1 The Alarms of Time, the Universal

Franz Kafka’s story “The Metamorphosis” (“Die Verwandlung”) is measured in time. We hear the alarm clock ticking on the chest in Gregor Samsa’s room, the clock that measures the times of the story – mechanical time, the time of the family, the time of labor, the time of studies, the musical time, the time of the Messiah. All these definitions of time – its transformations and derivatives, even timenness itself, perhaps, die Zeitlichkeit, the being of time, its ecstasies, the awakening of time itself – are written, imprinted, upon Gregor Samsa’s body.

It is both the fear of time and the anxieties of not-being-in-time into which Gregor Samsa awakes one morning out of “uneasy dreams.” “One morning” he found himself transformed in his bed into an insect.1 On the same morning, this “one morning,” in this time, which is “any time,” universal time, the time which repeats itself, the time-structure of repetition, the time of the alarm clock, Samsa awakes. And yet it is morning time, an early hour, the beginning of the day – beginning itself, one could argue – an opening, an hour of creation (a terrible creation) from which he is reborn, thrown into the world in a new, horrifying body – the body of a creature.

This is the Zeitraum, the time-space of Gregor Samsa; it is the “empty, homogeneous” realm of time, the time of everyday life, being marked by the clock. The clock is a device, an apparatus of universal time. The universal, that which belongs to all, is being represented (gezeigt) in the abstraction, in the repetition, in the sameness of the hour – the time segment of the clock. The representation and the conception (the holding-together) of the universal thus depends on the technical conditions of time, the homogeneity of its segments, their sameness and global validity, being repeated everywhere. Thinking on/of the universal, we argue, should be thus associated with the technical measurement of time, with the “general” work of clock, but also with its alarms – with its calls and raptures.

In this realm of universal time, “one morning,” Samsa is reborn: he reappears as a wound – the wound of time. For his reappearance, his transformation into an insect, is the Ereignis, that is, an event, a singular moment of revelation,


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an appearance before our eyes. More should be said about the grammar of this event, the awaking before our eyes of something unusual, foreign, singular in the midst of universal time (the time of the alarm clock). The empty space of time, the everyday, signified in this “one morning,” is also the moment in which an event transpires.

2 The Work, the Apparatus

Yet the distortions and irregularities of this body – Gregor Samsa, a human, a creature – call for discussion in terms of his/its spaces – the space of family and the minor space of the bourgeois. Here is Samsa’s room: four walls, a closed door, the enclosure of his being. One should discuss the boundaries and the margins of this home, the place where Samsa lives, is wounded, and dies. One should explore Samsa’s places, the spaces of climbing and of crawling, the thresholds of his realm of being, the paths of withdrawal and the paths of escape. For Samsa dies at-home (heimlich) in its deep, uncanny (un-heimlich) meaning.

This discussion, however, is about time, and the time of this story is measured by the ticking alarm clock in Samsa’s room. The clock signifies mechanical time – the time of the machine that directs and governs the human being and marks his schedule, the “timetable” – the time of work. The clock is one of these machines – the apparatuses, instruments, devices, and tools that Kafka studied during his years as a clerk at the Workmen’s Accident Insurance Institute in Prague. In the office and during his official travels to visit factories, workshops, and mines, Kafka learned the secret of the machine, the dialectic of production and destruction, the legal and social complexities of the insurance laws, and how all these influenced the damaged being of the worker. Kafka, in other words, stood before the gates of the law. As a scholar and inspector he explored the intricacies of legal writing and the labyrinths of the law. He met cripples and wounded workers, victims of work accidents, and refugees of the Great War. Without Kafka’s experience in these areas of labor and the law, and without his experience in interpreting the writings of the law, one cannot imagine the complexity of his literary creation. Kafka’s official writings about machines, accidents, safety measures, and inspection methods for factories should be read as additional prologue to his literature. His fictional work is imprinted with strong

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awareness of the destructive power of machines\textsuperscript{3}; likewise, it offers various reflections on the distortions that the human condition suffers in the technical age—the story “In the Penal Colony” (“In der Strafkolonie”) being perhaps the best example. Kafka’s literature documents the damage caused in a world governed by technological visions and applications. “This remarkable piece of apparatus” of the Penal Colony,\textsuperscript{4} like the train, the writing machine, and the telegraph, creates strange and destructive movements, environments of alienation, and meaningless zones of life and death.

In his early story “The Metamorphosis,” however, Kafka contends with a minor apparatus, a small mechanical device—a cogwheel, a coil, and a bell—the alarm clock that measures, denotes, and announces the hour.

3 The Creature, the Language
(Under the Clock’s Sign)

The clock of Kafka’s story is a modern device. Various clocks had been produced and used in antiquity, and as early as the fourteenth century time was being measured by mechanical devices. But in the nineteenth century, the century of industry, the century of the train and the steam engine, clocks assumed control over the time of being.\textsuperscript{5} Clocks measured the times of work and travel. The time cycles of nature, the seasons, and the phases of the sun retreated and withdrew forever before the new governor. The clock came to govern all realms of being: the town squares, the factories, the train stations, the city halls, the living rooms, the studios, and the bedrooms. The clock delineates a new measure, a new rhythm, homogeneous and monotonic for the order of all things. It defines a new standard

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regulated movement, one of creation and production, and enables a new collective, universal consciousness of existence.\(^6\)

The clock of the nineteenth century was the main carrier of production and travel, trade, and consumption. The hour itself became more economic than it had been previously: clocks measured shorter and more precise segments of time. Time itself, now measured in minutes and seconds, was delineated more finely and accurately than ever. One need not accept the thesis of capitalistic time structure (“time is money”)\(^7\) in order to agree that since the nineteenth century clocks have signified the economics of being. Life is now measured, planned, designed, and produced by the universal time of the clock. Like the train, the steam engine, and the telegraph, clocks reconstruct time and space into new dimensions. Being itself turns into a monotonic rhythm.

This drama – the drama of \textit{techne}, the drama of mechanical time, and the rise of new dimensions of being-in-time, a new order of things measured by the clock – is imprinted in the world of Gregor Samsa. He lies in his bed, awoken from uneasy dreams, struggling with the weight of his new body and feeling a pain he had never previously experienced. He feels sad, and the view of raindrops beating on the window “makes him quite melancholy.”\(^8\) Samsa complains now about his \textit{Beruf} – his occupation, his call (more should be said about this German word) of being \textit{ein Reisender}, a commercial traveler, an agent who suffers the trials and tribulations of constant travel, including worrying about train connections, eating bad meals, and entering into casual contact with other travelers who never become intimate friends. Samsa is a subject of these time machines that measure and define his being. For the train itself belongs to this world, the world of mechanical time. These are the great clocks hanging above the entrance halls of railway stations as if they were portraits of the new sovereign. In the age of the train, movement itself is faster yet also more precise and detailed. The universal time of the clock is well differentiated: the day is segregated, set apart into hours and minutes. Time itself, however, is never different. What is being measured is the same. The clock signifies the sameness of all things.

This time-space, the universal, mechanical time of travel and labor, is where Gregor Samsa is living. The alarm clock ticking in his bedroom thus hints at


\(^8\) Kafka, “The Metamorphosis,” 89.
the time schedule of industry and trade, and represents the rational, abstract, global dimension of time. The rhythm of these empty hours is imprinted upon his body – the body of an agent, a traveler, a worker, an employee, who every morning, this “one morning” too, is awoken and thrown into a world of rapid movements, mechanical gestures, and superficial human contacts. This is the world of the train. Like the clock that divides time into equal metered segments, the train breaks and tears the space, the landscapes, into spatial fragments. Like the alarm clock that jolts the world and hurls people from their homes – hurry! hurry! – into the streets and to their offices, to endless movements, so too does the train impose rapid movement on its subjects, the travelers.

Kafka notes the effects of the movement of the train on our observation of the world, the way things appear to us (das Ereignis, or “the event”). He writes in his diary:

Goethe’s observations on his travels different from today’s because made from a mail-coach, and with the slow changes of the region, develop more simply and can be followed much more easily even by one who does not know those parts of the country. A calm, so-to-speak pastoral form of thinking sets in. Since the country offers itself unscathed in its indigenous character to the passengers in a wagon, and since highways too divide the country much more naturally than the railway lines to which they perhaps stand in the same relationship as do rivers to canals, so too the observer need do no violence to the landscape and he can see systematically without great effort.9

In the train era (the technical era) the landscape, the country, and space itself are viewed differently than in Goethe’s time, when the mail coach was the main mode of travel. The new movement no longer enables a “pastoral form of thinking”; rather, the world is pictured and written as a violent mode of experience, ein Erlebnis, or even, one could argue, a shock. The famous traumatic neurosis, as we know, is partly related to train travel around the turn of the twentieth century. Should one attribute Gregor Samsa’s distortions to these travels?

But we are still in Samsa’s room, and he is still lying in bed. He has to wake up, for his train is leaving at five o’clock in the morning, and – listen! – the alarm clock is ticking:

He looked at the alarm clock ticking on the chest. Heavenly father! He thought. It was half-past six o’clock and the hands were quietly moving on, it was even past the half-hour, it was getting on toward a quarter to seven. Had the alarm clock not gone off? From the bed one

could see that it had been properly set for four o’clock; of course it must have gone off. Yes, but was it possible to sleep quietly through that ear-splitting noise?10

The invention of the mechanical alarm clock has various claimants, some reaching to the seventeenth century. More famous, however, is the one attributed to Levi Hutchins, a watchmaker who lived in the eighteenth century in the town of Concorde, New Hampshire. It is said that his clock was set to ring at one defined hour – four o’clock in the morning.11 And in Kafka’s story? From his bed Gregor Samsa looks at the clock ticking, sees that the alarm was indeed set for four o’clock, and thinks to himself that the clock must have gone off properly. The alarm clock on Samsa’s chest indicates the time of Hutchins’s clock – the time of invention. However, Samsa did not awaken, although the clock must have gone off at four o’clock, and its noise is supposed to be ear-splitting. Yet Samsa is still in bed and it is already half-past six – indeed, it is moving toward a quarter to seven! Gregor Samsa is late for work, his train having left nearly two hours ago.

The delay, the clock failures, and Gregor Samsa’s time inabilities should also be understood in ironic terms as a gesture of resistance. Samsa refuses to wake up, yet he employs the most childish means to stay in bed for another hour and a half.

But “the alarm clock had just struck quarter to seven,” and with this “Schlag,” or hit, at that moment, at that hour, a cautious tap is heard on the door behind the head of his bed: “Gregor, es ist dreiviertel sieben [Gregor, it’s quarter to seven].”12 It is the gentle voice of his mother calling Gregor from behind the door. Gregor cannot answer, however, except in his new voice, a horrible twittering – the voice of a poor animal. This is the vocal drama taking place in Samsa’s room, the mechanical sound of the alarm clock, the ticking of its hands, the noise of the bell. Against this we hear the gentle voice of his mother from behind the door, and, in-between, the voice of Gregor himself, a creaturely voice – the tweeting, the cheeping. In the realm of the time-machine, in its shadows, the human

11 There is no reference to the invention of the alarm clock in Hutchins’s autobiography, which includes an account of his clock-making business during his lifetime. A hint, however, is obtained from his son in the addendum of the book: “One of my father’s maxims was, ‘Early to bed and early to rise.’ Long before sunrise, in summer, he was accustomed to be at work in one of his fields; few men could keep up with him in using the hoe, and his work was not only done quickly but well done. In winter he arose at four o’clock.” See Levi Hutchins, The Autobiography of Levi Hutchins. With a Preface, Notes and Addenda by his Youngest Son (Private Edition), The Riverside Press, Cambridge 1865, 168.
speaks its creaturely condition – the being of an animal. The clock in Samsa’s room thus not only signifies the mechanization of human existence and the creation of the automaton, but also announces the re-turn-of-the-body. This body, creaturely, repulsive, and wounded, hints at certain qualities of resistance. The voices, the noises of Samsa, which remain unnoticed, can be heard as gestures of revolt performed on the stage of a family drama.

But there are other, different voices written, (un-)heard, in Kafka’s story: the cry of the mother when she experiences her son’s new appearance, the voice of Gregor’s sister, the calls of the chief clerk, and the voices of his father, whose cries and noises no longer sound like the voice of a single father. It is perhaps the voice of being-a-father, the sound of the patriarchal order itself, that is being heard – and crushed – in Kafka’s story. And, after the father pushes his son back to his room with a strong hit of a stick, as he, Gregor, is wounded and bleeding freely, and the door is slammed behind him – the rest, we hear, is silence.13 In Kafka’s “Metamorphosis,” one should hear these voices, the voices of the creaturely body, as being interwoven with the sound of the alarm clock. These are the sounds that exist before the words – and the sounds that return after the silence.

Furthermore: Is not the remnant of the Satyr, the mythical body of the Greek tragedy, half-goat, half-man, whose dance and music signify the birth of tragedy, now being reflected in the physicality of the literary creature in Kafka’s story? The return of the creature in Kafka’s story signifies a different, archaic time, a slow time that cannot be measured by clocks. Gregor Samsa, however, no longer fills the power and the potential of the creature, namely, the mode of resistance. In his story we find only the leftovers of a strong being, the miserable remnants of a creature. We recall: Samsa is not a wild animal but an insect.

More should be said about the voices in Kafka’s story that echo the vocal images of the Jewish body, the unmusical body, the body of the author himself.14 The unmusical, this figure of thought, signifies in Kafka’s world the dissonances and disharmonies of existence, the disorders of desire. And yet the unmusical also recalls a certain sensibility, a way of listening, an attention to the distortion of being. Samsa’s unmusical voices can thus be compared with those of the singer Josefine, from Kafka’s final story, “Josephine the Singer, or the Mouse Folk” (“Josefine, die Sängerin oder Das Volk der Mäuse”), who does not sing but whistles, and her folk melody is that of the mouse people. Here too a trace can be found of the language of the mouse, the Mauscheln language, the pejorative name

for the Jewish dialect in Germany, which was considered an irregular, distorted body-language. Kafka’s remark, in a letter to Max Brod about *Mauscheln* is well-known: he tells Brod first about his disease, tuberculosis, which he names the *Lungenwunde*, the lung-wound, thereby relating the sense of disgust he feels in its treatments; he then turns Karl Kraus’s work, which he compares with *Mauscheln*, a Jewish language built on minor gestures, noises and cries. But it is not Kraus alone but rather German-Jewish literature itself that Kafka imagines as a work of *Mauscheln* – an improper creaturely writing. The Jewish writer is identified in Kafka’s letter with a poor creature hung between heaven and earth. His back legs are stuck in the Judaism of his fathers, while his front legs search, in vain, for new ground. Out of this impossible situation Jewish writing becomes possible, albeit desperate.

Is this writing, the writing of *Mauscheln*, the creaturely writing of a German Jew, imprinted in Gregor Samsa? This is a possible reading, of course. This time, however, we follow a different thread of interpretation, a different time-line, the time of the alarm clock. On this path I will consider the use of the clock as a metronome that measures the story’s rhythm and defines its odd musicality. What is perhaps measured according to this rhythm, the beat, the ticking of the alarm clock, is the violin playing of Gregor’s sister that is performed in the living room. Only Gregor likes his sister’s playing, as if it were “the unknown nourishment he craved.” And so he wonders, “is he an animal, that music has such an effect upon him?” Is musical sensibility perhaps the last sign of humanity that still lives in his body, or is it in fact the real signature of a creaturely being – painful and doomed? We recall that it is the power of music, his sister’s performance, that draws him from his room to his last spurt of crawling before he is forced to return to his chamber. There, wounded and hungry, he dies, as the tower clock strikes three in the morning.

Again it is the clock that measures and re-calls the fate of Gregor Samsa. The tower clock that signifies the universal (public) time now echoes the last breath of Kafka’s creature. Samsa, who was reborn in the time realm of the alarm clock, dies under the sign of the tower clock, three hours after midnight. Just as he came

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19 The tower clocks that were placed in the town squares in Europe from the beginning of the nineteenth century replaced the church bells as signifiers of public time. See Merle, “Tempo! Tempo! Die Industrialisierung der Zeit im 19. Jahrhundert,” 182–198.
into the world “one morning” (eines Morgens), so does he leave it at another morning hour. But at this “one morning,” the hour of his birth and death, something principle yet singular is revealed, namely, the event of being. It is morning time, daybreak time, the time between dark and light, night and day, when Samsa appears and disappears. And this is also the time of the story itself that is written in-between the times, in the difference. This is the time paradox of Kafka’s story: in-between the empty, homogeneous, familiar hours, out of the repetitions of standard, universal time, in the rapture of an endless return, something new, different, and unfamiliar appears – the horrible body of Kafka’s literature.

4 Studying, The Time of Childhood

Yet there is a different, additional time that writes itself in Samsa’s room – the time of studies (Studium) engraved on his writing desk, his Schreibtisch. Lying on this desk, there are, as we read at the beginning of the story, a few textile samples. These are the fabrics, the textiles / the texts – the drafts of Kafka’s first stories, perhaps? – found on the writing desk of the pitiful protagonist. It is mentioned that Gregor Samsa uses these textiles during his commercial travels; they are examples of his vocation. The writing desk, however, the desk of studies, was used by Samsa during his years as a student at the academy for business and before that, when he was a student at secondary school and also even earlier, when he was a pupil in elementary school. The removal of the writing desk from Samsa’s room thus signifies the orientation of writing, the direction of studies, in which time moves back, re-turns in the other direction, to the years of childhood. Studies (and gestures of writing) are intertwined in a complex manner with these zones of childhood and realms of memory, although these realms themselves are already lost in oblivion. Indeed, Kafka’s protagonists are often figures of forgetfulness. Yet what is this time-concept of studies, the time being imprinted in these textiles, the “texts” that were left on Samsa’s desk? Are they also measured by the clock? Does the empty, circular time of the alarm clock govern also the world of studies, or does a different, archaic direction in time produce inversions of time, delay, and fragmentation? And perhaps there is no time, no “before” and no “after,” no past and no future in these textiles, the examples of “writing” that sit on his desk. Possibly the objects on Samsa’s desk are objects of exchange. This

20 Kafka, “The Metamorphosis,” 89.
strange concept of time that is reflected in this writing-desk of Gregor Samsa, the
time of condensing (Verdichtung), the time of all times being verdichted, poeti-
cally condensed, is time of the script.

In Samsa’s room one finds a few broken, fragmented signs of the being of
a student, a subject lost in the realm of studies, the world of writing, the uni-
verse of textiles/texts and scripts. The students in Kafka’s world, according to a
well-known reading, are doomed to empty, happy travel, or eine fröhliche leere
Fahrt, in which they sense freedom from the law of time. Samsa, however, aban-
dons his studies and now this miserable creature no longer enjoys this demonic
degree of freedom. His travels, we read, are not free and empty; rather, they
belong to the realm of duty and vocation; they promise not escape but repetition.
Samsa’s travels are charged with Schuld, a sense of guilt.

And the Schuld is measured by the alarm clock that rings and announces
both the duties and costs of time. Man, who is a subject in the realm of time,
autonomous but occupied, is captured forever in duties, in being-guilty. Escape
from these circles of mechanical time, the mechanism of being-thrown-in-the-
world (Geworfenheit), is a rare possibility, one that few of Kafka’s protagonists
enjoy and that is no longer possible for Gregor Samsa.

For good reason the story tells about Schulden – the family’s debts that
Gregor took upon himself after his father’s ruin. But after the terrible transfor-
mation he has experienced and the loss of his job, Gregor feels how the family’s
debt has turned into guilt. This is how he perceives the wound on his back, a
wound caused by one of the apples his father threw at him in his final attempt to
escape his room. Thus Gregor must bear not only debt in its commercial sense
but also duty and guilt in their theological sense – of having fallen. Gregor Samsa
belongs to the community of sons who live and die in this realm, governed by
ruined, damaged fathers who in their own falls lead their sons to self-destruction.
A similar fate is that of Georg Bendemann’s being sentenced to death by his father
in Kafka’s story “The Judgement” (“Das Urteil”). Each son is condemned in the
name of the father and carries the generational burden. In Kafka’s unfinished

22 Walter Benjamin, “Franz Kafka: On the Tenth Anniversary of His Death” (“Franz Kafka: Zur
zehnten Wiederkehr seines Todestages”), in Illuminations, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry
Wiederkehr seines Todestages,” in Benjamin über Kafka. Texte, Briefzeugnisse, Aufzeichnungen
23 Franz Kafka, Beim Bau der chinesischen Mauer [The Great Wall of China], Fischer Taschen-
novels this pattern turns cosmic: in short, what the son carries on his back – namely, his guilt – is in fact the universe itself.

5 Not-Yet

The alarm clock ticking on the chest in Gregor Samsa’s room signifies profane time, the time of living and working on earth. Samsa lives in this time-space; he feels its surface, having being condemned to crawl on the ground. In this sense he endures the trial; the hard judgment of the fall shapes the human condition – finitude and labor. The being-on-earth that is measured by the alarm clock could not be fully understood without these theological assumptions of the weight of Schuld, or debt and guilt, in the design of human subjectivity. How does Kafka contend with these theological assumptions? In his stories the father falls and arises, the son escapes and returns; the women, subjects of desire, are doubled too. It is rather an inversion of the theological assumptions, a difficult irony, in which tradition itself seems to be rewritten against its own path. Samsa’s alarm clock also counts these inverted hours – for time seems to go wrong and finally collapses into circles of repetitions.

Did the clock ring? What was it announcing? Or were its hours broken and lost in delays and oblivion? At the beginning of the story the alarm clock does not allow the counting of any special hour, for everything seems to be equally measured into standard, homogenous segments of universal time. In this time-space, in this “one morning,” in the timeliness of the profane order, in the empty zones of the clock, there is no place for singularity and differences.

And yet, we recall, the alarm clock in Samsa’s room signifies one original hour, namely, four o’clock in the morning, the time of beginning, the hour at which all things are called to creation, to return to this world. This hour is measured, recalled with a terrible noise; yet it has passed uneventfully... Gregor Samsa did not awake.

We are thus dealing with this special, singular hour, the time of lost promises and of periods of delay, the time in which Kafka’s literary body is being written. It is the time of the story itself that should be understood according to these inversions, not only the period in which Kafka’s story was written – those longs weeks of the winter of 1912, the weeks of his desperate exchange of letters with Felice Bauer – but also the time gaps enveloped in the text itself. The literary writing depends on these inversions, suspensions, and distortions of time structures. The poetical moment is of this nature. It embodies a resistance: the resistance to being on time. Meaning, in its literary sense, is reproduced in suspension.
Meaning itself is always and still on its way, and the way is that of the reader, who, like the man from the village standing before the law, always arrives too early or too late. Being before the law is that of coming beforehand, of arriving too early. Yet at the same time his arrival is already late, for he will never be admitted: the entrance, his hour, is past forever. The man from the village arrives not-in-time, and this, we recall, was the guard’s answer at the gate of the law in Kafka’s story: entrance to the law is allowed, but “not yet” (jetzt aber nicht). This is the time digression, the perversion of time that signifies the debt, the guilt, the blessing, and the curse that many of these villagers in Kafka’s stories suffer. The country doctor himself is a subject of these time distortions. He is removed from his home at the speed of lightening, and here he stands at night at the gates of a distant village. However, when he wishes to return home, being thrown on to the country road, he lives forever in a different, tremendously slow time. The country doctor’s journey comes to a standstill. Who should save him from this journey?

The clock of Kafka’s story, the rhythm of his tale, takes place at the extremes. And there, where time is accelerated to a standstill, something is being revealed – the literary matter itself. The alarm clock ticking in Samsa’s bedroom signifies the time labyrinths of Kafka’s prose. This is how Gregor Samsa is being awakened into the world – he awakens by the sign of the clock. But this awaking, the ecstasy of time, brings time itself to its end.

Thus, in the ticking of the alarm clock, one hears the mechanism, the repetition of work, travel, and trade; one listens to the rhythm of studies and to the timings of childhood and the periods of memory and oblivion. We hear the ecstasy, the noise and the silence of time itself – the time of debts, the time of guilt, the time of judgment, the time that escapes or re-turns to a standstill. In these extremes, in inversions of time, being re-presented in the world of Gregor Samsa, literature reveals itself, I argue. It speaks with suspensions and delays of meaning, in being too early, in being too late, in being “not yet” (jetzt aber nicht), but never being on time.

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6 The Time of the Messiah

And in this time that collapses, the time that is wrong, the time of being late, the time that passed before it was, Kafka’s protagonists, and perhaps also his readers, feel this rare impression of singular time that the Talmud relates to the Messiah himself, who sits before the gate and waits to be called into the world – for his time never arrives; his time has already passed.

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