The Chronolibidinal World of *Dying for Time*

Jennifer Yusin
Drexel University

Martin Hägglund. *Dying for Time: Proust, Woolf, Nabokov*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2012. 197 pp. $49.95 cloth.

Desire, as Martin Hägglund claims in Dying For Time, *has been erringly conceived in philosophical, literary, and psychoanalytic traditions as testifying to a fundamental lack of being. In response, Hägglund develops the notion of chronolibido, a theory that posits the constitutive difference of desire as testifying to temporal finitude and mortality as the object of desire. In the rubric of chronolibido, the desire for immortality dissimulates a preceding desire for survival. This review takes up Hägglund's theory of desire and examines the implications of chronolibido for reading modernist literature.*

Keywords: chronolibido / desire / time / difference / modernist literature

Like his first book published in English, *Radical Atheism: Derrida and the Time of Life* (2008), Martin Hägglund's *Dying for Time: Proust, Woolf, Nabokov* is groundbreaking and powerful. Hägglund is a remarkable writer who writes with precision and clarity and argues convincingly. One need not have read *Radical Atheism* in order to understand *Dying for Time*, but it is important to note that *Dying for Time* is a critical follow up to *Radical Atheism*. In *Radical Atheism,* Hägglund argues that the logic of radical atheism disavows traditional atheism by arguing that the desire for immortality dissimulates a prior investment in survival. As Adrian Johnston, William Egginton, and Michael Naas noted in their trenchant responses to this book, the theory of radical atheism relies upon a theory of desire that is not yet fully fleshed out in the first text. In its sustained engagement with psychoanalytic models of desire, *Dying for Time* provides a robust response to this critique of radical atheism. But as one reads *Dying for Time*, it quickly becomes clear that the text is more than a rejoinder; it is yet another scholarly triumph in its own right.

Hägglund opens his study with the claim that "[t]he debate between philosophy and literature begins over the question of desire" (1). There is, as Hägglund tells us, a scene in Plato's *Republic* when Socrates expresses his frustration with

Homer's poetry. He is unnerved by the fact that even the most keen of philosophical minds fall victim to the dramatic pathos in the *Iliad* that leaves one "in the grip of the desire for mortal life" (1). The task of the philosopher is not to be disturbed by the drama of mortal life staged in poetry, but rather to turn one's desire towards immortality and thus to the presence of the eternal that is immune to the threat of loss. Hägglund's opening focus on Socrates's lament bears a pressing significance for the book as a whole for a couple of key reasons. First, it sets up Hägglund's bold claim that the entire tradition of western philosophy—as well as that of literary criticism and psychoanalysis—has erringly conceived that "the constitutive difference of desire has supported the inference that desire testifies to an ontological lack" (3). In other words, desire is traditionally conceived of in terms of a defining difference between who one really wants to be and who one actually is, and that this difference leads one to desire to be what one is not. This translates into the desire to transcend time and thus to be immortal. Second, Hägglund's opening move rhetorically foregrounds what is one of the driving forces of the work: that literature stages the drama of lived experiences in ways that offer us key theoretical insights into the question of desire.

In *The Pursuit of Signs*, Jonathan Culler explores "the relationship between the concrete and exemplary dramas of literature and the more abstract claims of philosophical and psychoanalytic discourse" (226). Hägglund takes up that relationship with gusto, demonstrating at each turn that the theory of chronolibido—the central theory of desire that animates the study—"is not simply an extrinsic theory" mapped onto the literary texts in question but more accurately, "a set of insights [. . .] derive[d] from the texts themselves" (19). "Throughout the book," Hägglund writes, "I am concerned with the ability of literary writing to address fundamental questions of life and death, time and space, memory and forgetting" (18). For as much as literary writing offers key theoretical insights into the logic of chronolibido, that logic is also, according to Hägglund, more expressive of the dramatic pathos of survival and lived experience.

Dying for Time is organized around close readings of Marcel Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu*, Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse*, and Vladimir Nabokov's *Ada or Ardor: A Family Chronicle*. Hägglund is interested in these modernist authors in part because the concentration on aesthetics and time in modernist literature offers fruitful ground for exploring what he calls a "chronolibidinal aesthetics" (19). More to the point, however, what draws Hägglund to these authors in particular is not just that they have explored the intimate connection between time and desire with the greatest intensity but that their work has been persistently misread as expressive of desire as a desire for immortality. Demonstrating how Proust, Woolf, and Nabokov practice a chronolibidinal aesthetics in their writing enables Hägglund to develop his theory of chronolibido; these authors' works simultaneously provide him with the language for a new account of the constitutive difference of desire that does not testify to an ontological lack. This latter task mobilizes the study as a whole into a tour-de-force that disrupts the pervasive tendency to read immortality as the fundamental object

of desire in literary, philosophical, and psychoanalytic discourses and establishes instead a new model of desire that posits the desire for survival and mortal life precedes a desire for immortality.

To read modernist literature as staging the drama of "the radical temporality of life" (19) is a primary aim of *Dying for Time*, which hinges on Hägglund's governing pursuit of a new account of the constitutive difference of desire that is not read as an ontological lack. Here Hägglund begins by tracing—in the Derridean sense—"the constitutive difference of desire to the condition of time" (3). To understand how the difference of desire is linked to time, it is essential to grasp the basic tenets of the Hägglundian logic of time. Drawing upon Derrida's work on the trace, Hägglund formulates the present as constituted by the simultaneous passing away of the past and the anticipation of a future yet to come. Rather than conceive of the present as a temporality intrinsic in itself, Hägglund posits that the present is instead characterized by the infinite splitting between past and future. In this rubric, a present moment (and therefore presence and everything thought on the basis of presence) can only come into being insofar as the moment is always already becoming past and is being superseded by another moment that has yet to arrive. Consequently, a present moment is always negating itself because the very event of it becoming present is always differentiating between what is ending and what is anticipated, and among present moments. Because the present moment comes into being as the splitting between past and future, it is always threatened by the possibility of its own erasure. Thus differentiation and the threat of loss are co-implicated in this deconstructionist logic of time; we cannot think one without the other.

Crucially, the notion of chronolibido relies upon this temporal process of alteration because it enables a reading in which we may interpret the difference of desire as affirming a preceding investment in survival and mortal life that resists the desire for immortality from within, and argues against a logic of lack that leads to the conclusion that being timeless is the object of desire. It is also key factor in Hägglund's chronolibidinal world because it establishes the theoretical framework for his distinction between immortality and survival as the difference between reposing "in a state of being that is eternally the same" and "liv[ing] on in a temporal process of alteration" (8). More to the point, the structural relation between time and difference allows us to see that difference is bound to and defined by an investment in survival and mortal life precisely because it can be lost. We are invested in mortal life because it is temporally finite (we want to survive because of the threat of death) and the very fact of survival is itself bound to temporal finitude for its own possibility in the first place. This means however, that the investment in survival is characterized by a double bind between chronophilia, the attachment "to a temporal being," and chronophobia, the fear of losing that temporal being (9). Temporal finitude is thus intrinsic to life itself and the state of being invested in life. Though the exigencies of lived experience may be expressed as the desire to transcend time, it always, according to Hägglund, stems from a desire to be a mortal being who lives on in time. Whereas philosophical,

psychoanalytic, and literary tradition has persistently read the difference of desire as always answering to an ontological lack that articulates immortality as the object of desire, Hägglund's radical rethinking of desire argues that this difference in fact testifies to temporal finitude and thus to mortality and survival as the object of desire.

Hägglund's theory of chronolibido is a model for reading and interpreting the difference of desire as affirming the desire to live on in time; for "chronolibidinal reading" reveals the governing theoretical principles of desire by deriving them from "the drama of desire from the bond to temporal life and the investment in living on" that are "staged in the works of three canonical modern writers" (14). Our first stage for the fundamental drama of libidinal being is *À la recherche du temps perdu*. We are first ushered through a comprehensive survey of the influential studies of Proust (including philosophers like Gilles Deleuze and Paul Ricoeur and literary theorists and critics like Georges Poulet and Leo Bersani) only to discover that, in the end, every reading of Proust has not only missed the mark on the question of temporality and desire, but also erroneously considered the matters of Proustian aesthetics and metaphysics to be resolved. From the outset, Hägglund announces that every other reader of Proust has mistakenly read the narrator and protagonist Marcel's experiences with involuntary memory. They do not, he asserts, reveal "a timeless essence" (22). Even when Marcel's memories conjure feelings of being "an eternal man" or "outside of time," "the logic of Marcel's own text," Hägglund posits, contradicts the notion that he transcends time (23). "On the contrary, it highlights a constitutive temporal difference at the heart of the self. While a past self is retrieved through involuntary memory, the one who remembers can never be identical to the one who is remembered" (23).

To be sure, this conclusion is rendered via a classic deconstructionist move: to read the text against itself. One would expect no less from Hägglund who, with *Radical Atheism*, established himself as a pioneering reader of Derrida who invigorated deconstructionist philosophy with a new and powerful critical life. Hägglund never fails to derive such moments from excellent close readings of the novel that are focused on Marcel's writing. Marcel's "experience with involuntary memory leads [him] to pursue a chronolibidinal aesthetics" in his writing (45). Thus memory and writing are inextricably linked and it is writing that reveals the structural synthesis of time and thus of survival itself. The critical point is that Marcel's involuntary memory does not reveal an essential timeless self that that then fails to be represented as a unified whole in writing. Rather, the chronolibidinal aesthetics that drives Marcel's writing animates the passage of time as the source of pathos that then intensifies the experiences of being mortal, and thus of the violent action of time. A present moment, let us recall, is always being negated by its own passing away and by other successive moments. Erasure, extinction, and loss are at work in survival itself from the beginning, making painfully clear that Marcel is driven to write in the first place because of the threat of his own destruction. He writes because he is afraid of death, and because he is afraid of that loss, he writes in order to record his experiences for the future. As Hägglund

concludes that "[t]he co-implication of chronophilia and chronophobia is thus the genesis of Marcel's book" (51), we can see how chronolibidinal aesthetics articulate Proust's novel as staging the drama of the inherent destructibility of life.

The threat of loss acquires a new intensity in Hägglund's second chapter as he explores what he terms a "chronolibidinal conception of trauma and mourning" (17) in Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse*. Hägglund's engagement with Woolf is framed by "Woolf's aesthetics of the moment" (57) that reveal the negativity of time. Woolf's literary writing captures the violent passage of time by staging the drama of how "the value of life is thus never given once and for all but is strictly undecidable: life is both the source of the desirable *and* the undesirable, so the promise of the future is at the same time a threat" (61). The undecidability of life is central to Hägglund's notion of the "traumatic conception of temporality" because it elucidates the "structural link between the possibility of trauma and the constitution of time" (61). Like involuntary memory in Proust, Woolf's painter protagonist in *To the Lighthouse,* Lily Briscoe, has "aesthetic ambition to crystallize the moment" (59) articulates the dramatic pathos of the passage of time in experience. But unlike in Proust's novel, temporality in Woolf is decidedly and explicitly traumatic.

As it has been inherited from Freud's seminal work on traumatic neuroses in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, the traumatic event and its elaboration in the psyche is characterized by delay and deferral. Trauma minimally describes a sudden and overwhelming experience with life-threatening events that cannot be fully grasped, even retrospectively. Because the traumatic event happens too soon for consciousness to process the magnitude of what has happened, trauma is characterized by a delay in understanding that occurs in the form of repetitions, such as nightmares and flashbacks that attempt to apprehend the event at a later time. Traumatic repetitions are also plagued by a happening too soon, for the psyche can never adequately prepare itself for the catastrophic force of a traumatic event. Insofar as the psyche is always trying to master the event *after* its occurrence, the traumatic event is also characterized by an understanding that is too late and more precisely, always incomplete. The traumatized subject is always in the process of trying to comprehend past experience, which is the delay, and thus, how the meaning and composition of their present experiences can only be apprehended in retrospect, which is the deferral.

Hägglund argues that the structure of delay and deferral that characterizes the traumatic event is also that which characterizes "temporal experience in general" (61). The linkage between the temporal structure of trauma and of temporal experience in general is a critical move in Hägglund's analysis of Woolf's novels because it allows him to argue that "[f]ollowing Derrida's provocative formulation, we can therefore say that *every event is traumatic*" (61). For Hägglund, our lives are vulnerable to trauma as a condition of being because we are subject to unpredictable futures. The very exposure to trauma is thus inseparably bound to the possibility of survival in the first place. Hägglund is keenly interested in articulating the structural sameness between trauma and experience more

generally and not necessarily a sameness among different registers of experience. He is careful to avoid a "relativist thesis" that proclaims "everything is violent" (72). "Of course," Hägglund writes, "the general susceptibility of trauma does not mean that everyone is *equally* susceptible to trauma. The different degrees of susceptibility, however, all presuppose the structural possibility of trauma that is concomitant with temporal experience in general. A temporal being is by definition vulnerable to trauma, since it can never repose in itself and is exposed to an undecidable future" (62).

Hägglund explores how the undecidability of life is played out in the exigencies of lived experience in *Mrs. Dalloway*, in particular through the traumatic events experienced by the characters Clarissa and Septimus. Far from proposing a model of how to respond to trauma, Hägglund argues that the power of Woolf's "depiction of trauma [. . .] dramatizes how the undecidability of survival pertains to the desire for life itself" (72). Thus Hägglund, in yet another moment that deftly argues against all of the landmark studies on the theme of trauma in Woolf's writings, contends that the scene of Septimus's suicide dramatizes chronolibidinal experience precisely by emphasizing that the aesthetics of the moment are imbued with an utter temporal singularity that cannot be replaced. That irreplaceability amplifies feelings of suffering precisely because it affirms the violent passage of time and the terrible undecidability of life. "The pathos of Woolf's *moments of living*," Hägglund tells us, "stems from the fact that they are always already *moments of dying*" (78). For some, then, suffering may invigorate one's feelings of chronophilia. For others, it eventually destroys one's attachment to life, leading them to a tragic end. Either way, these painful moments of being testify to temporal life as traumatic in our chronolibidinal world.

The difficult texture of time and memory returns with force in Hägglund's focus on the act of writing in Vladimir Nabokov's novel *Ada or Ardor: A Family Chronicle*. The narrative conceit of the novel draws attention to the conception of the "now" and how it dramatizes the "chronolibidinal notion of writing" (81). The novel recounts the incestuous, adolescent love between two siblings, Ada and Van, through Van's later writings about his memories of their love story. Provocatively, however, Van's memoir is continuously interrupted by revisions and notes made by Ada, himself, and an editor. As the novel unfolds, we learn that Van revises the typescript of his memoir into longhand approximately six years after it was first written, which was transcribed via dictation. Van's revised manuscript is then sent to a secretary who types up a fresh version of the memoir, only to have this version repeatedly interrupted by Van's and Ada's editorial comments that are inscribed by hand on the pages themselves. *Ada* is thus replete with structural and allegorical representations of the act of writing that "narrate the past [and] *record the act of narrating the past*" (100).

In Hägglund's reading, the narrative on all levels repeatedly testifies to the fact that both the act of inscribing and the inscription itself is never immune to the threat of erasure. Thus, the activity of writing becomes its own chronolibidinal drama that is animated from the beginning by the problem of writing time. For

both Van and Ada, writing in all its forms is motivated by the desire to archive and retain the memories of their joyful, youthful love story, and thus to preserve the love itself. But that process of preservation is, at every turn, forced to confront the inevitable reliance of the mark on the possibility of erasure that exceeds any authorial control. As Hägglund's engagement with the novel makes clear, we write in the name of the future time when it may be read precisely because what is being written is always already vulnerable to its own destruction. We should not read the interruptions that the novel stages through the activity of writing as interruptions of a life that is otherwise whole. "Rather, the life that continues is in itself already marked by interruption: it reckons with irreversible losses and continues to record the negativity of time in its very continuation" (107).

Following his literary analyses, Hägglund engages with the question of desire in psychoanalytic discourse. To do so, he pays particular attention to Freud's 1916 essay "On Transience," and claims that "[f]or all of its groundbreaking achievements, the psychoanalytic conception of desire has generally not questioned the supposed experience of an ontological lack" (111). Hägglund's reading of "On Transience" is coupled with his analysis of the Lacanian model of desire, both of which seek to demonstrate that the psychoanalytic logic of lack "assumes that a temporal being is a lack of being that we desire to transcend, while emphasizing that the idea of a timeless being is an illusion that we should learn to leave behind" (111). In Hägglund's reading, Freud's essay testifies to the double bind of chronophilia and chronophobia in the general theory of chronolibido.

But as Adrian Johnston and William Egginton contend in their response to *Radical Atheism*, which also take up his early readings of Freud's essay that are recapitulated in *Dying for Time*, Hägglund's reading elides the fact that Freud does not deny that everything, including desire, is temporally finite. Although Hägglund's assessment of "On Transience" offers an excellent reading of the poet figure's fears about the transience nature of life, it seems to ignore Freud's own postulations about the significance of our relation to transience in our emotional lives. That is, Hägglund's reading does not account for the ways in which Freud is offering a new way of understanding our ability to desire, and our subsequent experience of it, in relation to transience. For Freud, the scarcity of time intensifies the enjoyment of what is already pleasurable and is therefore already steeped in the inevitability of its end. Temporal finitude plays an indispensable role in increasing, or decreasing for that matter, the intensity of one's experience of desire. In other words, Freud's account of transience provides us with a new way of understanding *how we experience* our desire and our enjoyment within the landscape of our emotional lives.

In no way is Hägglund's reading of Freud's essay an indication of failure in the logic of his central argument about chronolibido. On the contrary, with remarkable consistence and precision Hägglund persistently adheres to an impeccable logic and articulates the notion of chronolibido and its implications for how we conceive of desire. Indeed Hägglund's ability to argue so persuasively and so effectively is rivaled by no one to my mind. Ironically, however, it is the force of

the logic itself that, when it comes to psychoanalytic discourse, is his foe. One of the central insights of psychoanalysis is the power unconscious processes play in desire, and in our lives more generally. Even if we agree that experience in general is a condition of temporal finitude (and indeed I do agree on this point), this notion does not always *adequately describe* how certain events, like traumatic experience, occasion unconscious processes that do not necessarily answer to the structural condition of time on the level of experience. Indeed this is one of the important functions of other discourses like literature and psychoanalysis: to give expression to our experiences that exceed structural language of deconstruction, to offer us a new language for talking about how the exigencies of lived are actually experienced. Our lives may be constituted by the logic of temporal succession, alteration, and finitude in the first place, but this does not mean that our lives are always given to us as such. And the ways we experience even the texture of time and the ways in which we live on in time have much more with how that the temporal bond is symbolically rendered and played out in forms of affect. Although this point does not escape Hägglund—he is careful to note that "the investment in survival is *a necessary but not sufficient condition* for affectivity" that "does not itself have *any* given aim or direction" (13)—he nevertheless employs the language of deconstruction to return us, in every instance, to the condition of temporality. So one is left questioning, in the wake of an impressive literary analysis: does literary writing only, in the end, dramatize and affirm a straightforward relation to the structural? Or does it affirm the structural but also disrupt it by dramatizing the symbolic power of the unconscious?

Irrespective of where one stands on the matter of literary writing and whether or not lived experiences always answer to the structural condition of time, *Dying for Time* is brilliant and innovative. From this point forward, one would be hard pressed to think through questions of desire without turning to Hägglund's study. But much of what makes *Dying for Time* so remarkable is its attention to modernist masterpieces that continue to demand our critical attention and our emotional investment as readers. Whereas in *Radical Atheism* Hägglund emerges as an influential philosopher of deconstructionist thought, in *Dying for Time* he asserts himself as a formidable literary critic. And it is in his groundbreaking readings of Proust, Woolf, and Nabokov that he takes up what Culler calls "the concrete and exemplary dramas of literature" (226) and demonstrates that it is in literature where the dramas of desire, survival, and of lived experience are most profoundly given to us.

Works Cited

Culler, Jonathan. *The Pursuit of Signs*. 1981. Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 2001. Print.

Egginton, William. "On Radical Atheism, Chronolibidinal Reading, and Impossible Desires." *CR: The New Centennial Review* 9.1 (2009): 191–208. Print.

Freud, Sigmund. *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. 1920. Ed. and Trans. James Strachey. New York: W.W. Norton, 1961. Print.

Hägglund, Martin. *Radical Atheism: Derrida and the Time of Life*. Palo Alto, Stanford UP, 2008. Print.

Johnston, Adrian. "Life Terminal and Interminable: The Undead and the Afterlife of the Afterlife — A Friendly Disagreement with Martin Hägglund." *CR: The New Centennial Review* 9.1 (2009): 147–189. Print.

Naas, Michael. "An Atheism that (*Dieu merci!*) Still Leaves Something to Be Desired." *CR: The New Centennial Review* 9.1 (2009): 45–68. Print.