

The Meaning of Functionless Dialogue

MIKE EDWARDS

CHARACTERS

AERYN, the student of RHIYA

METHIS, the patron of YUNESH

RHIYA, the teacher of AERYN and former student of YUNESH

SOM, a sprite

YUNESH, a philologue and former teacher of RHIYA

SETTING

Illegible Memorial Hall, an amphitheater at the Institute.

SCENE

YUNESH	Blessed be, so good to see you, Rhiya! And your friend, we see, is so good to be—?
AERYN	Aeryn, Rhiya's student. I am honored.
METHIS	You've missed the lesson: Yunesh introduced the seminar to Som, who—there she is!
AERYN	Why, she's adorable—and how tiny.
METHIS	Very wiggly, you'll see. Show us, Yunesh?
AERYN	Such expressive little features! What eyes!
RHIYA	Those thumbs—I'm sure. Seems you've done well, dear friend.
YUNESH	Yes. Good Som. Shall we play say, Som? Good? Yes. Som, Yunesh say, Hello. Yunesh Som say.

SOM

{ }

AERYN

And peace be upon you as well, dear Som,
for I'm astonished by your greeting's form
yet precisely understand your three chords
hummed what my words merely spoke back to you.
—Teacher Rhiya, how shall I with respect
gracefully address your teacher's patron?

YUNESH

Our names are our first things, fine as
finite things first are. Our first names are fine.

METHIS

Fin est, Yunesh? Call me Methis, Aeryn.
Surely you must be here to ask of Som
and her turns with words—or his, for observe
now how his genders change as nouns and names
or flowers bloom and petals swiftly fall:
declensions fix and so contain declines.

RHIYA

Aeryn and I—first names are fine—seek to
trace how words change in what they mean, like Som.

AERYN

Verbal queries, but here, nowhere written?

YUNESH

The Illegible Amphitheater
permits no scribal memory: just speech,
meaning's briefly passing present transport.
Speech, whether just or not, fades presently.
Memory inscribed demands a future—
what words next, we ask, and next, and next, though
finitude's clamor finds no answer here—
and obscures what past it fails to transfix.
Here you'll see no writing on walls nor doors,
nor screens nor boards in black or white, no text
to tarry and taint the meaning's moments.

Som turns moments' meanings synchronic'ly,
to trace ever-fading meanings' presents.

METHIS

With capital, Yuneshe has made Som to
transform any language to non-language.
Yet Som does not recall: no memory
interrupts his continuous present.
He simply responds with transformation.
The seminar queried today of harms:
how, for example, we receive insults.
We know for any gender, contempt's best
gestured with what—

SOM

{ }

METHIS

—ah yes. Exactly, Som.
O thank you so. No now you clean that up.
It's fine. So fun! I know. Spray your language,
blaspheming sprite, and on my good shoes too.

AERYN

But if he tells you only what you've told,
how is that not already memory?
At which point of utterance is discourse
undergoing meaning's transformation?
Any change already implies a past.
Evanescence gleams shade more brightly too,
and words never mean only now or new.

YUNESH

You're quite quick, Aeryn, to recognize my
sponsor's sprung queries and their edged sharps.
The present is a razor's blade at
which we presume simultaneity
of meaning. Yet that edge also reflects.
A mirror's quicksilver seeing comes more
swiftly to our eyes than the meaning of
its display to our mind's understanding.

AERYN

I disagree. We see more with our minds
than with our eyes, especially mirrors.
Would that it were otherwise: for how can
one being, through any sign, hope to share
their own experience with another?
Som shows strangeness splinters meaning's mirror's
glass to shards, with the bare edges of which
linguistic ambiguity may be
better cross-grain carve-cut through translation
into other forms. This should not be news,
though: language is imperial, we know,
and speech cements sedimented moments.
My question, which Rhiya could not answer:
How can a teacher, in reading students'
written work, understand the writing's work?

RHIYA

Our well-met luck brings us to you, Yunesht:
Aeryn's words I read and learn and know, but
I do not see in them what they would be.

METHIS

I will paraphrase, for your dilemma
seems to me to precisely recompose
our essay of Som's translated moment-meanings.
Aeryn questions whether Rhiya truly
knows beyond interpretation the work
figured by written words, when those words stand
as mere marks of a living mind at the
living moment of their composition.
When we read a work, how do we read the
mind behind the silent marks that sign it?
In Borges, the memory of Funes
permits a day's perfect recall—yet the
remembering entire consumes a day.
Shall the readers of writings then say they've
found the lost days of Proust's remembered time?

I should so ban writing for its prolix
and multiplicative meaning-spawning
beyond our quotidian finitude.
There is not enough time to read all of
life that our momentary writing writes,
yet still we read as if what's written lives.
The map is not the territory, but
when we read we territorialize.
How then may teachers pretend their readings
grasp what students' writings communicate,
when teachers have not lived their students' lives?

RHIYA

Please give us less art and more of the world,
for your plain art's words still veil, dear Methis.

YUNESH

Such artful artlessness rhetoricians
call *sprezzatura*, as you know, Rhiya,
yet you yourself would hide more than you show,
for you show what's hidden in your presence
and its immanentizing exigence.
Seeming is being, and being seeming,
and here we are assembled, save for what
we would address: Aeryn's absent writing.
Aeryn contends that such writing does not
seem but is, as at its transcrib'd moment,
and with what that liv'd moment would present.
Do we receive Aeryn's meanings, or words?
In Som's synæsthetic *sprezzatura*,
the very essence of rhetorical
kairotic speech, we see they're one, or none.
He tells us only what we tell—again!—
her, changeable by meaning's and her flux.

METHIS Would it not be blasphemous to make Som
tell Rhiya all of Aeryn's written work?
Surely honest Rhiya's account could let
us compare the cross-time match of words and
sense, and so know Aeryn's writing's true worth.

YUNESH And that, Methis, is what you say you'd wish?
To freeze and vivisect meaning's progress?
Sense's bleeding edges cut, and desires
spoken cannot turn back to un-wishing.

RHIYA A wish is not a deed, nor speech an act—
or so would I have said ere I saw Som.

METHIS I admit it. I don't yet understand
how we in consensus grasp exactly
what Som translates. Note that sculpture there—no,
on the left, the wrought ellipse of twisted
wire and string and glass. Tell us what you see.

AERYN The meaningless function of dialogue.

RHIYA That's it.

METHIS Agreed.

YUNESH Just as others have said.

AERYN How do you mean? It's an abstract sculpture.
What I meant is what only I have seen.
Its meaning must reside in the viewer.

METHIS It's Som's, and of course it means what you said,
or more properly what I've said: for I
once said just those words to her. She made
"The Function of Meaningless Dialogue."

AERYN

But that cannot be! It indicates no
material thing. You and I share no
common experience of that concept.
The art is of a category nought.

YUNESH

Yet how can these not be the needs you plead,
Aeryn? For you complain Rhiya grasps not
what your written writings' words would present,
but here Som's blurts present agreeably
for all to see one's words made fixed deeds.

AERYN

So this then would be the ideal form of
what I just named as what I thought would be
the functionless meaning of dialogue?

YUNESH

Shorn of your excess subjunctive voice and
sesquipedalian circumlocutions,
Yes. It would—I suppose—seem to be. No?
For negation shears off provision and
turns us round to power's bind: between the
object and subject, who will be master?

AERYN

It is just as you say. It was just as
I said. But I tell you now it is not.

RHIYA

It it, it was, but not: how can what you
said you spoke as true so now not be so?

AERYN

Speech has its principle of moments
and the work of those moments gives to my
queries their uneasy complications.
Seeming succeeds. Being precedes seeming.
If for Yunesh seeming's being, and its
converse, being, seeming, where then turns change?
Change's turns prompt my inability
to know and speak, as Som's sculpture plainly

now reverses and refines my passing
knowledge, since I've seen its present stasis.
Words only approximate Som's sculpture.
Having been not who I am, nor can it be
to me what it also once was, or if
it is, it all the more reflects. Our change
meters the world's, and so too does our sense.
We test our knowledge 'gainst what knowledge was.

METHIS

Does Som thus meter all the world or none?

AERYN

Som is change, and so unchanging changes.
Her changes are the excess of our words.
Som cannot show you what you seek: students
define their gains by their changes in time,
just as we'll never at once read every word.
Our labors make meanings across moments.
When written words our written works rewrite,
when what we've read is more than what we write,
whose labor gives those words their worth and weight?
Whose consum'd words our surplus works requite?

METHIS

Listen, friends: how the declamation soars!

AERYN

Their added worth, the value they transport
beyond that time to provision given,
becomes black-ink'd profit in pages read
for differences of valuation slight
or great depending upon how closely
we come to seeming—ah, let's keep it light.
We readers toil, we write and annotate,
and scholars' circulated words become
both wealth and coin by which measures
we compare the value of our time spent
consuming and rewriting them anew,
reproducing words we know may not be

seen, and their labor's value unseen too.
The surplus value taken from my words
and work must serve as more than metaphor:
my labor's worth but weighs my bodied time.
Is not my labor mine and so a part
of me? How much of that labor I gave
freely, yet more was took than ere I saw,
for my labors are my liv'd words living:
I'll not divorce my writing's work from me.
Yet in me those others' voices too sound,
or more their texts I've in submissions to
scholars' circulating conversations
cited capital from which, I suppose,
someone else's profit flows. My present
pages work and rework theirs: so I hope
to be in still others' works cited found,
bound with my dark lines by strange hands lighted,
and thereby render'd fair my labor.
How can this be done by Som if she has
no stable present against which she can
measure unchanging what you seek to change?
Rhiya, you pretend to hate the game you
jokingly call "*Guess what the teacher thinks,*"
yet Som's transformations give to Methis
that game's precisely mimicked inverse,
like some patty cake metempsychosis:
what-the-teacher-thinks' mirroréd other.
It's a deeply narcissistic practice,
making Som blurt back words' signs one wishes
had perhaps been more perfectly spoken.
To you my plaint's gentler but related:
You've misread my words for your own, though they
reflected first not in your eyes but mine,
and found I've faultily unknown your knowns.

RHIYA Your tone grows sharp. I'd ask if we—

AERYN —could speak
more softly? Make our meanings milder so
as not to mar these walls' long-echoed words?

METHIS These walls you so disdain yet daily use:
tell me, who built them? With whose money? Why?

AERYN The past's bequests—

YUNESH —compound their interest
and press upon each word we speak today.
The dead's gold gilds our living scholarship.

METHIS Not just dead gold, either. Some still breathes and
watches; still says what ideas shall move, as
your teacher, Rhiya, knows full well: knowledge,
though, is not acknowledgment—

RHIYA —and your point?

METHIS My point's been made but I'll resharpen it:
Your student speaks of labor's worth, yet here
we talk in halls that capital maintains.
What ivories are stood on steel not bought
with gold? What scholar writes who has not first
been fed?

RHIYA Fed, yes, yet not full bought—

METHIS —nor et?
To which I'd add a last "yet"—as if the
hand that feeds leaves no trace nor bruised mark
near that quiet close-mouth'd smile, behind which
I'm sure there clench sharp teeth—when did last your
classes teach what might threaten a bequest?

RHIYA	Each word I speak—
METHIS	Each word you speak I've bought.
YUNESH	One might seem to consent for now, yet let none mistake mimesis for agreement.
METHIS	Money talks, and in talking represents. There's labor and then what funds it, and from which source the cyclic circuit flows: checks for institute endowments, for grants to those bright students who mistake your borrowed voice for wisdom freely given. Som hears this and shows us voice's flayed flesh deboned.
RHIYA	If that were true—
METHIS	—If? There shall be no "if." Watch closely now as I withdraw my hand. How quickly does your brave defense collapse when faced with next term's funding? Come here, Som. Show Rhiya how our patronage translates.
SOM	{ }
YUNESH	Oh!
AERYN	We're rich!
METHIS	Hardly.
RHIYA	You cannot—
METHIS	—I do, and make your cannot into cant, or "can't": the apostrophic mark of what's compressed, elided, owned, or so your protests prove.

RHIYA

Then I shall not—

METHIS

Refuse what? To be fed?

To teach? To let your student's work be read?

Refusal requires a space from which one
might refuse, and you rent your space from me.

TO BE CONCLUDED