Masochism: Franz Kafka and the Eroticization of Suffering

1. Managing the Menace: Masochism as a Psychological Survival Strategy

The vast majority of interpersonal relationships in Franz Kafka’s (1883–1924) narratives are defined by the dialectic of transgression and punishment, and vacillations between aggression and servility. In Kafka’s rigorously hierarchical universe, subjects never relate to others as equals: his protagonists, exiled from the sacred, alienated from their peers, spiritually, socially and sexually adrift, seem to be able to choose only between the roles of perpetrator and victim. Kafka negotiates the dynamics of domination and submission thematically in many of his texts. Gregor Samsa’s fall into vermin-hood in ‘The Metamorphosis’ (written in 1912, first published in 1915), for example, is related to his submissive personality and his sexual tastes, which are epitomized by the picture of Sacher-Masoch’s ‘Venus in Furs’ on his wall, the defence of which precipitates his ultimate decline. Gregor’s
transformation into a crawling creature can be read as punishment for his sexual tastes: his monstrous exterior corresponds to his monstrous interior; his appearance is causally related to his essence. Gregor’s verminous form can also be interpreted as an externalization of his unconscious perception of himself as a pest, which, in masochistic fashion, seeks to bring about its own extermination. Moreover, ‘The Metamorphosis’ traces a transferral of power in the family, a radical role reversal: Grete is the active sadistic counterpart to the masochistic Gregor; what Gregor loses in terms of influence, control and status, Grete gains.²

From the outset, Karl Roßmann is abused by both men and women in *The Man Who Disappeared* (written mainly in 1912, first published under the title *Amerika* in 1927). This pattern becomes most apparent when he, slipping ever further down the social scale, is turned into Brunelda’s, Delamarche’s and Robinson’s slave in a conspicuously sado-masochist arrangement, and when he voluntarily adopts the name ‘Negro’ in the ‘Theatre in Oklahoma’ chapter. Sado-masochistic imagery features very explicitly in *The Trial* (written in 1914–15, first published in 1925), particularly in the flogging scene in the ‘Whipper’ chapter and in the episode featuring the ritualistic degradation of the merchant Block, whilst ‘In the Penal Colony’ (written in 1914, first published in 1919), a gruesomely visceral torture–punishment–atonement fantasy, illustrates the inherent instability of social power relations.

Given the ubiquity of these patterns in Kafka’s oeuvre, it is surprising that sado-masochist dynamics have for the most part received only passing critical attention. John Zilcosky and Elizabeth Boa