violence to those entities. The progression of the novel, with all its revelations and its complications, both produces and reveals cracks in such a mind-set. No matter how much someone might want them to be, no matter how hard someone tries to make them so, “things” just are not that simple. The allure of a straightforward and strong key to the relationships among the characters in the novel (such as the one that Rennie provides and that Jacob will later adopt) and to the narrative more generally seems clear, but, at the end of the road, we will realize, just as characters in Barth’s novel must realize, that the pursuit of this key has led us to a dead end.

Still, Barth’s interdependent embedded allegory and its direct allusion to the biblical figures certainly raises our awareness of allegorical potential. As Stephen Barney declares, if an allusion such as this one “is extensive, especially if it resides in the whole plot of the text, it tends towards allegory. The correspondence of the presented text to the old, authoritative text encourages the reader to look for a tertium quid, a principle of interpretation to which the correspondence points. Since the literary monuments—the Bible, Virgil, Ovid—have submitted to allegorical interpretations of their own, the tertium quid may not be far to seek. The fact that the antique text has been criticized makes it a fit support for allegory” (16–17, emphasis in original). An allusive embedded narrative such as the one we find in The End of the Road, then, can be read as a signal of allegorical intent and can result in the reader moving toward allegoresis.

Barth has in a sense encouraged this move by having his narrator pick up and extend Rennie’s interdependent embedded allegory, effectively allowing the allusion to “[reside] in the whole plot of the text” (Barney 16). Late in the narrative, after Rennie has had an affair with him, Jacob actively adopts the satanic role that Rennie has envisioned for him. Having learned of the affair, Joe perversely sends the repentant Rennie back to Jacob’s apartment so that she can have sex with him again, ostensibly to decide exactly what she thinks about adultery, about Jacob, and about her marriage. Surely at least partly to spite Joe, Jacob does take Rennie to bed, but he contends that

I was able to do so only because, for better or worse, enough of my alertness was gone to permit me to dramatize the situation as part of a romantic contest between symbols. Joe was The Reason, or Being (I was using Rennie’s cosmos); I was The Unreason, or Not-Being; and the two of us were fighting without quarter for possession of Rennie, like God and Satan for the soul of Man. This pretty ontological Manichaeism would certainly stand no close examination, but it had the triple virtue of excusing me from having to assign to Rennie any essence more specific than The Human
Personality, further allowing me to fornicate with a Mephistophelean relish, and finally making it possible for me not to question my motives, since what I was doing was of the essence of my essence. Does one look for introspection from Satan? (377)

This “pretty ontological Manichaeism” clearly recalls Rennie’s “pretty conceit” that casts Jacob as Devil and Joe as God (317). Moreover, the fact that Jacob—Barth’s autodiegetic narrator (a first-person narrator who is also the protagonist of the story)—picks up the conceit gives it more force than it has coming from one of the more minor characters. This force derives from the tendency of most readers to seek out an authoritative voice in and for the narrative. Susan Lanser has argued—and I think convincingly—that “Voices with the greatest mimetic authority . . . are more likely to be equated with, or to coconstruct, implied authorship; voices carrying both diegetic and mimetic authority will have the edge” (156). As a character who both dominates the story-world (mimetic authority) and has control of the narrative (diegetic authority), Jacob fits the description of an authoritative voice, one that might echo the sentiments of the implied author.

We would be well advised, however, to take seriously Jacob’s warning that this extended conceit “would certainly stand no close examination,” because such scrutiny will reveal the rhetorical limitations of this kind of embedded allegorical narrative. In this case, the good–evil opposition that the embedded narrative fleshes out seems overly simplistic, a fact that even Jacob recognizes. Jacob’s most egregious act of bad faith is to convince himself—or to allow himself to be convinced by his therapist—that life demands such incessant reductionism. Relying on a structuralist linguistic metaphor to explain Rennie’s confusion about whether she loves him or abhors him, Jacob reasons that getting on in the world requires us to distort reality in ways that enable us to avoid becoming bogged down by what appear to be irresolvable conundrums:

I’m sure, as a matter of fact, that what Rennie felt was actually neither ambivalent nor even complex; it was both single and simple, like all feelings, but like all feelings it was also completely particular and individual, and so the trouble started only when she attempted to label it with a common noun such as love or abhorrence. Things can be signified by common nouns only if one ignores the differences between them; but it is precisely these differences, when deeply felt, that make the nouns inadequate and lead the layman (but not the connoisseur) to believe that he has a paradox on his hands, an ambivalence, when actually it is merely a matter of x’s being part horse and part grammar book, and completely neither. Assigning names to things is like assigning roles to people: it is necessarily a
distortion, but it is a necessary distortion if one would get on with the plot, and to the connoisseur it’s good clean fun. (389)

For the second time, but in a different context, we hear Jacob making an implicit Aristotelian argument that plot should be our chief concern and, further, that the progression of a plot depends on one’s ability to distort reality through simplification, and ultimately claiming that such an activity can be both harmless and fun.

Jacob is at least consistent on this score, if not others. Indeed, slightly earlier in his narrative he has an epiphany concerning his one real conviction, and it is one that explains even if it does not ethically justify his rather cavalier attitude toward Rennie’s emotions. “Articulation!” he exclaims,

There, by Joe, was my absolute, if I could be said to have one. At any rate, it is the only thing I can think of about which I ever had, with any frequency at all, the feelings one usually has for one’s absolutes. To turn experience into speech—that is, to classify, to categorize, to conceptualize, to grammars, to syntactify it—is always a betrayal of experience, a falsification of it; but only so betrayed can it be dealt with at all, and only in so dealing with it did I ever feel a man, alive, and kicking. It is therefore that, when I had cause to think about it at all, I responded to this precise falsification, this adroit, careful myth-making, with all the upsetting exhilaration of any artist at his work. When my mythoplastic razors were sharply honed, it was unparalleled sport to lay about with them, to have at reality. (367)

Despite the frustrating qualifier that immediately follows (“In other senses, of course, I don’t believe this at all” [367]), the reader of Barth’s novel must take Jacob’s confession about articulation seriously, because it helps us to understand his character and how he seeks to manipulate the world so as to make his way through it as painlessly as possible.

When we take the long view of Barth’s novel and Jacob’s role in it, the interdependent embedded allegory that pits Jacob against Joe emerges as an example of the tendency of the characters in this work to falsify and to oversimplify. Thus, despite the reliance on the compelling narrative of good versus evil that the God–Satan narrative provides us, the interdependent embedded narrative that emerges from it has little power to transcend the confines of the narrative that houses it. Indeed, it seems almost laughable to equate such fallible and petty characters as Jacob and Joe with the monu-

23. This idea of “getting on with the plot”—and what getting on with the plot requires one to do or not to do—will be echoed and expanded in Barth’s short story “Click.” See chapter 6, ”The Presence of Allegory,” for a discussion of this story.
mental figures of Satan and God. Jacob can only be a one-dimensional character—as Kegley argues he is—if we allow him to oversimplify himself and if we fail to recognize that things are far more complicated than he allows them to seem. Thus, Bernard J. Paris contends that “often characters seem unrealistic simply because we do not comprehend their motivations and personalities” (81), and that, when read carefully we can see that, in this novel at least, Barth’s “characters are brilliant mimetic portraits” (64). The apparent contradiction between Kegley’s and Paris’s interpretations of the characters can be explained by the amount of faith they put in the embedded allegory and by how seriously each takes Jacob as a reliable narrator, one who essentially speaks for the implied Barth.

If there is a general lesson to be drawn from this example of an interdependent embedded allegory, it is that this kind of textual phenomenon can have a significant impact on how we interpret a work of narrative fiction. Like other textual phenomena, however, interdependent embedded allegories are only a part of the feedback loop of interpretation, so readers should not blithely assume that they are a direct revelation of authorial intention or that they can be made to stand for the primary narrative. As is the case with Barth’s characters, they are often more complicated than they first appear. This fact will be made even more evident as we examine another case of interdependent embedded allegory from a different novelist.

J. M. Coetzee’s *Elizabeth Costello* is another text that employs interdependent embedded allegory, but rather than following Barth’s lead and drawing on a foundational cultural–religious narrative, Coetzee weave[s] the weak allegories of Franz Kafka into the fabric of his narrative. This tactic produces a different rhetorical effect from that which we see in Barth’s work because Coetzee’s use of narratives that are themselves allegorical amplifies the allegorical quality of the embedding text. Given that the connection between the embedded narrative and the embedding narrative is so strong in interdependent embedded allegory, this amplification might even be greater than what we encounter with independent embedded narratives that are allegorical.

My reading of Coetzee will reveal that the embedding of an allegorical narrative can function not only as a tool that an author might use to structure a reader’s response to or interpretation of the primary narrative, but also as a means of summoning or channeling the spirit of the embedded narrative or author. We see this effect to some extent in Kafka’s use of “Before the Law,” the feeling of which seems to dominate the close of *The Trial*. Both of these narratives, however, are Kafka’s creations, so the net effect is still entirely
Kafkaesque. In *Elizabeth Costello*, by way of contrast, Coetzee makes use of Kafka’s narratives and in so doing manages to engage with the spirit of those weak allegories—to capture, in other words, the essence of the Kafkaesque without merely emulating Kafka through Coetzee’s own weak allegory. Here, Coetzee seems to be exploring the possibility of using fictional narratives to perform what at least one version of literary criticism has historically tried to do: to sympathetically convey the essence of another author.

Coetzee divides his novel into eight “Lessons,” each of which issues from the mind or words of the eponymous protagonist, a sexagenarian author from Australia. A decorated and prolific novelist, Elizabeth Costello remains most famous for her 1969 novel *The House on Eccles Street*, a work in which she takes Marion Bloom—the wife of Leopold Bloom, hero of Joyce’s *Ulysses*—as her subject. When her own story—the one written by Coetzee—begins, the passing years have nudged Elizabeth past the tipping point that we all face somewhere in the middle of life and into physical decline.

The novel opens with Elizabeth leaving her home in Australia for a trip to Pennsylvania, where she will receive a prize, deliver an acceptance speech/lecture at a college, and submit to the requisite media interviews. She is accompanied by her son John, a lecturer in physics and astronomy at a school in Massachusetts. “Elizabeth has become a little frail,” Coetzee’s narrator reveals, and “without the help of her son she would not be undertaking this taxing trip across half the world” (2). John does worry about the toll that the trip will exact from his mother, recognizing that she does not have the physical strength or stamina that she did when she penned the work that made her famous. As he reflects on her condition and her prospects for surviving the ordeal, we readers get the first of a number of allusions to Kafka: “He [her son] is here, with her, out of love. He cannot imagine her getting through this trial without him at her side. He stands by her because he is her son, her loving son. But he is also on the point of becoming—distasteful word—her trainer” (3). The use of the word “trial” to describe Elizabeth’s visit speaks both to the suffering that her public performance will no doubt

24. Coetzee has also approached Kafka in his literary criticism. See for example his collection of essays titled *Stranger Shores*.

25. Coetzee practices in this novel something close to what Mark Edmundson has claimed should be the goal of all teachers of literature. “The standard for the kind of interpretation I have in mind is actually rather straightforward,” Edmundson explains. “When a teacher of literature admires an author enough to teach his work, then it stands to reason that the teacher’s initial objective ought to be framing a reading that the author would approve. The teacher, to begin with, represents the author; he analyzes the text sympathetically, he treats the words with care and caution and with due respect. He works hard with the students to develop a vision of what the world is and how to live that rises from the author’s work and that, ultimately, the author, were he present in the room, would endorse” (62).
cause her, but it also, of course, brings to mind the Kafka novel of the same name. The reader might never make this latter connection, however, if Coetzee had not written an acceptance speech for his protagonist that makes the link more pronounced, a link that depends on the “distasteful word” that describes what John seems to feel is his role relative to his mother.

John, Coetzee writes, “thinks of [his mother] as a seal, an old, tired seal. One more time she must heave herself up on to the tub, one more time show that she can balance the ball on her nose” (3), and he is her trainer. But in her acceptance speech Elizabeth alludes to another animal, the ape in Kafka’s short tale “A Report to an Academy.” Elizabeth uses this story to get at the theme of her talk (itself a kind of a report to an academy)—realism—and to make the point that sometime in the twentieth century something changed in the way we read literature; she sees Kafka as an exemplar of that change. “If you know the [Kafka] story,” she tells her audience, “you will remember that it is cast in the form of a monologue, a monologue by the ape. Within this form there is no means for either speaker or audience to be inspected by an outsider’s eye. For all we know, the speaker may not ‘really’ be an ape, may be simply a human being like ourselves deluded into thinking himself an ape, or a human being presenting himself, with heavy irony, for rhetorical purposes, as an ape . . .” (18). From this example, Elizabeth draws the broader conclusion that such undecidability or indecipherability now characterizes all of literature and our reading of it. The time of knowing for certain what something was or meant has passed, she asserts:

The word-mirror is broken, irreparably, it seems. About what is really going on in the lecture hall your guess is as good as mine: men and men, men and apes, apes and men, apes and apes. The lecture hall itself may be nothing but a zoo. The words on the page will no longer stand up and be counted, each proclaiming “I mean what I mean!” The dictionary that used to stand beside the Bible and the works of Shakespeare above the fireplace, where in pious Roman homes the household gods were kept, has become just one code book among many. (19)

And from hermeneutic contingency comes ontological contingency: “There used to be a time, we believe, when we could say who we were. Now we are just performers speaking our parts. The bottom has dropped out. . . . There is every reason, then, for me to feel less than certain about myself as I stand before you” (19).

26. A few pages later, when John reflects on the insight with which his mother writes, he changes his assessment and thinks she resembles a cat more than the typically amiable seal (5).
This issue of belief and Elizabeth’s inconsistent relationship with it returns forcefully in the penultimate section—and final “Lesson”—of the novel. This chapter of the text is called “At the Gate,” and it is a striking example of an interdependent embedded allegory. With no contextualization from the narrator, the reader of this section finds him- or herself looking on as Elizabeth—sunburned and perspiring—alights from a bus in the middle of a busy town square. “Past the pavement tables, past the young folk, the wheels of the suitcase rattling over the cobbles, she makes her way to the gate where a uniformed man stands drowsily on guard, propped on the rifle he holds butt down before him” (193). When she asks the guard to open the gate for her (neither she nor the reader seems to understand why she senses that she should go through it), he informs her that she must first make a statement of what she believes. At this, we are told, “There is no more doubt in her mind about where she is, who she is. She is a petitioner before the gate. The journey that brought her here, to this country, to this town, that seemed to reach its end when the bus halted and the door opened on to the crowded square, was not the end of it all. Now commences a trial of a different kind” (194). The invocation of a trial at this point in the narrative calls our attention back to the opening chapter, in which Elizabeth’s son worries about her as she faces the professional ordeals that arise from her celebrity. If Kafka’s novel was a vague allusion at that juncture, it has now been fully embedded in her own story.

Coetzee, in fact, explicitly prepared us for this embedding at an earlier point in the novel. When, following that first lecture on realism and Kafka, John asks his mother why she chose that as the topic for her acceptance speech, and in particular why she selected Kafka, of all writers, as an entrée into realism, Elizabeth replies that even though Kafka’s parable of the ape might not be realistic in any strict sense, it reveals a kind of foundational realism because “Kafka had time to wonder where and how his poor educated ape was going to find a mate. And what it was going to be like when he was left in the dark with the bewildered, half-tamed female that his keepers eventually produced for his use” (32). What is more, she continues, “Kafka’s ape is embedded in life. It is the embeddedness that is important, not the life itself. His ape is embedded as we are embedded, you in me, I in you. That ape is followed through to the end, to the bitter, unsayable end, whether or not there are traces left on the page. Kafka stays awake during the gaps when we are sleeping. That is where Kafka fits in” (32).

Coetzee likely intends us to see the presence of the ape in Elizabeth’s life more directly than even she implies or perhaps recognizes here. The ape’s embeddedness is more than just a simile (“as we are embedded”), but rather a reality; in some ways Elizabeth has been transformed into the ape in this
story (the poor figure granted no privacy, whose base urges and flights of brilliance are both on full display), even as she, in theory, plays the role of Kafka (the figure in the panopticon who never sleeps) in her own novels. That we are meant to see Elizabeth in the role of the ape becomes apparent when, in a brilliant conclusion to the opening section of the novel, Coetzee subjects her, as she sleeps on her return flight to Australia, to the kind of ethically suspect and perhaps gratuitous gazing that John finds objectionable in the most committed realistic fiction but that she seems to value in Kafka:

She lies slumped in her seat. Her head is sideways, her mouth open. She is snoring faintly. Light flashes from the windows as they bank, the sun setting brilliantly over southern California. He can see up her nostrils, into her mouth, down the back of her throat. And what he cannot see he can imagine: the gullet, pink and ugly, contracting as it swallows, like a python, drawing things down to the pear-shaped belly-sac. He draws away, tightens his own belt, sits up, facing forward. No, he tells himself, that is not where I come from, that is not it. (33–34)

The remainder of the novel is ostensibly organized around the kind of monologues that Kafka’s ape delivers, but it is also infused with this kind of access to the normally hidden animal reality of the speaker. And like Kafka, Coetzee follows his subject through to what would appear to be the bitter, unsayable end.

In Elizabeth Costello that end begins, fittingly, with Coetzee embedding Kafka’s embedded allegory “Before the Law” in the allusively titled Lesson, “At the Gate.” Coetzee is not trying to be clever here, not trying to create just enough resemblance between his text and Kafka’s so that only the most astute readers will make the connection. Indeed, in case we have failed to pick up on the reference some fifteen pages into the chapter, Coetzee, using free indirect discourse to reveal Elizabeth’s reckoning of her own situation, brings his indebtedness to Kafka out into the open: “The wall, the gate, the sentry, are straight out of Kafka. So is the demand for a confession, so is the courtroom with the dozing bailiff and the panel of old men in their crows’ robes pretending to pay attention while she thrashes about in the toils of her own words. Kafka, only the superficies of Kafka; Kafka reduced and flattened to a parody” (209). So, there is never a question of somehow “not getting it”; the connections to Kafka are too strong to miss.

Yet both Elizabeth and the reader need to figure out why—why Kafka, and why these pieces of Kafka’s work? “And why is it Kafka in particular that is trundled out for her?” muses Coetzee’s narrator for Elizabeth. “She is no devotee of Kafka. Most of the time she cannot read him without impatience.
As he veers between helplessness and lust, between rage and obsequiousness, she too often finds him, or at least his K. selves, simply childish. So why is the mise en scène into which she has been hurled so—she dislikes the word but there is no other—so Kafkaesque?” (209).27 The best response that Elizabeth can muster is irony: “One answer that occurs to her is that the show is put together this way because it is not her kind of show. You do not like the Kafkaesque, so let us rub your nose in it” (209). Clearly, Elizabeth sees this moment as the trial she must endure, as the test to which she must submit. And this test has two distinct facets.

The first aspect of Elizabeth’s trial involves what she calls the “superficies of Kafka.” In other words, someone has recreated the situation and the setting of The Trial and dropped her—unwittingly and unwillingly—into it. The resultant sense of confusion and disorientation leaves Elizabeth nonplussed, which does align her with a number of Kafka’s protagonists, especially his various K’s. As a novelist herself, one who has read even if she has not particularly enjoyed Kafka, Elizabeth recognizes the similarities between her story-world and the one created by Kafka almost immediately. After her first unsuccessful attempt to pass through the gate, for example, Elizabeth inquires of the sentry who mans the guardhouse whether she might be permitted to look through to the other side, “Just to see if it is worth all this trouble” (195). The sentry accedes and escorts Elizabeth up to the gate itself: “Past the soldier leaning on his rifle he takes her, till they stand before the gate itself, massive enough to hold back an army. From a pouch at his belt he takes a key nearly as long as his forearm. Will this be the point where he tells her the gate is meant for her and her alone, and moreover that she is destined never to pass through? Should she remind him she knows the score?” (196). She knows the score. She knows, in other words, the various parts assigned to the various players in this little embedded sketch because she knows Kafka. Like the reader, Elizabeth herself feels the embedded narrative—or, more accurately from her point of view, the narrative into which she has been embedded—exerting the prefigurative pressure that Honig identified, but this time the pressure is on her own situation. Acutely aware of her own situation and whence and from whom it derives, Elizabeth acts as the reader of her own narrative, and she interprets it largely through the lens of that other allegorical narrative.

And in many ways she actually gets it wrong. Coetzee’s use of Kafka might appear parodic from her perspective, but from the reader’s it is quite

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27. Elizabeth’s professed resistance to Kafka in this passage does not seem to square with her use of Kafka’s “Report” in the opening section of the book. On the other hand, this apparent contradiction is in keeping with what we’ve seen of her and her ambivalence about convictions. Just because she does not like Kafka does not mean that she cannot use him.
serious. In some ways, the figures who occupy both texts (the sentries, judges, etc.) seem more credible—less reduced and flattened—in Coetzee's novel than they do in Kafka's. Indeed, whereas in Kafka's text the demands and the demeanor of the "Examining Magistrate" and his fellow judges appear unpredictable, erratic, and inappropriate (witness the mildly pornographic book How Grete Was Plagued by Her Husband Hans that K. finds lying on the Magistrate's table, for example [54]), the judges in Coetzee's novel, though stern and largely humorless with Elizabeth, act relatively reasonably. So, while the situation and the score seem uncanny (in the Freudian sense of the word, which emphasizes both repetition and helplessness) from Elizabeth's point of view, the reader of Coetzee's novel might interpret the effect of the embedding quite differently.

This difference arises from the fact that Elizabeth is too willing to accept a one-to-one correspondence between her situation and Kafka's weak allegory. Despite the fact that she finds Kafka's protagonists "childish," she steps easily and willingly into the shoes of Joseph K. from The Trial. As a result, she interprets her own experience at the gate as if it were identical to K.'s experience before the law, and this allows her to play the role occupied by K., the role of the lone sane person trying to make sense of a world without logic. And, just as K. initially refuses to take seriously the fact of his arrest and all that it entails for him (42), so too does Elizabeth deny the validity or legitimacy of the situation in which she finds herself. When she fails to gain passage through "what is evidently her gate and hers alone," she attributes this failure not to her inability to articulate to the judges what it is that she believes but rather to the vagaries of the court itself:

Astonishing that a court which sets itself up as an interrogatory of belief should refuse to pass her. They must have heard other writers before, other disbelieving believers or believing disbelievers. Writers are not lawyers, surely they must allow for that, allow for eccentricities of presentation. But of course this is not a court of law. Not even a court of logic. Her first impression was right: a court out of Kafka or Alice in Wonderland, a court of paradox. (223)

But this conclusion is too facile, and it reflects a desire on Elizabeth's part to avoid the difficult, but ultimately quite reasonable, question that the judges put to her: what does she believe?

This requirement clearly puts her at a loss: "What if I am not a believer?" she asks. She is speaking to a guard at this point, and his response, unlike the responses that K. receives, must strike the reader as eminently reasonable: "The man shrugs. For the first time he looks directly at her. 'We all
believe. We are not cattle. For each of us there is something we believe. Write it down, what you believe. Put it in the statement” (194). Compared with those that K. receives regarding his situation, these instructions are blissfully clear, and they allow her to orient herself and to grasp the nature of her predicament. This is the point in the narrative, which I referenced earlier, when the narrator reveals Elizabeth’s newfound certainty regarding her situation: “There is no more doubt in her mind about where she is, who she is. She is a petitioner before the gate. The journey that brought her here, to this country, to this town, that seemed to reach its end when the bus halted and its door opened on to the crowded square, was not the end of it all. Now commences a trial of a different kind. Some act is required of her, some prescribed yet undefined affirmation, before she will be found good and can pass through” (194). She clearly has an understanding of her predicament, and such an understanding Joseph K. never achieves.

Even though Elizabeth correctly picks up on the “score” of the narrative that has been embedded in her own story and recognizes the part assigned to her, the Kafka text does not exist within the confines of Elizabeth Costello as an independent embedded allegory. We recognize it, certainly, as a narrative that does exist autonomously elsewhere, but it is changed by the fact that it has become a part of and interdependent with Coetzee’s story. The most significant change results from Elizabeth’s failure to recognize that her “first impression,” that sense of the Kafkaesque, cannot serve as a final interpretation of her predicament. The epistemological uncertainties that the adjective Kafkaesque (particularly when it derives from The Trial as opposed to, say, The Metamorphosis) carries with it actually cover up—or perhaps allow Elizabeth to avoid—the more central problem for her: that abiding ontological problem of who she is. Elizabeth focuses on the strangeness of her circumstances and inaccurately reads her judges as the same characters that we find in Kafka’s text, but she does not confront in a serious and satisfactory manner the question of what she believes.

After an ill-fated attempt to placate the judges by claiming that because she is a writer of fiction she should be granted an exemption from the rule requiring one to have beliefs (195), Elizabeth decides to tell the judges a
story, a narrative that she concedes “may sound allegorical” (217). The inspiration for the story comes from her childhood in Australia, more precisely, a childhood spent in a rural area “of climatic extremes: of scorching droughts followed by torrential rains that swelled the rivers with the carcasses of drowned animals” (216). The story she tells from this childhood of extreme weather involves frogs that, during the dry season, “go underground, burrowing further and further from the heat of the sun until each has created a little tomb for itself. And in those tombs they die, so to speak. Their heartbeat slows, their breathing stops, they turn the color of mud” (216). Then, when the rains return and the moisture begins to penetrate to the depths of the frog “tombs,” “[i]n those coffins hearts begin to beat, limbs begin to twitch that for months have been lifeless. The dead awake. As the caked mud softens, the frogs begin to dig their way out, and soon their voices resound again in joyous exultation beneath the vault of the heavens” (216). Elizabeth offers this story as the answer to the question of what she believes: “I believe in those little frogs,” she says, noting that they—and the situation that they inhabit—are real, “the Dulgannon [river] and its mudflats are real, the frogs are real. They exist whether or not I tell you about them, whether or not I believe in them. . . . [It] is because of their indifference to me that I believe in them” (217). This is a strange response, and one cannot be sure that it is made entirely in good faith, whether it is born primarily of the advice to show passion, or whether it is simply a desperate attempt to sway the judges. Whatever the case, Elizabeth insists on a literal reading of her embedded narrative. “In my account,” she explains, “for whose many failings I beg your pardon, the life cycle of the frog may sound allegorical, but to the frogs themselves it is no allegory, it is the thing itself, the only thing” (217). Elizabeth’s desire to view this story from the perspective of the frogs, and therefore to downplay its allegorical potential, accords with her conception of art and her own literary production, which she views, in retrospect now as she seems to have reached the end of her professional (and possibly even actual) life, as defiantly and relentlessly mimetic. “Now that it is over and done with, that lifetime labour of writing, she is capable of casting a glance back over it that is cool enough, she believes, even cold enough, not to be deceived. Her books teach nothing, preach nothing; they merely spell out, as clearly as they can, how people lived in a certain time and place” (207). Such an approach to literature certainly runs counter to the kind of figuration required of allegory, and it also explains why she can see the life cycle of the frogs as simply the life cycle of the frogs. For her, those frogs simply are; it is their literal existence in which she believes, in which she places her faith. For readers, though, and equally for those to whom she makes her appeal, her emphasis
on the literal aspect of her embedded narrative makes far less sense than
does the allegorical interpretation.

Following her presentation of the story of the life cycle of the frogs,
one of the judges asks a logical question, one that we might interpret as an
opening for Elizabeth to acknowledge that her frog story has really been the
transformation of the idea of the “spirit of life” into a figural narrative, thus
resulting in an allegory: “You believe in life?” the judge asks (218). But Eliza-
beth does not take the bait, or the offer: “I believe,” she reiterates, “in what
does not bother to believe in me” (218). The questioner cannot accept this,
as revealed by the “little gesture of impatience” she makes while she offers
her follow-up comment: “A stone does not believe in you. A bush. But you
choose to tell us not about stones or bushes but about frogs, to which you
attribute a life story that is, as you concede, highly allegorical. These Aus-
tralian frogs of yours embody the spirit of life, which is what you as a storyteller
believe in” (218–19). This amounts to putting words in the author’s mouth,
for Elizabeth has said no such thing. She has admitted that the story she tells
of the intrepid frogs “may sound allegorical,” but she quickly minimizes this
allegorical potential by focusing so relentlessly on the reality of the frogs and
their particular and peculiar lives. She resists the notion, imposed on her by
the judge, that she really means to transform the phenomenon of the frog’s
life into a figural narrative about the “spirit of [human] life.” Without this
turn, the turn that defines the use of tropes, Elizabeth’s response seems sadly
insufficient; it’s really no wonder that this statement fails in its objective.

Coetzee might be using Elizabeth and her position—or perhaps her lack
of a position is more apt here—to critique traditional notions of allegory.
To recognize the story of the frogs as an allegory of the spirit of life is tan-
tamount in some ways to committing an act of violence (to use Gordon
Teskey’s term) against the frogs. The experience of the frogs can only be vali-
dated if it can be anthropomorphized, or transformed into terms that have
meaning for human beings. Elizabeth’s immediate context (finding herself in
a Kafkaesque embedded allegory, in other words) and the task required of
her appear to demand this kind of turn; literal belief in frogs will not suffice,
so allegory must turn the trick. Elizabeth’s judges and the readers of Coe-
tzee’s novel all seem to expect this move, but Elizabeth stands firm against it.

If we return to one of the earlier “Lessons” in the novel, we can gain a
better understanding of Elizabeth’s intransigence on this point. Elizabeth
makes it clear throughout the novel that she embodies what the philosopher
Richard Rorty would call “liberal irony.” A liberal ironist, according to Rorty,
is someone who recognizes the necessary contingency of his or her own
beliefs and sense of self and who wants to guarantee that others are respected
and, above all, never humiliated. 29 When Rorty refers to “others” we can be relatively certain that he means other humans, but Elizabeth seems to want even broader application of liberal humility, extending it to the realm of animals. In a section titled “The Philosophers and the Animals,” Elizabeth makes a strong and provocative argument in support of equating the fate of livestock animals to the treatment of the Jews at the hands of the Nazis; clearly, she is—at least in this section—a forceful advocate for animal rights, even animal equality, and she makes her case by attempting to deconstruct the binary opposition that philosophers typically use to differentiate humans from animals: reasoning beings versus unreasoning creatures. “Both reason and seven decades of life experience,” Elizabeth contends, “tell me that reason is neither the being of the universe nor the being of God. On the contrary, reason looks to me suspiciously like the being of human thought. Reason is the being of a certain spectrum of human thinking. And if this is so, if that is what I believe, then why should I bow to reason this afternoon and content myself with embroidering on the discourse of the old philosophers?” (67). Here, Elizabeth seems to emphasize the stark limits of reason and thereby rejects the line of thinking that suggests reason should be used as the basis for distinguishing between humans and animals.

In the following section of Coetzee’s novel, a section titled “The Poets and the Animals,” Elizabeth extends her thinking to the artistic sphere, and she offers a certain kind of poetry as a means of transcending this problem of reason. Though we do not have access to her entire speech on this topic (this portion of the novel is again focalized through Elizabeth’s son, John, and he arrives late to her talk, so we hear only what he does), Elizabeth seems to be drawing a distinction between poems that use animals figuratively or allegorically and those that use them for what, to Elizabeth, are more noble ends. As John walks into the room where his mother is speaking, he hears her proclaim that “In that kind of poetry [the figural kind] . . . animals stand for human qualities: the lion for courage, the owl for wisdom, and so forth. Even in Rilke’s poem [she has apparently been discussing ‘The Panther’] the panther is there as a stand in for something else” (94–95). Given what we know of Elizabeth’s attitude toward animal rights, we can safely detect a note of ethical opprobrium in this description, a sense that the animals in this kind of poetry are simply being viewed through human eyes and used for human purposes.

Moving on from Rilke, Elizabeth finds an alternative in two poems by Ted Hughes, “The Jaguar” and “Second Glance at a Jaguar.” In explicating

29. These notions permeate Rorty’s writings, but they are most forcefully put forward in *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity.*
these poems, Elizabeth arrives at an interpretation that foreshadows her frog story later in the novel. Hughes, Elizabeth argues, moves away from using the animal as a way to get at an idea and instead seeks to transmit in some direct way the experience of being the animal. “In these poems,” she explains,

we know the jaguar not from the way he seems but from the way he moves. The body is as the body moves, or as the currents of life move within it. The poems ask us to imagine our way into that way of moving, to inhabit that body.

With Hughes it is a matter—I emphasize—not of inhabiting another mind but of inhabiting another body. That is the kind of poetry I bring to your attention today: poetry that does not try to find an idea in the animal, that is not about the animal, but is instead the record of an engagement with him.

What is peculiar about poetic engagements of this kind is that, no matter with what intensity they take place, they remain a matter of complete indifference to their objects. In this respect they are different from love poems, where your intention is to move your object. (95–96)

The parallels between Elizabeth’s reading of these poems and her own attitude toward literature and toward animals—an attitude that we might call “sympathetic”—in the novel is both striking and telling. When she describes what she has tried to do in the book that made her famous, for example, she notes that

There are no bounds to the sympathetic imagination. If you [she is speaking in “The Philosophers and the Animals” section here] want proof, consider the following. Some years ago I wrote a book called The House on Eccles Street. To write that book I had to think my way into the existence of Marion Bloom. Either I succeeded or I did not. If I did not, I cannot imagine why you invited me here today. In any event, the point is, Marion Bloom never existed. Marion Bloom was a figment of James Joyce’s imagination. If I can think my way into the existence of a being who has never existed, then I can think my way into the existence of a bat or a chimpanzee or an oyster, any being with whom I share the substrate of life. (80, emphasis in original)

When we hear Elizabeth speak about her own fiction in this way, we can perhaps understand better what she means when she professes to the judges in the “At the Gate” section that her role as an author amounts to being a “dictation secretary.” “I am a writer,” she insists, “and what I write is what I
hear. I am a secretary of the invisible, one of the many secretaries over the ages. That is my calling: dictation secretary. It is not for me to interrogate, to judge what is given me. I merely write down the words and then test them, test their soundness, to make sure I have heard right” (199). Transcribing, listening without judging, sympathizing with—these constitute Elizabeth’s authorial imperatives and they also describe her version of animal rights. As both an author and an animal rights proponent, Elizabeth wants either to allow us—in the case of her fiction—or to compel us—in the case of her support of animals—to “imagine our way” into another being’s existence.

That Elizabeth makes such frequent use of Red Peter, the ape from Kafka’s “A Report to an Academy,” makes perfect sense, then, because from her vantage point the ape presents us with an opportunity to sympathize with this compelling hybrid creature. And Elizabeth does take this story, despite its fantastic premise, quite seriously, and literally. She even goes so far as to acknowledge that on occasion she “feels like” this ape. When she speaks to the gathering of philosophers she concedes that the story might have allegorical possibilities—“an allegory of Kafka the Jew performing for Gentiles,” for example (62)—but, as she does with the frog story, she quickly abjures this figural tack. Speaking of her remark that she feels like Red Peter, she says quite simply that “It means what it says. I say what I mean” (62), and the implication is that she believes as well that Kafka has said what he meant and that Red Peter really is an ape who has been thoroughly cleaned up and well trained, and who has something to say.31

Thus, Elizabeth implies strongly here that Kafka has done with Red Peter what Hughes has done with the jaguar and what she will do with the frogs, that is, construct narratives that facilitate the reader’s sympathy, our fellow feeling, for another animal. Indeed, she even casts Kafka in the same role that she fancies for herself, that of dictation secretary, when she argues that Red Peter “wrote” his own life history and that Kafka functioned as his “amanuensis” (70). Though it strikes many in her audience, and probably the readers of Coetzee’s novel as well, as somewhat incredible, Elizabeth suggests—admittedly without any confirming evidence—that Kafka might have been influenced when he wrote his “A Report to an Academy” by the work of Wolfgang Köhler, a German psychologist who published a monograph in 1917 in which he reveals the results of his largely unsuccessful attempts to

30. Elizabeth admits later on that the phrase “secretary of the invisible” originates not with her (or Coetzee) but with the Polish poet Czeslaw Milosz.

31. Again, we cannot realistically prove that Elizabeth is mistaken in this reading of Kafka; however, the number of allegorical animal parables that appear in Kafka’s shorter works provides strong evidence to the contrary. Were “A Report to an Academy” an anomaly in Kafka’s oeuvre, then her literal interpretation would be more tenable.
educate apes from the island of Tenerife (73). In making this assertion Elizabeth implies that Kafka might simply have imagined a different, more successful, outcome to Köhler’s experiments and then—to borrow Elizabeth’s own words—to have devised a way “to think his way into the existence” of the product (Red Peter) of those experiments.

Coetzee has embedded in this novel a narrative—“A Report to an Academy”—that most readers would recognize as a weak allegory but that his protagonist insists on reading literally. What are we to make of this, and what are we to make of that other embedded allegory, “Before the Law,” that Coetzee embeds? I have not found an easy and entirely convincing answer to this question. I do, on the other hand, feel relatively confident in claiming that Coetzee himself is doing something similar to what he has Elizabeth do and what Elizabeth claims that Kafka has done in his story of the ape. In other words, the embedded allegories in *Elizabeth Costello* do not function as interpretive heuristics; Coetzee does not seem to intend them to encapsulate the meaning of the novel as a whole. We might better understand these embedded narratives as a means of inhabiting another body, as a way of sympathetic.

On one level, Elizabeth bears some obvious resemblance to Red Peter, and not simply because she acknowledges her own sympathy toward this figure. Perhaps more significantly, she occupies the same position and plays a similar role in Coetzee’s narrative to those occupied and played by Red Peter in Kafka’s, at least in Elizabeth’s reading of Kafka. And if Kafka can be called Red Peter’s amanuensis, then the same holds for the relationship between Elizabeth and Coetzee; the author of *Elizabeth Costello* dictates the experience of Elizabeth Costello. Elizabeth Costello sums up the connection nicely: “Red Peter [unlike Wolfgang Köhler] was not an investigator of primate behaviour but a branded, wounded animal presenting himself as speaking testimony to a gathering of scholars. I am not a philosopher of mind but an animal exhibiting, yet not exhibiting, to a gathering of scholars, a wound, which I cover up under my clothes but touch on in every word I speak” (71). The wound to which she refers here is a reference to one of the wounds that Red Peter suffered as he was being captured. In Red Peter’s case, this wound also has some bearing on how he is perceived—as animal or human: “I read an article recently,” he explains in his story, “by one of the ten thousand windbags who vent themselves concerning me in the newspapers, saying: my ape nature is not yet quite under control; the proof being that when visitors come to see me, I have a predilection for taking down my trousers to show them where the shot went in” (“A Report” 175). Elizabeth clearly ties herself to Red Peter by playing on the same issue of social decorum, and her explicit identification with Kafka’s ape helps to form a metonymic rather
than a metaphoric connection between the two narratives. So in this case, the embedded allegorical narrative is literalized by its relationship with the embedding narrative.

On a second, higher-order level, we can understand Elizabeth as the vehicle through which Coetzee inhabits not Kafka himself, but rather Kafka’s corpus. Elizabeth argues, we should remember, that Ted Hughes has shown us through his jaguar poems not how to inhabit another mind but rather how to inhabit another body, and Coetzee’s persistent now-explicit-now-allusive use of Kafka’s work (“A Report to an Academy,” “Before the Law,” The Trial, “An Imperial Message,” “A Hunger Artist”) gives readers the sense that he is inhabiting the body of Kafka’s work, if not quite the mind of its author. This novel stands as the “record of [Coetzee’s] engagement” with Kafka without being a discourse on what he thinks Kafka was trying to say or what he thinks Kafka meant. One might of course argue that when Elizabeth expounds on “A Report to an Academy” she expresses Coetzee’s sense of Kafka’s meaning, but to do so rests on the assumption of identity between the author and his character; such an assumption is always dangerous, and in the case of this novel in particular, in which the implied Coetzee often comes across as severely critical of his protagonist, that strategy lacks credibility. So, if we eschew the temptation to regard Elizabeth as Coetzee’s mouthpiece, we have, finally, a novel, Elizabeth Costello, in which the author, J. M. Coetzee, allows his protagonist, Elizabeth Costello, to take up residence in someone else’s body of work, and this is a corpus, Elizabeth claims, that was produced by the one man among all others who “is the most insecure in his humanity” (75). Perhaps rather than any grand ideas, it is this feeling that Elizabeth and Kafka share.

Ultimately, I would suggest that Coetzee’s engagement with Kafka and his use of the interdependent embedded allegories also results in a feeling, a sympathetic connection between the contemporary South African novelist and the early-twentieth-century Czech writer. By embedding Kafka’s weak allegories in a narrative that rests primarily on a mimetic foundation, and by embedding his protagonist—herself a self-styled author of realistic fiction—in these narratives whose origins are allegorical, Coetzee has produced an odd hybrid of a novel, one that demonstrates both continuity with and departure from the kind of mimetic fare that Elizabeth has produced during her career. The use of Kafka gives the work an allegorical feel, but the interdependence of these embedded allegorical narratives makes a straightforward allegorical interpretation nearly impossible to manufacture. Kafka’s weak allegories are weakened even further by their association with Coetzee’s narrative, but they still lend a sense of the allegorical, a Kafkaesque feeling, to Elizabeth Costello.