Dying for Time: Proust, Woolf, Nabokov

Martin Hägglund

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The question of desire has been the source of a debate between literature and philosophy that can be traced back to Plato's *Republic*. In Plato's dialogue, Socrates explores the affective power and the pathos of poetry, arguing that the pleasure we derive from the catharsis of tragedy causes us to desire a life bound to mortality. This kind of mortal desire is antithetical to the task of the philosopher, whose desire should transcend the "investment in mortal life," orienting instead toward the "immutable presence of the eternal" (2). This "Platonic axiom" of the desire to transcend mortality marks the point of departure for Martin Hägglund's new book, *Dying for Time*, a work that grounds the origin of all desire in the investment in survival.

In *Dying for Time*, Hägglund introduces the concept of *chronolibido* as a means of challenging our traditional conceptions of desire. The condition of desire, Hägglund argues, is bound to the condition of time. Desire is contingent upon our being invested in a temporal existence that, like the passage of time, depends on negation and loss in order to exist in the first place. In contrast to Lacan's notion of desire as ontological lack, in which one can never be fulfilled because the object of desire is understood to be a timeless entity, Hägglund insists that we desire because "both the subject *and* the object of desire are from the very beginning temporal" (3). Because every moment must negate itself, must cease to be "*in its very event*" in order for there to be time at all (3), this temporal succession is both the fundamental condition for survival and the origin of desire. That which propels us forward in time is the desire for fulfillment, and this fulfillment is fundamentally temporal: "Even at the moment one is fulfilled, the moment is ceasing to be and opens the experience to loss" (4). This experience of loss serves as the foundation for Hägglund's chronolibidinal argument, formulated by the double bind of *chronophobia* and *chronophilia*. On the one hand, it is because of one's "temporal finitude that one cares about life in the first place" (5), and this attachment to a life exposed to loss, this "care," is *chronophilia*. On the other hand, this very attachment generates an anxiety over losing one's temporal being, and this fear results in *chronophobia*.

Within the framework of a double bind based on the attachment to mortal life, Hägglund›s book calls for a reconsideration of philosophical, theoretical, and literary works that traditionally have been read as paradigmatic of the desire to transcend mortal life and attain immortality. The first three chapters of *Dying for Time* reassess three modernist authors, Marcel Proust, Virginia Woolf, and Vladmir Nabokov, whose works have "persistently been read in accordance with a desire to transcend mortal life" (14). By locating the logic of chronolibido within a selection of their canonical literary works, Hägglund shifts the drama of desire from a lack of immortality to the bond to temporal life. Against the dominant criticism surrounding the transcendent aesthetics of these authors, Hägglund powerfully articulates that the complex and nuanced connection between time and desire has been fundamentally misunderstood.

Through an exploration of Proust's "modernist masterpiece," À la recherche du temps perdu (1913), chapter 1 departs from the established reading of Proust's involuntary, or epiphanic, memory as revealing a "timeless essence" (22). In contrast to Georges Poulet's canonical reading, for example, wherein Marcel's aesthetic revelation exposes "'an essential self, liberated from time and contingency, a primal and perpetual being, the creator of itself, [so that] the existence traveling in search of its essence finds it in timelessness'" (22), Hägglund argues that the experience of involuntary memory does not, in fact, "yield an identity that is exempt from time" (23). Through the logic of chronolibido located within Proust's own prose, Hägglund shows that the resuscitation of a past self through involuntary memory necessarily coincides with the recognition that the past (and the past self) is irrevocably dead. While Marcel's repeated claim to "having attained an aesthetic state that would allow him to contemplate the world without the anxieties of desire" (that is, a world unbound to temporal finitude), lends credence to the argument that what he desires is access to a "timeless essence," Hägglund reveals how these moments are «undercut from within" by the double bind of joy at recovering the past and a sadness in realizing that the past is no longer (55). This double bind necessarily is contingent upon an investment in an essentially temporal being, and Marcel's effort to record this extinction at work in the midst of survival forces a new conception of the Proustian aesthetic.

Woolf's well-known and much analyzed "moments of being," or "aesthetics of the moment" (as Hägglund refers to them), are the focal point of chapter 2. In contrast to Ann Banfield's canonical account, which posits the "being of the moment as a timeless presence" that "crystallizes" the atemporal moment and transforms it "from the ephemeral into the eternal," Hägglund argues that Woolf›s aesthetics of the moment reveal how "even the most immediate presence passes away as soon as it comes to be" (57). It is not the desire to transcend the moment that precipitates its crystallization, but rather, it is the recognition in the very temporality of the moment that causes one to want to retain it as a memory that will live on in the future. Mrs. Ramsay's "ecstatic experience" during the famous dinner scene in *To the Lighthouse* (1927) is given as an example of the chronolibidinal logic at work in the text. As Mrs. Ramsay "reposes 'in an element of joy' she thinks to herself: 'this cannot last'" (59). The recognition of the temporal transience of the moment is precisely what makes Mrs. Ramsay want to hold onto it; she desires to make it "endure" not as a moment located in the realm of the timeless, but as a moment that will allow herself and her memory to *live on in time*.

This "threat of temporal finitude," Hägglund emphasizes, «is at work in every experience" (60), and as such, he presents his theory of the "traumatic conception of temporality" in Woolf's aesthetics of the moment. The same temporal structure inherent to trauma — that is, the event that happens either

too soon, wherein one cannot fully comprehend the moment at the time, or too late, in that one can only grasp it once it has passed — exemplifies the experience of temporality in general. This understanding of time as one of "deferral and delay" leaves an interval in temporal experience that is repeatedly exposed to the possibility of trauma. Thus, "exposure to trauma is inseparable from the very opening of the future and thus inseparable from the possibility of living on in the first place" (62). The exposure to an "undecidable future" may simultaneously "enhance one's feeling of being alive" and leave one feeling "devastated" (78). This experience of being alive is dependent upon the chronolibidinal double bind of the care for a temporal existence and the fear of losing it, which, for Hägglund, characterizes the "traumatic impact of being mortal" (78).

The final chapter to focus on a literary text explores the relationship between chronolibidinal desire and the act of writing. By examining a selection from Nabokov's oeuvre, including *Ada or Ardor: A Family Chronicle* (1969) and *Speak, Memory* (1951), Hägglund illustrates how chronophobia, the "apprehension of the imminent risk of loss" (i.e. the susceptibility to trauma illustrated above), motivates the desire to "imprint the memory of what happens" (82). Through the motif *now remember*, which originated in Nabokov's first great novel, *The Gift* (1938), Hägglund demonstrates how the act of writing stems from the chronolibidinal investment in living on. Against the dominant reading in Nabokov scholarship, which views the act of writing as the "desire to transcend the condition of time" (84), Hägglund illustrates how the necessity of writing, for both Nabokov and his protagonists, stems from the desire to inscribe the "present as memory for the future" (84). Following the logic of the negativity of time, the "passion for writing [becomes] the passion for survival" (84): as every moment ceases to be as soon as it comes into being, the present must be inscribed in memory in order to be grasped at all. "Without this inscription," Hägglund asserts, «nothing would survive, since nothing would remain from the passage of time" (84). The passion for writing as passion for survival hinges on the chronolibidinal investment in living on as a being subject to the negativity of time. The chronophobic fear of losing the mortal life one cares for is the impetus for recording one's memory against the threat of future erasure.

The final chapter of the book, "Reading: Freud, Lacan, Derrida," reexamines a series of canonical psychoanalytic works with a chronolibidinal focus that grounds the logic of chronolibido within the logic of the text itself. Through a groundbreaking rereading of Freud's most fundamental concepts, with a particular focus on the death drive and pleasure drive, Hägglund finds convincing evidence in such texts as *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920) that chronolibidinal desire is at work within the psychoanalytic model of the mind. In opposition to Freud's claim that "'unconscious psychic processes are in themselves 'timeless,'" for example, Hägglund posits that the unconscious, while not necessarily adhering to "*linear* time," is not exempt from the "*succession* of time" (113). Hägglund uses Freud's notion of "cathexis," or what he describes as "every libidinal investment," as an example of the unconscious's essential relation to temporality (113). The "temporal finitude of the cathected object" — the possibility that the cathected object, that which is bound, can be lost or altered — is what gives rise to a libidinal economy. Libidinal investments or bonds, which according to Hägglund are essentially temporal and therefore subject to the processes of survival and extinction that characterize the succession of time, produce the economic capacity to "redistribute resources and withdraw investments as a strategic response to being dependent on what may change or be lost" (113).

Thus, Hägglund's theory of chronolibido attempts to reconsider the concept of the libidinal economy in terms of "the temporal process of *binding*" (122). It is because the bonds are always exposed to the possibility of being broken that we are invested in them. If the objects were "fully present in themselves," Hägglund maintains, «there would be no reason to care about them, since nothing could happen to them" (113). These bonds are the foundation of survival — the necessary tension required for psychic life is dependent on binding — and the "binding excitation" is the basis for any "drive, desire, or will" (129). Against Freud's claim in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, if the unconscious were not subject to the succession of time, "nothing would happen in it, and nothing would happen because of it" (114).

Tracing the origin of desire in written works from Socrates to Derrida, Hägglund's book skillfully and clearly demonstrates that the proof of chronolibido, the investment in mortal life and not the desire to transcend it, derives from the texts themselves. As temporal beings bound to the investment in living on in time, the experience of mortality exists within the double bind of care and fear, pleasure and pain, "mourning, trauma, and bliss" (167). Within the framework of chronolibido, Hägglund reveals new ways for reading the drama of desire in both literature and philosophy, and he challenges us to rethink our conception of what it means to live a mortal life bound to the passage of time.