# Saying/Making/Doing: What Authors Are Up To

John Farrell

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# *Saying/Making/Doing: What Authors Are Up To*

John Farrell

Sometime during my days as a graduate student in the 1980s I realized that many of my teachers and fellow students had a way of thinking about the reading of literature, indeed about the experience of reading itself, that was completely different from mine. They saw themselves as interpreting texts as free-standing semantic objects without reference to what their authors intended them to mean. My experience, however, was that reading, in addition to recognizing the common meanings of words, always meant having to guess what those words meant in context, along with the tone with which they were invested, and that such guessing inevitably centered upon an author. By author I mean a person with historical coordinates, an identifiable audience, and a mind similar enough to my own to justify my sense that, with any individual sentence, one possible meaning was more likely to be in play than others. For me, reading, however difficult, was and still is a matter of getting in touch with another mind.

My contemporaries had many reasons for being suspicious of authors and their minds. The Romantic cult of individual genius had become a vulgar antique, derided by Marxists as bourgeois. Sigmund Freud had buried authorial intentions so deep in the unconscious that they no longer seemed intentional, allowing critics who were skeptical about retrieving conscious meanings from literary works to have uncanny confidence unearthing meanings not even stated in the text. The great modernists, for all their individuality of style, pushed the boundaries of language seemingly beyond the place where authorial intentions could hold off the proliferations of meaning and myth. That opened the way for Northrop Frye and others to declare that literary works were made out of other literary works, casting authors as mere artifacts of bourgeois property law. During the anti-mentalistic Forties, when logical positivism, pragmatism, and behaviorism were in vogue, the New Critics found professional dignity promoting literary language per se as their object of study. Literary language, they believed, was a special form of language, being inherently ambiguous and ironic, and therefore richer than the tediously clear, speaker-dependent utterances of practical life. Structuralists and post-structuralists followed suit in focusing on language per se. Was it not a grander mission for literary scholars to rise above preoccupation with the historically limited productions of individual authors and gain access to more scientific objects of study like language or myth? And wasn't it a relief being able to short-circuit the biographical reductions of hasty undergraduates with a taboo against stepping outside the text? There was even a certain professional convenience in being able to marginalize the elite cadre of poet-critics who then reigned in the academy: Pound, Ransom, Tate, Winters, Jarrell, Auden, and, above all, T. S. Eliot, who had the temerity to add explanatory notes to *The Waste Land* as if he had some special privilege to decide its meaning.

These anti-authorial developments made the field of literary criticism exciting and gave it influence across the humanities.

The iconoclastic moment famously reached its climax when Roland Barthes added the "Death of the Author" to Nietzsche's "God is dead."[1] Theoretically, insofar as authors remained of any interest, it was because they could be decoded, unmasked, and critiqued. Suspicion became the new credulity, a paradoxical article of faith. The fact remains, though, that in spite of renouncing authors as sources of meaning, and in spite of all the challenging developments that went along with the marginalizing and suppressing of authorship as an explanatory resource, scholars went on talking about authors and resorting to their utterances as valuable sources of explanation. The proscription of authors was a taboo few could abide by. Reputable scholars uttered ritual disclaimers before breaking it, but they broke it nonetheless. In fact, they broke it much more often than they realized.

The mutual incompatibility of the many different theories that literary critics have relied upon over the last several decades and the question as to how all of them might cope with a stronger notion of authorship remains a challenge to the field. Courses on literary theory now often end with a section focusing Bruno Latour's discussion of "critique" in which he questions the value of all those approaches that put the critic in the superior position of decoding the author's unintended messages.[2] Meanwhile, literary critics have taken up "agency," especially the political agency of marginalized or oppressed groups, as a central term and, indeed, a guiding value for the understanding of literature in its historical context. The result is that authors have returned as historical actors even while their power of speech remains a mystery. It does not seem unfair to label this a public intellectual neurosis.

What, then, is the cure?

My slogan, to begin with, will be *saying making & doing*. Let us begin at the end, with the *doing*. How does *doing* in general work?

Aside from the inner cogitations of your psyche, all the true actions of your life have started with bodily motions. Exertions of force upon various objects, movements and shiftings of position, the manipulation of tools and implements, and signals in various media, these exhaust your performance as a human agent. Your body does other things; it makes you blink, cough, sneeze, yawn, and flinch. But these are not actions in the fullest sense. You can sometimes choose the circumstances in which they occur, but they are largely beyond your control.

The limited form of human action is surprising when we consider the breadth of its operations and the grand proliferation of its effects. But there is a correlate which diminishes the mystery. None of the motions that constitute our actions are undertaken only for themselves. There is always some further intention, even if it be nothing more ambitious than the stretching of a limb or the scratching of an itch. Some worthwhile result is expected beyond the physical exertion. We accomplish one thing in order to accomplish another. We do *x* to do *y* to do *z*. Intentions come in chains. The buttons you push, the steps you take (metaphorically and literally), the words you speak, the gestures you make, their intended effects unfold far into the future. This nested structure, action within action, goal within goal, is essential to human agency. Intentions meld into each other in a fluid process and single

[1] Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author," in *Image-Music-Text* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1977), pp. 142-48. This, however, was by no means Barthes' last word on the subject. See Gisela Bergonzoni, *La préparation du roman contemporain: présence de Barthes et retour de l'auteur chez Gonçalo M. Tavares, Enrique Vila-Matas et Henri Raczymow.* Thèse en Littératures comparées, Université Rennes 2, 2017, Introduction and Chapter One

[2] Bruno Latour, "Why Has Critique Run out of Steam? from Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern." *Critical Inquiry* 30, no. 2 (2004): 225–48.

actions fulfill multiple purposes. Intentions can exist in a preliminary form, before the action is taken, but they almost inevitably adjust to the circumstances of their execution. They evolve in process.

If doing always means doing one thing in order to do another, what is the doing that constitutes the goal of literary performance? Undoubtedly there are many, but the key one, the one that makes success for all the others possible, is the creation of a valuable experience for an audience, an experience at least valuable enough to keep it reading. Goals beyond that may differ from author to author, power, fame, glory, and profit being common candidates, along with the joys of communication itself. But giving pleasure is the final intention no literary work can succeed without. This is the type of goal that William Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley aimed at in their famous article "The Intentional Fallacy,"[3] saying that we have no need to think about authorial intentions because "the proof of the pudding is in the eating"—in other words, it doesn't matter what authors are aiming at if they don't succeed in giving you pleasure. They were right, of course. Literary works don't succeed just because we recognize their authors intend them to. But Wimsatt and Beardsley didn't recognize that, in order for works to succeed in doing anything at all, they have to fulfill prior, communicative goals. Giving literary pleasure doesn't come of itself.

That's where the *saying* comes in.

The person at the next table has just said "It's nine o'clock in Paris." Do you understand this sentence? If you have basic competence in English, you know what information the sentence typically conveys. That is unambiguous. Still, there is something which separates this sentence from your typical experience of meaning. Unlike (I hope) the sentences of this article, you have no idea why "It's nine o'clock in Paris" is being said. The relevance of the information it conveys, and therefore its true meaning, is opaque. To give it relevance, we have to hear it in context. In one context it might imply "It's not too late to telephone your friend in Paris." In another it might imply "Even if it's early for a drink here, it's already nine in Paris, so we might as well have one now." Without being able to recognize these implications, the sentence loses its point. There is no speaker behind it. It has no voice and says nothing.

Examples like this have been given by distinguished literary critics—Stanley Fish in particular—to argue that it's the reader, or the community of readers, who determine linguistic meaning, but readers have no reason to bother interpreting them if there's no speaker or author in context for them to be right or wrong about.[4] Fish started his career espousing the author-less text of the New Critics, changed horses from texts to individual readers, then to "interpretive communities," only to come home to authors at last.[5] It is perfectly true that sentences taken as mere pieces of language can mean any number of things depending on context. But that is precisely why we need a context to make them worth interpreting. And that context can only be the relation between an author or a speaker whose intention is aimed at an audience that can potentially identify it. It is not for extra-textual clues that authors are indispensable. It is for the animation of the text itself. With their attempt to limit authors'

[3] W.K. Wimsatt and Monroe C. Beardsley, "The Intentional Fallacy," *The Sewanee Review* 54, no. 3 (July–September 1946): 468–488.

[4] Stanley Fish, *Is There A Text in This Class: The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980).

[5] For his late position, see Stanley Fish, *Versions of Antihumanism: Milton and Others* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014), 1-6.

extra-textual utterances about their intentions, they left the texts themselves—theoretically, at least—without a voice.

So much for *saying*. As a communicative act, the literary work can only achieve its further goals—having a valuable effect for an audience—if it achieves its preliminary goal of saying something the audience can pick out from the many possible meanings of the text as the one intended. It is interesting to note that Wimsatt and Beardsley did not rule out recognizing intention as the key to what they called "practical messages." It was only in literary works that intentions were unwelcome. In a key footnote they conceded that, unlike works of art, the intentions of practical messages succeed simply if the audience recognizes what they are. But they were wrong about that too. Neither practical message nor literary works succeed simply through the mere recognition of intended meaning. If I ask you "Can I borrow ten dollars?" and you say no, my communicative intention succeeds but my practical intention to borrow ten dollars has failed. Even the clearest and simplest practical messages—"I love you," for example—can fail if the hearer doesn't believe you mean them. Here we see the same chain of intentions as in the literary work. In order to have a hope of getting ten dollars, my intention has to be recognizable, even though that's not enough for my further intention to succeed. And in order to create a valuable experience for the audience, the intended meanings in a literary work have to be recognizable, even though that's not enough for the literary work to succeed. Success in *saying* is necessary for *doing* even if it's not sufficient. Another way of putting this is to say that all utterances, literary or otherwise, have two types of requirements, transparency and effectiveness. Where the first one is lacking, the second must be too.

What about *making*? Here we confront the fact that literary performances come in many different types which give authors all kinds of intermediate goals. They aim to achieve particular artistic effects by writing a sonnet, for example, or a comedy, or by telling a story with a certain kind of ending. Their *saying*, in other words, is constrained by the form of the work they are *making*. Since literary forms tend to have a certain tonality which conditions their reception, they do not generally succeed when the audience cannot pin down the work's genre and catch its tone. So form, or genre, comprise part of the intention that must necessarily be recognizable for the work to have its effect.

But the relation between form and meaning is more complicated than it is in cases where *x* is simply necessary to do *y*. Literary statements do not simply fill out literary forms the way crossword puzzle makers fill out boxes. In the process of composition, form and meaning are candidates for mutual adjustment. It is as true to say that authors look for the proper meaning to fill out a form as to say that they look for the proper form to express a meaning. Expressive and artistic goals can barely be distinguished. This is just one more way in which the complexities of literature are occluded when authors are left out. Authors do, indeed, as myth critics and many others have observed, work by borrowing well-known forms, patterns, and conventions, but they must always find a way of renewing them with contents of their own. They have to realize meaning and form together.

Now it seems as if the *saying* and the *making* elements should be thought of as coincident, leaving only *doing* in the future, when the reader actually arrives on the scene to enjoy the benefits of the author's work. In fact, however, the *x*-to-do-*y* separation between the *saying/making* and the *doing* in the process of composition is also overly schematic because authors, as they negotiate between the exigencies of statement and genre, undoubtedly adjust the artistic effects they are aiming at as well. All three of our elements, then, seem to be up for mutual negotiation. So, with the reader's permission, I will revise my slogan to *saying/making/doing*. This is a model of intention internally complex enough to satisfy any textualist critic, allowing the text to remain the literary phenomenon par excellence while giving authors their creative

due.

I have often been asked *How do you know what the author means?* My answer is, if by *know* you mean *know for certain*, then you don't. Ordinary language and literary language are slipperier and trickier than that, which is why they have the power to give us pleasure. The regimented, unambiguous languages of science, mathematics, and computer programming serve their purpose well, but art, including the art of conversation, has no reason to envy them. Art depends upon a language that is multiple, subtle, and unexpected in its meaning, turning old usages to new and surprising ones. Uncertainty and the need for interpretation are among the sources of its charm. There is finesse both in the writing and in the reading of literary works, and there is no reason to wish it otherwise. The New Critics were right to see the ambiguities of literary language as an essential asset. Where they went wrong was in separating literary language too categorically from ordinary language by erasing the author, the very person who turns language's many wrinkles into assets for the reader's pleasure.

**John Farrell** is the Waldo W. Neikirk Professor of Literature at Claremont McKenna College, where he has taught since 1990. He is the author of *The Varieties of Authorial Intention: Literary Theory Beyond the Intentional Fallacy* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), *The Utopian Dilemma in the Western Political Imagination* (2023), *Paranoia and Modernity: Cervantes to Rousseau* (2006) *and Freud's Paranoid Quest* (1996). He is currently publishing the Substack Thinking Out of School (https://farrelljohn.substack.com), free to the digital public.

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