

# from *A Physical Comedy: Cogitation in the Representation of Meaning*

Pascal Poyet

translated by Lisa Robertson

A circle shows the area. The area is the totality of meaning. The ensemble of what the word signifies or can come to signify at one moment or another is called the “area.” A diagramme in the form of a circle shows the different meanings of the verb *to touch*. In the central part of the circle—a concentric circle, smaller—a sentence is written, where the word is used in what we’d call its proper sense. All the other meanings, called figurative, are distributed all around it, some distance from the centre, at precise points, each in relation with the others, over the surface of the circle. Each meaning in its place, its larger or smaller part of the circle, is represented by a sentence (in the sense that the sentence is its representative or is representative of it) in which the word is used in this manner. On the back of a postcard showing several views of the same city, the caption “Many Aspects of Tangiers.” I flatten out the piece of paper, which had been folded: the area contains sentences. I don’t walk all over but, as in looking at a map, I know where to find those places I’m familiar with, the ones where I stay, in relation to the others I’ll go to see. I stay in only a quite small part of the circle. We act as if there are well-defined edges, precise borders, lines that we draw and that just as cleanly we cross. We suppose that the limits of the word coincide with the limits of meaning, that crossing the border of one, we leave the other, and that we know this with the very same sureness, as, when we are going out, we hear the door slam behind us, or from the glances or the few words exchanged downstairs with the building caretaker. And if the caretaker wasn’t there? Would I be content to glimpse the empty chair? The things he left, his newspaper and his meal, in the big compartment of the row of mailboxes that serve, so to speak, as theatre wings. Once I’ve gone out the door of the building, eyes scanning the sidewalk, would I be reassured to glimpse him a little further down and to know he was busy chatting with a passer-by? We know, we see, when we’re going out, as clearly it seems as we’d see, at the exit

of a big city, a sign saying so. And now? Towards what kind of “world minus touch” am I going to go? And at what distance from the banging of the door will it call up a meaning like that? And in my daydream, I don’t know if all the words touch each other, if leaving one, I go directly into another, or if words are separated by a kind of countryside that I’ll have to cross—and if that were the case, what separates the glass from the spoon, the paper from the pencil, which I have not yet promoted to the level of object?

One “touches” the arm of the other. The “one” and the “other” are two lively beings one touching the other and the other touched by the one and the verb *to touch* designates this intentional gesture which consists of bringing one’s hand towards the arm of the other until the contact of the two skins—or the simple pressure felt through the garment—produces a sensation in the one who touches as well as in the one who he touches. This is the centre of the circle, the way of using the word that we describe as the “richest” semantically, the verb in its primary or plenary meaning. From caress to grab, it’s still *to touch* in the full sense of the term. One touches the arm of the other, as at the café terrace next to the window this hand’s placed on the knee of the interlocutor, but not like nudging or brushing against, the light contact of arms. Not in the way we bring a hand towards an object either, nor even in the way an object would touch another on this table, or the way an object would touch this table, even less the way a neighbourhood of this city touches another at their shared border. The further we extend from the centre, the more the primary properties of the meaning disappear. That there is a full meaning does not imply that there is an empty meaning. The way that meaning transforms is different according to the direction we take. This way, the more we advance towards the outskirts, the more chances there will be that the depth that maybe we should be afraid to plumb, not only finger, while having an image of ourselves emptying a word of its meaning, will not be the depth of the water, nor of some sort of container, and even if the one that, or rather the one who will touch it would stay for now a living being, me, not the sugar at the bottom of the glass of tea, the more fragile the hypothesis of the intentional act will become, just as fragile as the hypothesis that this, properly speaking, consists of an act at all. We’ll be able to meditate on it for as long as we like while walking on the beach at this precise place

where finally we arrived, where the sea undulates and the sand is harder, while an itinerant photographer sells portraits made the day before to those who have come back for them. Now taking another direction from the centre, or setting out from this edge, which would retreat always a little at this time of day, this hour when everyone leaves to go where—so setting out from this edge which we had arrived at, where a group of young women feet in the water dresses twisted to their knees have themselves photographed on the phone of one who has stayed on dry land, turning around the circle, crossing a few division lines very clearly drawn on the map earlier, not so easy to locate now—this edge of sidewalk? this backed-up road?—we'd like to know if such cogitations on a word are comparable to these movements in a city, and we'll come to say to ourselves why not, by dint of asking this question while wandering like this, forced to walk out on the street because a group is forming in front of a snail-seller, that this question touches—bizarrely we set out to express ourselves in this register, surprised to find ourselves bilingual in our own language—upon the representation of meaning. So we'll ask ourselves if the structure of meaning when we envisage it this way, even going a bit by chance, resembles the structure of a city with its centre and its outskirts, if we can represent one in the way we are used to representing the other with its neighbourhoods where the city splays out and where its name is understood differently, if we circulate in one the way we circulate in the other, crossing the street when it becomes possible, and reciprocally what it would signify to see the different parts of the city the way we see the regions of meaning, the names of the neighbourhoods printed on the map like the meanings of the proper name of the city, what we call meaning and what is an aspect, what serves to announce, by showing a photograph taken on a beach, another on an avenue, a photograph of a landscaped walkway or of a certain façade, that "It's Tangiers"—what we put under this name in different cases and how much more walking time it will take to get to a square that we could in turn consider as a centre. But at this distance from the centre, to be lively: done. Even the idea of movement seems to have disappeared. The pencil and the saucer were, remember, on that coffee-table, still concrete objects, but the objects among themselves, as tangible as they are, don't touch each other in the sense of an intentional movement of two beings to touch each other, not

even in the sense of an involuntary jostling, and not in the sense either in which a meandering in the city at such an hour, without a goal, or more correctly without ambition, when nobody has obliged you to go out, would near its end. They juxtapose. Gone are the ideas of movement, and of intention releasing that movement, the contact ending the movement and the sensation that the contact provokes. But what's left then of the full sense of the word, the one that rules choice and assures that at this distance from the centre it's still this word we choose to use, this name we give to touch, such a brand that we'll later point out, out on our way back, to the employee of the perfume shop who will hand you a label-less flask? I can in fact say that to touch doesn't happen among two so-called objects, and I could say that they're juxtaposed. And tired of aimless walking, and because for the first days it's as difficult to orient oneself in one's thinking as it is in a city, we head back. By the brand new train station, recently constructed at the edge of the city, a large billboard was announcing: "Here, the new centre of Tangiers is born."