

Preface

Kafka's "The Top" is a story about a philosopher who spends his spare time around children so he can grab their tops in spin. To catch a top still spinning makes him happy for a moment in his belief "that the understanding of any detail, that of a spinning top for instance, was sufficient for the understanding of all things." Disgust follows delight almost at once and he throws down the top, walks away. Yet hope of understanding continues to fill him each time top-spinning preparations begin among the children: "as soon as the top began to spin and he was running breathlessly after it, the hope would turn to certainty but when he held the silly piece of wood in his hand he felt nauseated."

The story is about the delight we take in metaphor. A meaning spins, remaining upright on an axis of normalcy aligned with the conventions of connotation and denotation, and yet: to spin is not normal, and to dissemble normal uprightness by means of this fantastic motion is impertinent. What is the relation of impertinence to the hope of understanding? To delight?

The story concerns the reason why we love to fall in love. Beauty spins and the mind moves. To catch beauty would be to understand how that impertinent stability in vertigo is possible. But no, delight need not reach so far. To be running breathlessly, but not yet arrived, is itself delightful, a suspended moment of living hope.

Suppression of impertinence is not the lover's aim. Nor can I believe this philosopher really runs after un-

Preface

derstanding. Rather, he has become a philosopher (that is, one whose profession is to delight in understanding) in order to furnish himself with pretexts for running after tops.

*Princeton, New Jersey
August 1985*