

# Distributing Agency Everywhere: TV Critiques Postcritique

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## Abstract

This essay analyzes and challenges a group of contemporary responses to the discordance between intention and “distributed agency,” as it has become known in the postcritical work of Rita Felski and like-minded critics (typically self-identified as postcritics, surface readers, posthumanists, or new materialists). Although readers have tended to see such critical positions as distinct, they all share a set of essential commitments regarding agency that render intention—and literary interpretation, by extension—incoherent. The essay argues that postcriticism and likeminded theories rely on a two-part commitment functioning in the background: first, a commitment to intention as a performance that occurs in the mind, and, second, to distributing agency to other actors and “actants”—most crucially *readers*—as an obligatory result of this account of intention. To illustrate the analysis and critique, the essay considers brief but telling moments from some contemporary prestige television shows such as *The Americans*, *Homecoming*, and *Patriot*. These readings help to clarify that the crucial postcritical error is not distributive agency per se, but the now-familiar account of *textual* agency. Exploring a similar set of problems about intention and interpretation, shows like *Homecoming* and *Patriot* take a far more skeptical stance towards the beliefs and strategies embraced by postcritique. Moreover, only a commitment to authorial intention makes that skepticism legible.

## I

Were you to sit down and stream some of the best contemporary American television, you might notice a recurring riff on a basic problem of agency. It goes something like this: a character who desires to be good, who at a different cultural moment might have been considered essentially if not unusually moral, finds herself stuck in an awful or criminal scenario that does not so much test her as torture her into playing out rotten actions she cannot avoid. Think of *Orange Is the New Black* (Netflix, 2013-2019), *The Americans* (FX, 2013-2018), *Mr. Robot* (NBC/USA, 2015-2019), *Patriot* (Amazon, 2015-2019), *The Crown* (Netflix, 2016-), *Homecoming* (Amazon, 2018-), *Russian Doll* (Netflix, 2019-), and especially the eschatological series *The Good Place* (NBC, 2016-2020), which takes this situation as virtually its entire philosophical gambit.<sup>1</sup> In contrast, when earlier acclaimed shows (typically produced by HBO, as were *The Sopranos* or *Boardwalk Empire*) portrayed ethically-tormented criminals, they were given minor roles. Of all the qualities we might

<sup>1</sup> Arguably many other series could be added to this list, such as *The Honourable Woman* (BBC/Sundance TV, 2014) and *Halt and Catch Fire* (AMC, 2014-2017), to name two.

attribute to protagonists like Tony Soprano or Nucky Thompson, virtue is not one of them. Unlike that earlier, pre-streaming moment of television history, contemporary characters' failures to act better are typically not the result of ambivalence or a lack of backbone, which is to say that their failures are not personal, psychological, or even altogether moral. Instead, their failures are essentially structural.

Tapping into a broad contemporary interest in agency, characters on such shows cannot act as morally as they might want to because the system they are trapped in, the system that makes their actions meaningful, does not permit it. As one character whines in season three of *The Good Place*, "[e]very time I do something nice it backfires. There are so many unintended consequences to well-intentioned actions! It feels like a game you can't win."<sup>2</sup> In these fictional worlds, the system has an agency that surpasses or undermines that of the characters, twisting their "well-intentioned actions" into results with "unintended consequences." The series finale of *The Americans* dramatizes these results when teenage daughter Paige chooses to remain on an American train platform while her mother, deep-cover spy Elizabeth (Nadezhda) Jennings (played by Keri Russell), fleeing to the U.S.S.R. now that her deception is exposed, sits in a sluggishly accelerating train car. Elizabeth spots her daughter outside, but, horrified, can do nothing to reach her without jeopardizing the entire family (Figure 1). Admittedly, Elizabeth's ideological rigidity and vocational brutality render her a somewhat flawed version of the phenomenon I am identifying. Unless one is fully committed to the mid-1980s Soviet state, it is not easy to see her as essentially good. But at least in this particular moment, the scene captures a dynamic all of these shows seek to explore. The massive locomotive—like the corporate, sociological, familial, clan-based, or state structures these shows portray—moves grimly, stolidly on, while the Jenningses sit immobile, suppressing shock, unable to leave their seat on the train.

<sup>2</sup> Tahani makes this complaint to Good Place afterlife architect Michael, who subsequently realizes that everyone's problem is that an action today has different, and generally worse, consequences than that same action five hundred years ago: "Don't you understand? The bad place isn't tampering with points. They don't have to because every day the world gets a little more complicated, and being a good person gets a little harder" (*The Good Place*, [S03E10, "The Book of Dougs," 2018]). Contrast this moral realist position with the pragmatically strategic lesson the computer Joshua finally learns in *WarGames*: "The only winning move is not to play."



Figure 1. *The Americans* (2018), S06E10, "START."

Concerns about action and agency are not exactly new. The history of such concerns stretches from classical and enlightenment philosophy to the sociological theories of Durkheim and Weber, the modern philosophy of action of Wittgenstein and Anscombe, and the poststructuralism of Althusser, Foucault, and beyond. Yet the broad contemporary preoccupation with agency in both our culture and in academia represents a distinctive development, one focused on reconciling individual intentions with the sense that agency has become unaccountably and dangerously diffuse. Consider that at another moment, these gloomy television scenarios would have been understood as quintessential indicators of the tragic, akin to the torment of the powerless by gods (as in classical or early modern drama), the forces of historical change (as in novelistic realism or dystopian fiction), or massive bureaucratic dysfunction (as in the modernist or postmodernist novel).<sup>3</sup> But while ill-fated characters enduring misfortune might be a minor theme in contemporary television scenarios, these shows tend not to tarry in the tragic for very long, if at all. Characters are rarely seriously blamed or punished for their moral failures and their excuses or virtues seem irrelevant; more often, they suffer by witnessing almost banal instances of their own feebleness. Indeed, in viewing this phenomenon of action not as tragic but as a quotidian condition of contemporary life, such series imply that a deeper calamity of agency has befallen us. Instead of a crisis involving the *making* of moral judgments in a world of varied faiths and foundations (the predicament of moral relativism), the struggle here invariably involves *acting effectively* on such judgments, that is, manifesting one's convictions and ethical intentions in the world. Any individual has only the smallest modicum of control in accomplishing her intended actions. The agency a person once possessed individually, or perhaps only appeared to possess, has now been dispersed beyond her, although her intentions are still hers alone.

Rather than condemn this philosophical phenomenon, or the television shows staging it, this essay analyzes and challenges a group of contemporary responses to the discordance between intention and “distributed agency,” as it has become known in the postcritical work of Rita Felski and likeminded critics (typically self-identified as postcritics, surface readers, posthumanists, or new materialists). Although we tend to see such critical positions as distinct, they all share a set of essential commitments regarding agency that render intention—and literary interpretation, by extension—incoherent. Theorists and critics committed to thinking of texts “as nonhuman actors,” as Felski puts it in *The Limits of Critique* (2015), see that position as “requir[ing] a revision of common assumptions about the notion of agency” (Felski 154). To illustrate my analysis and critique, I consider brief but telling moments from some of the prestige television shows referenced above; these readings help to clarify that the crucial postcritical error is not distributive agency per se, but the now-familiar account of *textual* agency. Exploring a similar

<sup>3</sup> Contrast the contemporary television phenomenon to Charles Dickens's *Oliver Twist* where, as D.A. Miller writes, “characters may move from more or less advantageous positions in the system” but never leave or even want to leave that system (5).

set of problems about intention and interpretation, shows like *Homecoming* and *Patriot* take a far more skeptical stance towards the beliefs and strategies embraced by postcritique. Moreover, only a commitment to authorial intention makes that skepticism legible.

Bookended by two scenes from the recent Netflix series *Homecoming*, the next section challenges the idea of distributed textual agency in the work of a number of different recent theorists, including Jane Bennett, Karen Barad, Caroline Levine, and Alfred Gell. I examine how the work of Felski, in particular, deploys Bruno Latour's ANT ("Actor-Network Theory") as an attempted solution to the problems that distributive agency raises in cultural or literary interpretation. Theories like Felski's tend to divide agency from intention, heralding the former and downgrading the latter. But this splitting of (an unsound version of) intention from agency evades and confuses literary and cultural interpretative problems rather than resolving them, turning literary texts into textual objects in the process—a transformation that proves to be an immense problem in itself.<sup>4</sup> The final section of the essay challenges the postcritical view by exploring the unavoidability of intention in several different accounts, with a focus on Elizabeth Anscombe's brilliant book *Intention*. By interrogating Toril Moi's intriguing yet subtle modifications of the Anscombian view, we can appreciate the irresistible gravitational pull of postcriticism. Finally, I end with a brief discussion reading the series *Patriot* against postcriticism: the series follows government officials manipulating distributed agency to evade responsibility for actions those agents very clearly intend and mean, whatever words they speak to the contrary.

Keen readers will already have observed that all of the contemporary television shows mentioned above are produced by large corporate entities—as is virtually every “prestige” show produced today.<sup>5</sup> Although it is not a path I follow here, it could be argued that these shows allegorically represent their corporate means of production: that is, these shows represent the dramatic potential and inevitability of intention with regards to collective or distributive agency. Accordingly, sometimes a corporation's actions are the primary source of that drama and the companies are explicitly personified with a sardonic name. In *Orange Is the New Black* (Netflix), PolyCon Corrections (PCC) is the monopolizing prison corporation (also operating Immigration and Customs Enforcement detention centers) that acquires and rebrands the Management Correction Company (MCC), the prison corporation that had previously acquired Litchfield prison from the federal government after budget cuts threatened its closure. Whatever the prison conglomerate is called, it is indubitably a multi-pronged “con” on the inmates and many of its own employees. Other corporations are endowed with a philosophically resonant title, as in *Homecoming* (Amazon) and the venal Geist Corporation, a knowing spin on Hegel's difficult term for a collective subject or human spirit. And sometimes, as in *Patriot* (Amazon), these shows

4 For a brilliant account of precisely this dynamic in the work of the modernist poet Paul Valéry, see Cronan 221–52. As Cronan writes, “the canonical move of anti-intentionalism” is “to set up a false notion of intention—art as the communication of an inner message or preformed idea, for instance—and replace it with an equally false ideal of art as a machine to produce affects” (250).

5 For an excellent discussion of the relation between corporate agency and television, see Szalay, “HBO's” and “Pimps.” On prestige television as a new aesthetic form, see Shuster.

deploy representations of different kinds of collectives, such as governments, semi-public institutions, or criminal enterprises, to explore issues of action spread over many agents. But whatever the collective entity invoked, these series deviate from the postcritics and their fellow travelers by posing distributed agency not as the necessary foundation of our interpretive rejuvenation but, instead, as a pervasive malady of contemporary life that we must overcome.

## II

In one of the more dramatic scenes in *Homecoming*, government compliance officer Thomas Carrasco (Shea Whigham) admits to aggrieved mother Gloria Morisseau (Marianne Jean-Baptiste), “I don’t think your son did anything wrong ... I think something was done to him” (S01E07, “Test”). In the process of investigating Gloria’s complaint, Carrasco has become convinced that the mammoth (yet nimble) Geist Corporation, a government contractor medically erasing traumatic memories from returning soldiers to hasten their redeployment, is the bad actor liable for impairing her son Walter after his tour in Afghanistan. Carrasco seeks Gloria’s help in making sense of what happened. At this moment, he both assumes that he knows how to define moral and legal norms and that he can make judgments based on them. But, critically, Carrasco’s revelation follows immediately upon one of many instances exposing his ludicrous, but never entirely comic, physical ineptitude. Typically, he can barely walk a few feet without stumbling over mundane objects (like shoes) in his path, and he is easily dispossessed of the crucial piece of evidence (an envelope) necessary to make his case against Geist. In the scene with Gloria, Carrasco lurches into a row of bikes and sprawls nearly helpless on the ground (Figure 2).



Figure 2. *Homecoming* (2018), S01E07, “Test.”

From this awkward position on the pavement, he acknowledges his severely narrow influence on the world: “I know what people think: I’m just a, I’m a cog. And I am. I elevate or dismiss a complaint.” Carrasco, nonetheless, defends the mechanical work he *can* do: “My decision is used to turn other cogs, and they turn others and that’s what justice is” (SoiEo7, “Test”). He vindicates himself as one of the tiny parts turning the vast clockwork of justice. Whether or not he is correct, that self-portrayal as a simple mechanism stipulates as truth his extremely limited range of function in the world. Similarly, his admission clarifies the point of the melodramatic scenes focused on his finger hovering above the return key, as he anguishes over the only potential action he can make effectively: elevating or dismissing the Geist complaint. His klutziness, which is to say his estrangement from most of the surrounding object world, stands revealed as another instance of the larger phenomenon of distributed agency. He can crank *his* cog—and move no other. While Carrasco holds firm moral beliefs and makes judgments to seek fairness for Walter Cruz, his ability to act on those beliefs is reduced to making one choice (elevate or dismiss) enacted by a single key-stroke (hitting “return” or “delete”). Cruz deserves to be treated fairly, and Carrasco’s finger stroke is needed, but justice will require the actions of other cogs that Carrasco neither controls, knows, nor envisions.

Much recent theory has a ready account for Carrasco’s troubles, which works something like this: the previously sacrosanct bond between agency and intention is in the process of being thoroughly challenged and should be conceptually severed. Carrasco intends justice, yet the constitutive impoverishment of any individual agent forever stymies that intention. Or, as Geist corporate executive Colin Belfast (Bobby Cannavale) taunts Carrasco: “You work, and you talk, and nothing happens, and nobody listens” (*Homecoming*, SoiEo8, “Protocol”). But it is worth teasing out why this theoretical explanation has become persuasive.<sup>6</sup> For Jane Bennett, “[a] full acknowledgement of the porosity and contagion between bodies would entail a dramatic revision of the role of ‘will’ and ‘intentionality’ in human agency” (“Powers” 257). We would recognize that agency is “distributive and confederate” (*Vibrant* 38) rather than “a capacity localized in a human body or in a collective produced (only) by human efforts” (23). Similarly, in the introduction to the edited collection *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics* (2010), Diana Coole and Samantha Frost see matter as having its own “modes of self-transformation, self-organization, and directedness,” which subsequently “disturbs the conventional sense that agents are exclusively humans who possess the cognitive abilities, intentionality, and freedom to make autonomous decisions” (10). And for postcritical “form” theorist Caroline Levine, novels have long recognized and operated on this same truth: by “constantly run[ning] up against the limits of its own capacity for representation,” Charles Dickens’s *Bleak House*, in its vastness, “affords not individual agency [...] but a kind of narratively networked

<sup>6</sup> This position is not without its critics. As Alf Hornborg writes, although “[a]ll living organisms have purposes,” which lead to processes that can be described as agential, it is only “[w]hen purposes are consciously reflected on, as is often the case among humans, [that] we talk about intentions. To attribute agency, purposes, or intentions to non-living objects is tantamount to fetishism” (98; emphasis in original).

sublime” (Levine 130).<sup>7</sup> For new materialists and new formalists, their shifted perspective on the world, along with an energized focus on agency as a concept, reveals human intentionality as either less unique or less important than we previously supposed.<sup>8</sup>

As the above sampling attests, downgrading or deemphasizing intention lends support to Bennett’s and Levine’s views of agency as, respectively, “distributed and confederate” or “networked.” Consider how this reasoning works. First, the decoupling of intention from action makes it easier to claim, as Bennett, Coole, and Frost do, that humans are not the only ones to “act” and thus to have agency. Taking this a step further, separating intention from action also makes it easier to claim, as Karen Barad does, that “[a]gency is not aligned with human intentionality or subjectivity” *at all* (177). Instead, “intentionality might better be understood as attributable to a complex network of human and nonhuman agents, including historically specific sets of material conditions that exceed the traditional notion of the individual” (23). Once humans are categorically united with other non-human agents, then any observable effect on the world can be redescribed as a “complex network” (Barad) or a “narratively networked sublime” (Levine) or as a form of distributed agency not attributable to any particular person (Bennett). That is, instead of focusing on actors and what they do, “action should rather be felt as a node, a knot,” to recall Latour’s poetic riff on the same topic: action is “a conglomerate of many surprising sets of agencies that have to be slowly disentangled” (44).<sup>9</sup> The operating terms are no longer actors and their intentions manifested in the world, but actor-less and intention-free “sets of agencies.”

What kind of problem is this obviously resonant idea—that agency is not singular but distributed—trying to solve? Originating in Linguistics and Anthropology and spreading into cognate social sciences such as Sociology and Psychology, the initial purpose of the distributed agency concept was to portray more accurately the workings of human combinations: the collectives, corporations, and societies developing an emergent mindfulness existing somewhere between that of an individual and a crowd. The idea of dispersed agency offered a theoretical framework for those actions these groups might exhibit that seemed not to be intentional, at least strictly speaking. Such actions could then be theorized without either personifying groups or reproducing late nineteenth-century crowd psychology. As linguist N.J. Enfield describes, “with distributed agency, multiple people act as one, sharing or sharing out the elements of agency” (9). In more recent years, the concept branched into disciplines, such as Political Science, Law, and sometimes Philosophy, that were trying to solve the coordination problems often bedeviling governments, businesses, and other institutions.<sup>10</sup> At the most basic level, all of these theorists deploy the concept of distributed agency to explain the divergence between what we (either individually or collectively) might predict or desire to happen and what actually hap-

<sup>7</sup> Also relevant, if more personally-inflected, is Levine’s account of her contentious response to the view of literature held by her father, esteemed literary historian Joseph M. Levine: “I would argue that patterns of language came before us, preceding and creating subjects; he would insist that human agency and intention were primary, shaping any utterance we make” (ix).

<sup>8</sup> Other variations and critiques on agency include Anne-Lise François on “passive agency” (18, 27, 65) and Amanda Anderson on “aggrandized agency” (46–66).

<sup>9</sup> To be fair, Latour would likely be unhappy with much of the anthropological and linguistic work that deploys the term “distributed agency,” since it is crucial for him that the social sciences do not “conflate all the agencies [...] into some kind of agency [...] action should remain a surprise, a mediation, an event” (45).

<sup>10</sup> For a contemporary overview of the concept in a variety of disciplines, see Enfield; Kockelman.

pens. Carrasco might intend to punish the Geist Corporation for its harms to Cruz, but all he can actually do is “elevate” Gloria’s grievance to the Inspector General’s office, the next rung of government hierarchy. Meanwhile, a back-channel pact is already in place between Geist and government operatives who are preparing to quash that complaint.

Yet something intriguing—and major—occurred once distributed agency pushed beyond its previous disciplinary boundaries. In the process, the concept also expanded from discussions of *human* collectives (families, governments, corporations, etc.) to *human-object* combinations.<sup>11</sup> In this regard, cultural anthropologist Alfred Gell’s *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory* (1998) was ahead of its time, anticipating what became a version of the new materialist and postcritical positions. There he offers the example of a (non-self-driving) car as “the locus of an ‘autonomous’ agency of its own” because car owners tend “to regard a car as a body-part, a prosthesis” (18).<sup>12</sup> Thus, for drivers, “[t]he car does not just reflect the owner’s personhood, it has personhood as a car”—although legal or moral philosophers would surely disagree. When cars inconveniently break down on a desolate highway despite our best efforts to keep them serviced, car owners “consider this an act of gross treachery” to which they “hold the car personally and morally culpable” (19).

At least in the terms invoked here, distributed agency assumes that the difference between what we had hoped or planned would happen (reaching our destination via a functioning car) versus the result we were left with (sitting on the side of the highway) signifies something rudimentary about intention and action. Specifically, theorists like Gell and Levine understand that difference as the result of other people or objects actively intervening between our intentions and actions in some significant way. For the drivers in Gell’s example, machines act as “morally culpable” car-persons with agency. In Levine’s work, the idea of the “the affordances of form” plays a similar role: “Rather than asking what artists intend or even what forms *do*, we can ask instead what potentialities lie latent [...] in aesthetic and social arrangements” (6-7; emphasis in original). Following this same logic, when Carrasco stumbles on shoes strewn in his path or collapses into a row of parked bikes, something about the presence or placement of the shoes or bikes—their “potentialities [that] lie latent”—must have interfered with him fully realizing his intention to stride forward. According to this rationale, the deviation between an initial conception and a later, unsatisfactory result must originate in the distributive complications of action and agency that the world throws in our way.

In other words, assuming that intention is indistinguishable from an idea in a mind—a seriously incorrect assumption, but more on that below—and observing that our ideas often fail to come to fruition as desired or expected, theorists like Gell, Levine, and others hypothesize that action and agency must be more variegated and scattered than we

<sup>11</sup> Note that this theoretical move to consider human-object combinations differs substantially from a focus on crowd psychology (which tends to see the crowd as a new, albeit deranged, quasi-person), Foucauldian biopolitics, or Bourdieuan habitus. In contrast to the work of Alfred Gell or Latour, these more familiar positions read a dominant symbolic superstructure manipulating the human-object combinations.

<sup>12</sup> On Gell and Latour, see de la Fuente.



conventionally suppose. “[R]ather than ontologize the world in such binary terms,” reasons anthropologist Paul Kockelman, it makes more sense to “foreground agency as a radically multidimensional, distributed, and graduated process” (150). Intention, by extension, becomes a less critical, maybe even a negligible, part of that distributed process of action, which is why Levine can propose that we not bother asking “what artists intend.” In the next section I return to the assumption that intention is internal—an idea in the mind—that must support this account, in order to challenge the coherence of the view of intention on which all of these theories rest. But, for now, and with this historical and disciplinary framework for distributed agency in view, we can start to see how the aims of postcritique fit neatly within the same set of moves. After permeating the social sciences, the idea of distributed agency flowed into humanities disciplines, such as Art History, Literary Criticism, and Cultural Studies, inspired by Deleuzian ideas and willing to borrow from the social sciences and their strategies to make the reader’s or spectator’s engagement relevant to a text’s meaning.<sup>13</sup> Because agency is a larger, broader category containing both intentional and non-intentional acts, focusing on distributed agency shifted the focus away from intention and meaning and towards nearly anything else exhibiting activity.

Consider how Felski builds her concept of “postcritical reading” from the position that both authorial intent and context have been overemphasized, and that readers help build texts, which now operate as agential “coactor[s]” with those readers (12). According to her account, postcritique involves searching for a deliberately “weaker” theory “that does not trace textual meaning back to an opaque and all-determining power” but instead “clarif[ies] how agency is distributed among a larger cohort of social actors” (152). The opaque power she rejects seems to be a reference to either an absent author or a particularly hegemonic ideology. That is, rather than “trace” the meaning of a text either to some hazily envisioned author (the intending person) who might previously have been imagined to shape our interpretation of their text, or, alternatively, to contextual beliefs that dominate us all (ideology), Felski promotes a critical position that would “more fully acknowledge the coimplication and entanglement of text and critic” (152). Just as a car that breaks down despite its owner’s best efforts must have, for the drivers in Gell’s account, “an ‘autonomous’ agency of its own,” a book that is interpreted in ways that its author finds senseless, or that ideology did not quite predict, can be reimagined as “a cocreation between actors [book and reader, art and spectator] that leaves neither party unchanged” (84). Not dispensing with the relevance of the text entirely, she suggests instead that readers contribute to its meaning (and books contribute to readers’ lives) through an “act of composition [...] that binds text and reader” (182) together.

To provide support for this view, Latour’s Actor-Network Theory (ANT) offers Felski a way to propose that agency is not entirely the au-

<sup>13</sup> My account here is indebted to Ruth Leys’s analysis of “Deleuze-inspired affect theorists” in new materialism, and the basic commitment to anti-intentionalism that aligns all of these accounts (*Ascent* 312-15).

thor's or reader's, but should properly be attributed to a network of textual objects "thought of as nonhuman actors," a stance which demands "a revision of common assumptions about the nature of agency" (153-54). Readers' additions to the text's meaning (the "cocreation" they help to create) permit texts to be reframed as diverse objects with "writing" instead of texts that could support competing interpretations:

From the perspective of actor-network theory (ANT), [...] a treatise on critical negativity turns out, by contrast, to have numerous identities—as a material and physical object, a contribution to a tenure file, a reckoning with one's scholarly rivals, a means of working through a midlife crisis, a well- or poorly selling commodity, an argument in active search of supporters and allies, an object that triggers a wide range of affective response ranging from enthusiasm to irritation. (76)

Of course, it is virtually undergraduate theory-creed to state that texts have both a material quality (the medium with which signifiers are conveyed) and a conceptual one (consisting of the signifieds that make up the other half of the sign). This is simply to reiterate the basic elements of structuralist and post-structuralist semiology, and that is why Felski can rightly claim that "a treatise on critical negativity" functions as both "a material and physical object" and as "an argument" (76).

But to follow Felski's lead here in seeing a text, first, in terms of the motives a person might have had in writing it, is to confuse motive with intention and meaning. Her reasons for writing *The Limits of Critique* might or might not have been to reckon with her scholarly rivals, to work through a midlife crisis, to add to an activity file justifying a raise, or to publish an academic bestseller that pays out handsome royalties. We are motivated by all sorts of reasons all the time, but surely no one imagines that our motivations in writing a text, however complex and variegated those motives may be, are simply equivalent to that text's intention or meaning.<sup>14</sup> Second, to envision a text as somehow identical to a commodity with a low Amazon ranking, or to an object producing various "affective responses" in readers, is to reduce the text to just one of its qualities: its materiality or its capacity to prompt divergent reactions, respectively. This type of move appears so frequently in Felski's text that it functions as a component of the argument.

Most significantly, the "numerous identities" label circumvents any discussion of the meaning of a text. To say that a text possesses "numerous identities" eliminates even the possibility of competing interpretations, since it would become entirely apparent that some of the meanings that align with those various textual "identities" cannot be correct and others could not even count as meanings. For example, what exactly is the "meaning" of a commodity that does not sell swiftly? No doubt, that would indicate the strength or weakness of the market for academic paperbacks (very weak), in which case that commodity would "mean" the way any economic indicator means (e.g., the unemployment rate, housing starts, etc.).<sup>15</sup> But in terms of the "meaning" that makes

<sup>14</sup> The distinction between motives and intentions is complex; for a careful discussion, see Anscombe §12-15.

<sup>15</sup> The distinction invoked here is best described and analyzed by Paul Grice.

*The Limits of Critique* the critical polemic it is (Felski's avowals to the contrary), its commodity-value has no meaning at all. The argument made in the book will not change if Amazon raises its price by thirty-five cents or remains it at thirty-five cents or even if the University of Chicago Press pulps all outstanding copies of it.<sup>16</sup> Although *Limits* would clearly be either more or less popular with readers in those various scenarios, that fact does not begin to touch the meaning of the claims that make up the argument. In the end, Felski's "numerous identities" label attempts to transform texts with meaning into objects with identities, rendering interpretation of those objects not just irrelevant but, in a word, meaningless.

Except that, since one of the identities Felski proposes is "an argument in active search of supporters and allies," *The Limits of Critique* is not trying to jettison all meaning and interpretation. Rather, *Limits* seeks to flood the textual field with other kinds of activities that are not interpretive at all (i. e., ranking commodities, adding to a tenure file, experiencing affect, etc.). Insofar as postcritique provides readers with agency, it does so by authorizing them to determine which of the activities "readers" should do, and which of the identities of a text one should focus on at any given moment (the text as commodity? as tenure ballast? as prompt for feeling?). Once textual identities are what you, as a reader, must contend with—or perhaps, must respect, admire, or at least acknowledge—then interpretation is only one of the many activities readers do to and with texts. This consequence does not change interpretation fundamentally; rather, it posits "reading" as something like an imperial discipline (the hoary fantasy of deconstructive critics) able to encompass other fields with entirely different purposes, animating questions, and evidentiary criteria—fields such as Sociology, Economics, History, and Psychology.

"It's not a matter of rejecting interpretation," confirms Felski, "but of extending it" (175). Once "interpretation" (Felski's version of it) is extended into other arenas, someone must decide which of these objects' attributes or identities to focus on at any given moment. Mere objects, unlike books or art, only mean for the person able to make meaning with them. In ascribing agency to textual objects as such, meaning will only ever be authorized by the person receiving a text. The realm we are in remains the readers' (it is their text and their meaning), but "reading" now also entails activities requiring no interpretation at all. In the process of turning texts into objects with "numerous identities" (or as she puts it elsewhere, as "objects that do a lot of travelling" [160]), Felski's postcritical reading locates intention virtually nowhere and low-level agency distributed amongst readers everywhere.

But if postcritics like Felski are satisfied with this account of texts and interpretation, it is not at all clear that a text like *Homecoming* would be. As we have already seen, this television series about corporate and governmental action focuses on similar issues of agency, intention,

<sup>16</sup> For an excellent discussion of the contemporary relationship between commodities and art objects, see Nicholas Brown.

and also, by extension, individual responsibility. Unlike so many other trauma narratives, the wager of the show is not, “will the traumatic flashback ever recede into history?” Instead, the dilemma posed is, “if the traumatic memory could be neatly excised, would the absence be liberating or soul-destroying?” In asking this question, the series envisages the dangers of reducing a text, and representational language more generally, to just one of its attributes: in this case, that attribute is the ultimately physical source of a recollection in the brain.<sup>17</sup>

The Geist Corporation has fashioned a pharmaceutical product that, when ingested over many weeks, frees a soldier like Walter Cruz from negative, intrusive thoughts about his wartime life. Although Geist executive Colin Belfast (Bobby Cannavale) spearheaded the secret pilot project (designated “Homecoming”), all branches of the U.S. military are eager to sign on; the possibility of creating a force of emotionally resilient, partially amnesiac soldiers is too tempting to resist. But Colin’s underling, Homecoming program administrator Heidi Bergman, eventually realizes that the process of erasing Walter’s traumatic memory is radically altering his future plans, turning him into a pliant soldier keen to reenlist. At this point she goes rogue, attempting to obstruct and potentially expose the experiments, while also deliberately ingesting some of the amnesiac substance herself. Colin later attempts to stop her through manipulation and, eventually, by sleeping with her. Guiltily returning home to his wife Lydia (Sydney Tamiia Poitier), Colin tries to confess his adulterous act, but is indifferently rebuffed (Figure 3):

COLIN: I have to tell you something. ... Um ...

LYDIA: Ok. Should we put it in the box?

COLIN: No, no, I—I want to say this. [Lydia turns to get something.] No, I don’t want—I did something. Something happened.

LYDIA: And telling me about it isn’t gonna change that. So what do we do? We put it in the box, and we move forward. [Colin dejectedly takes a pen, writes something on a piece of paper, and hands it to Lydia, who promptly folds the paper and drops it in a slot in the box.] Good. [She puts the box away.] There. It’s gone. [They kiss and start foreplay.]

(*Homecoming*, S01E09, “Work.”)

<sup>17</sup> For the definitive critique of this position, largely aligned with the satirical force of *Homecoming*, see Leys, *Trauma* 229–97.

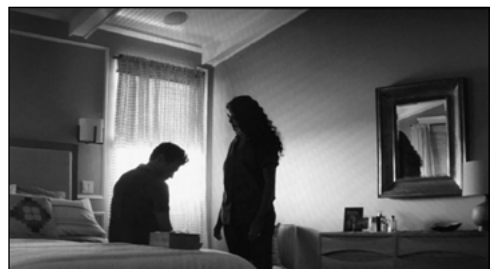


Figure 3. *Homecoming* (2018), S01E09, “Work”.

Lydia's chilling, albeit efficient solution to marital indiscretions functions precisely like the neurological pharmaceutical Geist has created. The representation of a memory is imagined as a discrete thing that can be neatly excised from one's personality and past experience: it is recorded, placed "in the box," and then "it's gone." Both Geist and Lydia see their position as entailed from the impotency of language to alter those memories or experiences. "Something happened," explains Colin, "and telling [Lydia] about it isn't gonna change that" action from having happened. From that perspective, simply placing an account of the narrative in a sealed box resolves the potential emotional harm likely to follow from discussing the affair. Likewise, Geist purports to be offering soldiers talk therapy, but that ruse is quickly exposed as a distraction from the secretly medicated food they are served daily. Corporate executives like Colin reason that therapeutic conversation about the triggering event would be pointless and expensive if the traumatic memory could be made to disappear entirely and cheaply.

All of this is to say that, for Lydia and Geist, an account of an experience, particularly a disturbing one but possibly any kind, has become an object. It is a thing to put in a box or to erase cleanly from a soldier's brain. And as Colin's written confession also becomes a literal thing in a box, that writing is consequently imagined as an object that can lose the capacity to represent his responsibility or even, it seems, his realized intention to cheat on his wife (hence their nearly instantaneous foreplay after the box with the confession is placed aside). Like the postcritical textual object, the paper with writing is understood to have an identity without meaning anything at all—or, more precisely, it *had* a meaning, and will only mean again if and when the box is reopened and the confession is read. That is, according to the game these two are playing with one another and the postcritics are playing with us, the writing will only mean again when a reader makes it mean.

But despite—or maybe because of—their immediate sexual act, Colin remains anxious and seems doomed. By distributing their past actions via writing into a literal box, Colin and Lydia harm themselves and their relationship: the intimacy of their marriage and their sense of responsibility to one another suffers irreparably. His fulfilled intention to cheat on his wife, albeit in service of the corporation and represented on that piece of paper, cannot be evaded simply by displacing his agency to a container that is then set aside. His confession still means exactly what it did when he wrote it down, and it always will. As should be clear from this example and will become clearer still in the examples to follow, the interpretive scenario of textual objects that the postcritics anticipate with eagerness, contemporary television portrays satirically and with alarm.

## III

I have suggested that the increasingly prevalent idea of distributed agency became a theoretical lens through which to see the world as one in which intention is downgraded or eliminated and, consequently, in which agency could be passed around fluidly to everyone and even everything. An “actor,” explains Latour, “is not the source of an action but the moving target of a vast array of entities swarming toward it” (46). In making this observation, Latour, like Gell and Levine, sees his account of agency as the best way to know and interpret the actions, human and otherwise, of “entities” he observes in the world. Other critics, such as Bennett and Barad, take this observation a step further to challenge or deny the centrality of human intentionality to human agency. And still others, like Felski, combine these claims to locate in texts, redescribed as objects, a newly perceived source of power as “coactors.” But all of these theorists of distributed agency are certain that intention, after it has been demoted and set aside, will neither be mourned nor even noticed in its absence.

**18** On the various caveats and complexities of the “why?” question in Anscombe’s account, see Bratman; Moran and Stone (132–68); and Ford et al. (1–32).

**19** “Meaning something involves an ‘outward act,’” explains Walter Benn Michaels, glossing Anscombe’s phrase: “your meaning has to be expressed in that act” (n. pag.). Although very recent neurobiology experiments on speech synthesis would seem to suggest that speech can be captured directly in the brain, that same study also revealed that even when participants mimed sentences without vocalizing them, there was an appreciable difference in brain activity that significantly decreased the accuracy of a computer algorithm “decoding” the sentences based on brain wave activity. The point is that even something as close to intention as thinking and miming speech still does not capture the brain wave activity of actual spoken language (Anumanchipalli et al.).

**20** For a good overview, see Frey 53.

Framing distributed agency along these lines clarifies the basic assumptions and problems involved in contemporary literary theory. But it also reveals that these theories rely on the mistaken idea that intention is an idea in the mind causing actions outside that mind. Elizabeth Anscombe’s *Intention* (1957), belatedly recognized as seminal in the philosophy of action, offers startling clarity on this topic. She proposes that defining intention is straightforward: “Intentional actions, then, are the ones to which the question ‘Why?’ is given application,” not in the sense of the answer providing evidence or stating a cause, but of an answer that mentions past history, interprets the action, or implies something about the future (24).<sup>18</sup> Moreover, Anscombe makes clear why the standard account of intention as internal—ideas nebulously formed inside your brain—is entirely mistaken: “intention is never a performance in the mind,” she declares.<sup>19</sup> Because words “may occur in somebody’s mind without [her] meaning them,” the phenomenon of those words occurring in her mind might be necessary but is not sufficient to be her intention. She “has to mean them.” In cases where we are trying to figure out whether or not she meant them, her “outward acts” must have been “significant’ in some way” (49). In contrast to virtually every other account of intention, Anscombe’s illuminates collective agency or distributive action by nullifying the relevance of an internal mind. The mind as a cause (or not) of action is simply not the relevant object of interest; instead, the fact that an agent knows what he or she is doing is the relevant point. Hence, asking and expressively answering “why?” is necessary and sufficient to tell us if and how actions are intentional.<sup>20</sup>

As we already have seen, most postcritics and fellow travelers do not share Anscombe’s non-internal view of intention; instead, they see intention as an insufficient internal cause for an agent’s actions out in

the world. However, there are moments when certain strains of postcritique begin to acknowledge the problems with the traditional account of intention as an internal performance in the mind. Examining how and why they stray from this acknowledgement can be fruitful; we can see a muddled account of intention undergirding postcriticism and related theories from the very start. In her important recent book, *Revolution of the Ordinary: Literary Studies After Wittgenstein, Austin, and Cavell* (2017), Toril Moi explores why both the New Critical and the orthodox post-structuralist positions misunderstand what intention means and how it functions. As she writes, Wimsatt and Beardsley's notion of "the intentional fallacy" mistakenly envisions intention as a "mental phenomenon [...] that precedes the text" (which leads them to denounce intention); their account turns out to be "no different from [...] and just as unsatisfying" as Paul Ricœur's view that intention is "some inner state" of the author's mind from which a text's "meaning [...] has broken its moorings" (200). For Moi, who is in this regard very much aligned with Anscombe, whom she also cites, such a "picture of intentions [...] is a theoretical fiction" (201). Intentions simply "don't work in this way," and writers know this. Flaubert would not have labored to figure out "what sentences he would accept as the ones he meant to say if he already had a perfectly formed intention to say exactly those sentences" (201). She continues, now invoking Cavell, "what is there [in a text] is what is intended" (203). Glossing Anscombe's point that we might ask an agent "why?" in order to determine which acts are intentional, Moi explains that "we must analyze the act after it has happened" (202).

So far, so good. But from these more or less unobjectionable points Moi jumps to a very different conclusion. Rather than simply state that intentions cannot precede the text, she states instead that "in the work of writing, intentions work in the opposite direction: only by looking at what he had done could Flaubert decide whether it was what he wanted to do" (201). This curious sentence takes a radically different position than either Anscombe or Cavell, each of whom is trying to capture the way intentional acts, of any kind, are inconceivable if not understood as acts (that is, as purposeful manifestations in the world). "Conception' cannot precede 'execution,'" writes Maurice Merleau-Ponty about Cézanne's painting, grasping at a similar point; "only the work itself [...] will prove that there was *something* rather than *nothing* to be found there" (69; emphasis in original). But in contrast, Moi is suggesting that intentions actually are things that happen in your mind—it is just that they do not occur in your mind until *after* you do them. What else could it mean to say that "intentions work in the opposite direction" when Flaubert makes a decision, after the fact, to authorize as intentional the writing he reads on the page?<sup>21</sup> When Moi's Flaubert "decide[s] whether [the writing he reads] was what he wanted to do," he has merely delayed until the moment of "looking at what he had done" for his intention as a performance in the mind to count as such. Following the postcritical

<sup>21</sup> For a longer discussion of intention in Moi's work, see Smith-Brecheisen.

playbook, we are right back in the anti-Anscombian view of intention in which intentions only exist as materialized in the mind.

Or consider another version of this same point. Moi explains that “Anscombe’s key move is to show that we read intentions off actions” (202). Again, in one sense, she is entirely correct. Anscombe is indeed suggesting that if we fail to focus on actions, our study of intention will be dead in the water. But in another sense, Moi’s gloss is misleading, for it implies that Anscombian intentional actions are determined by an *actual* interpreter asking and answering “why?”—perhaps someone who “read[s] intentions off actions” like Moi’s Flaubert looking at his prose and deciding in that moment what he means. But as Anscombe repeatedly insists, intentional acts possess the status of “intentional” by virtue of a particular theoretical response to an agent being asked “why?” Which is to say that for Anscombe, contra Moi, literally asking and answering the question of “why?”—after the fact—cannot be when and how an intentional act comes to be understood as such. That would be to understand intention, once more, as a belated performance in the mind. Rather, for Anscombe, the possibility of imagining the agent responding to the question “why?” demonstrates or confirms the *categorical* difference between intentional and non-intentional acts. Furthermore, the presence of an agent producing an actual answer to the question is not necessary; what is necessary is an imagined, positive, and fitting answer to that question.

In Merleau-Ponty’s terms, a version of this abstract, categorical distinction can be captured by the idea of there being “*something* rather than *nothing*” in a work of Cézanne’s. The distinction between a painting of ripe fruit on a farm table in the Provence being “something” special versus “nothing” special is not a literal difference—even though we might point to literal moments of differentiation between two paintings as evidence of those categories and to convince someone of the rightness of our view. But Moi’s focus on readers rather than agents, and on literal questions and answers versus categorical ones, conflates the two positions. This move also explains how and why she quickly pivots from a question about literary interpretation to quandaries of political and ethical responsibility: “In literary criticism the question of intentions, like the question of responsibility, cannot arise unless someone (the critics, the reader) *notices something* and asks, ‘Why this?’” (Moi 205; emphasis in original). Once intentions are understood as coming into existence in one’s head after the fact, in the process of “notic[ing] something” in or about a text “and ask[ing] ‘Why this?’” then we are right back in the readers’ world of Felski’s postcritique. Furthermore, we have returned to the realm where reading entails doing things with texts—things that might be ethical, political, vocational, or physical, but need not be interpretive.

My argument in this essay has been that postcriticism and likeminded theories rely on a two-part commitment functioning in the background:



first, a commitment to intention as a performance that occurs in the mind (with the caveat, *pace* Moi, that it might occur in the mind belatedly), and, second, to distributing agency to other actors and “actants”—most crucially *readers*—as an obligatory result of this account of intention. As we have seen, certain contemporary prestige television series, such as *The Americans*, *The Good Place*, *Homecoming*, and others, explore a similar set of commitments. Although beyond my discussion here, *Orange Is the New Black*, the award-winning series about a minimum-security women’s prison, might also be added to the list. That series sets as its animating problem how to weigh various forms of distributed agency: governmental, corporate, union / labor, and, most ad hoc of all, inmate clan-based (on the show, corporate always fares the worst, and ad hoc inmate always the best). But all of these series tend to view skeptically the results of what we can now identify as postcritical commitments. What I have been articulating as postcritical accounts of reader-created meaning are often dramatized satirically, as we saw with Lydia’s “box” solution in *Homecoming*, and distributed agency is revealed as invariably disastrous. In the last few pages, I want to suggest that we can also see at least one contemporary television series—the recent dramedy *Patriot*—identifying a version of the non-Anscombian (which is to say, postcritical) account of intention as the *source* of distributed agency and its worst effects.

*Patriot* follows a depressed undercover government intelligence officer, John Tavner (Michael Dorman), who assumes “non-official cover” as an employee at a midwestern industrial piping company so he can travel internationally without generating suspicion. His father, Tom Tavner (Terry O’Quinn), is a high-ranking administrator at a nameless national security agency, functioning as his son’s genial but demanding boss. To fulfill his mission of preventing Iran from obtaining nuclear capabilities, Tom clandestinely assigns his son a job that entails committing various unscrupulous, illegal, and sometimes murderous acts, all of which John carries out faithfully as a loyal son and “patriot,” albeit with increasing guilt and despair. In a series of flashforwards interspersed throughout season one, Tom is deposed (or debriefed) and explains why he illegally assigned his son the tasks he did (Figure 4):

Occasionally in my job I am told ‘no.’ I am told you cannot implement a particular course of action, and occasionally in my job I implement that course of action despite that. That’s what I did in this instance. I implemented a plan without authorization and in this instance at this time the plan began to unravel. (SoiEo7, “Hello, Is Charlie There?”)

Asking Tom “why?” he acted the way he did, as the investigators do, and his intention seems straightforward and illegal. Specifically, with John’s help and without proper authorization, Tom was attempting to “implement” a plan that “used a great deal of taxpayer dollars to influence a foreign election.” As he freely admits: “Not, uh, kosher” (SoiEo7, “Hello, Is Charlie There?”).

Figure 4. *Patriot* (2017), S01E07, "Hello, Is Charlie There?"



But Tom was not exactly a lone agent, ignoring his supervisors and operating with abandon, as he also tries to clarify to the investigators asking “why?” Although he “was not authorized to do” what he did, he continued because “[he] was expected to” (S01E07, “Hello, Is Charlie There?”). In a different scene (Figure 5), set in the narrative present, Tom furtively explains this dynamic to another government official, Tim Peetnam, from whom he needs a favor:

TOM: I mostly hear “no” and then mostly I’m expected to proceed. Quietly. But this time ... it unraveled quickly ... ordinarily I make progress when I’m told “no,” and then I go back with the progress and I ask again and again I’m told “no,” but it’s a “no” where I’m expected to keep going. This time if I go back with no progress, with backward action, then I’m told “no,” that actually means “no.” It also makes the “no” that I first got, which wasn’t really a “no,” a real “no.”

TIM: Then you’re fucked.

(S01E07, “Hello, Is Charlie There?”)

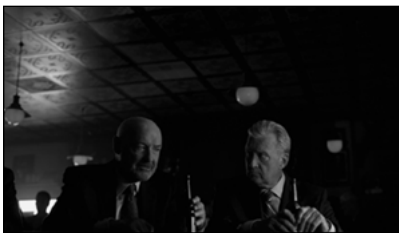


Figure 5. *Patriot* (2017), S01E07, "Hello, Is Charlie There?"



I think there are two principal ways of understanding what is happening in the scenario Tom describes, one that a committed postcritic would have to follow, and another that an Anscombian would have to follow. One of those viewpoints does not help us to understand Tom's (and John's) true situation in relation to their superiors, and one does. On the postcritical side, when Tom hears the various "no's," he is the reader of those signs determining what they mean, using whatever contextual clues he can discern to figure out that meaning. Thus, the first "no" he hears clearly means "yes" to him. He interprets it as, "yes, continue with your illegal acts influencing a foreign election because we can see you are making progress achieving our objectives." The last "no," in contrast, he interprets as a simple "no, stop what you have been doing." Producing only "backward action" means that his illegal acts will now be disavowed and disallowed: "then I'm told 'no,' that actually means 'no.'" But the trickiest part is his last point, because "it also makes the 'no,' that [he] first got, which wasn't really a 'no,' a real 'no.'" That is, he now has to revise the meaning of the 'no' he initially received, which he had interpreted as a "yes, continue with your illegal acts." Presumably, the meaning of that first "no" has shifted. Now "no" really means "no," and, as his friend Tim points out, he is "fucked." With so many "'no's' to keep straight," Tom's task becomes more perilous. As Tim warns him, "you make a mistake on one 'no,' you could be indicted for conspiracy—thirty years" (SoiEo7, "Hello, Is Charlie There?"). Being a reader of the government's "no's" is clearly a treacherous job if the meaning of the "no's" belongs to Tom, or to you as a reader, with the meanings, and the risks and rewards, constantly shifting over time.

But an Anscombian reading of this scene would identify a different kind of dynamic at work, one that arguably captures the drama of Tom's situation much more accurately. As with the postcritical reading, Tom would still be trying to interpret the meaning of all the various "no's" he has been receiving, and he would still bring to bear everything he knows about this situation, the context, and the speakers of the "no's" to fathom the meaning of the word in any of the scenarios in which he finds himself. That is the work any of us do as readers and interpreters: we try to figure out what someone means by the words they utter or write down. But only the intentional account produces the real story of what is happening here—the story that *Patriot* is at pains to show us. There is a game afoot whereby Tom's bosses say one set of words ("no," i.e., "don't continue") and mean another ("yes, proceed quietly"). This game allows them to subtly abdicate their responsibility as the authorizers of Tom's actions: when he returns having failed to achieve his goals, they say a "no" that not only means "no" but transforms the first no into "a real 'no.'" In a sense, his supervisors are effectively deploying a postcritical account of meaning (it is all in the reader's interpretation) to attempt to shirk their duties. And the postcritical reading does not even allow us to see that television is engaging with these interpretive questions in the first place.

To be sure, the supervisors' intention with each of their "no's" remains clear. These "no's" are functioning as a complicated arrangement of institutional cover: the word "no" permits Tom to move forward but with the understanding that the fallout, if it transpires, will land only on Tom (hence the risk that he will be indicted for conspiracy and sentenced to decades in prison). From the very start, both Tom and his bosses have agreed to play a gutless language game in which his supervisors signal that they might be altering their commitment to what they mean by a particular speech act: specifically, their commitment to their own speech act will adjust based on the delayed result of that act out in the world. The first "no" is thus a devious kind of performative, authorizing Tom's actions in one sense, and in another sense meaning, "you, Tom, can do what you want for now, but if it goes badly, you will have to accept all the responsibility for your actions, not us." And Tom, noble "patriot" that he is (like *pater*, like son), knows and consents to this arrangement despite the burden he is taking on. That is, he accepts that the "no's" he receives and acts upon distribute agency and responsibility for all of his actions on behalf of the country onto him alone.

Finally, in the terms we have been examining here, Tom's predicament illustrates how the interpretive regime articulated and authorized by postcriticism aligns with the idea of distributed agency this essay has explored. According to *Patriot*, relying on readers as interpreters, in order to distribute agency to them, produces venal results. Locally, in terms of the logic of the series, such a reliance permits supervisors who have been granted a tremendous amount of responsibility to relinquish the most basic duties of their position, leading to the disasters to follow for Tom, John, his family, and the country. Once Tom is obliged to make meaning out of all the "no's" he hears, the distribution of governmental authority and agency onto anyone and no one is the inevitable, dire result. But more globally, relying on readers as interpreters or on actors as textual objects—as postcriticism does—also obfuscates the real, albeit convoluted, story at work in these scenarios of intention, responsibility, and distributed agency. It is a story we might choose to ignore, but its meaning will always remain for us to interpret. In as much as postcritique wants to stay sensitive and attuned to what art has to say, the example of *Patriot* reveals why it cannot do that, while also spelling out why taking art seriously requires the very thing—intention—postcritique is determined to deny.

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