BOOK REVIEW

Dying for Time: Proust, Woolf, Nabokov. *Martin Hägglund*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012. Pp. 197.

The death of God demands a revaluation of values; it is fitting, then, that after challenging the philosophical coherence and desirability of ideas of God and immortality in his field-changing book *Radical Atheism: Derrida and the Time of Life* (2008), Martin Hägglund should reexamine the nature of desire itself. His new monograph, *Dying for Time*, turns to the question of the value of mortal life and, in the process, presses into its service the insights of three canonical modernist authors. This book develops a significant and original theory of desire, disputing traditional philosophical and psychoanalytic accounts, and it reads novels by Marcel Proust, Virginia Woolf, and Vladimir Nabokov in light of this theory, challenging the critical consensus that attends them. In so doing, it also opens up further questions about the role of the literary in theorizing desire, as I will discuss at the end of this review.

Dying for Time argues that desire must be reconceived in light of the condition of finitude. Against the "Platonic axiom" that the true aim of desire is a state of immortality where nothing can be lost (2), and against Freudian and Lacanian accounts of desire as underwritten by the death drive, Hägglund contends that the truth of our desire is an investment in mortal life—in this fragile, human life—with all the attachments to perishable objects that living entails. Received ideas about desire generally assume that desire seeks to extinguish itself in satisfaction and that, because of our finite natures, any given satisfaction must be incomplete and impermanent. Indeed, most metaphysical and religious traditions advocate detachment from worldly pleasures and a reinvestment of desire in a truth or state of being that would transcend time. The psychoanalytic tradition at least recognizes that a state in which we would be impervious to loss is a state indistinguish-

able from death, but it nevertheless presents this state of repose as the telos of the desiring being. Hägglund boldly argues that fulfillment itself must be rethought as essentially temporal. We are mobile subjects in pursuit of mobile objects, to paraphrase Samuel Beckett—mobile, because what we love is subject to change, just as we ourselves are subject to change.[1] We don't desire in spite of the threat of time but because of it: to desire something is to fear losing it and to hope to retain it, at the very least not to remain indifferent to what happens.

The implication of time in all desire leads Hägglund to characterize libido as "chronolibido." While recognizing the mobility or "constitutive difference" of desire described by psychoanalysis, chronolibido attributes this difference to the differential structure of time rather than to a gap in being (3). It thus explicitly challenges the logic of lack that operates in accounts of desire from Plato to Lacan. What is more, chronolibido describes not just the structure of desire but the affective bond to temporal life, arguing that we are constitutively invested in our own survival. Here, it is important to note that Hägglund does not seek to replace a theory of the death drive with that of a "survival drive." Refusing to do so means that Hägglund departs from some terminology he put forth in *Radical Atheism*,[2] but, significantly, it indicates his decision to refuse any teleological principle for the libidinal economy (12). Even the preservation of the organism is not posited as an end. The libido proceeds from the investment or "bond" to temporal life—and the last chapter of this book engages with Freud and Lacan in detail in order to develop an original theory of binding—but life itself has the status of neither a purpose nor a principle. We might say that Hägglund's is a philosophy of life without vitalism.

Readings of Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu* (1913–27), Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925) and *To the Lighthouse* (1927), and Nabokov's *Ada or Ardor: A Family Chronicle* (1969) make up *Dying for Time*'s three central chapters. These readings seek to consider in depth the experience of desire, and especially of desire's ambivalence—what Hägglund refers to as the "chronophobia" and "chronophilia" of our finite attachments, the fear of losing and the hope of preserving the mobile objects of our desire. Against the nearly universal tendency to read these works as invested in art's power to transcend time, whether through the faculty of memory (Proust), writing (Nabokov), or a hyperattentiveness to the moment (Woolf), Hägglund argues that what these texts reveal is in fact the complex, individual, and pathos-ridden experience of mortal survival—what he also calls a rendering "palpable" of the effects of time (77). Hägglund's reading of Proust, for

1. Samuel Beckett, *Proust* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1931), 6–7.

2. Martin Hägglund, *Radical Atheism: Derrida and the Time of Life* (Stanford University Press, 2008), 170 n. 13.

example, challenges the pervasive celebration of involuntary memory as revealing a timeless essence and argues, instead, that the "truth" disclosed by involuntary memory is that of the form of time itself, made "visible in the contrast" between what survives and what is extinguished (50).

The treatment of Woolf is perhaps the most compelling of the three, as it puts its finger on something uniquely poignant in the experience of reading her: "The experience of reading Woolf," Hägglund observes, "may not only enhance one's feeling of being alive, it may also leave one devastated" (78). Contrary to those who find in Woolf's attention to the richness of the moment an attempt to "transform the ephemeral into the eternal" (57), Hägglund argues that Woolf's aesthetics underscores the essentially traumatic character of every event. Beyond the specific traumas depicted in *Mrs. Dalloway*—traumas of war, of illness—Woolf shows that "every event is traumatic," in Hägglund's reading, because its value cannot be decided in advance (61). The temporal character of experience means that what happens can be assimilated only after the fact and must be exposed to the threats of an unknown future.

Similarly, Hägglund's reading of *Ada* finds that Nabokov depicts an attentiveness to the fleeting present, in which "the necessity of writing—of inscribing the present as a memory for the future—follows from the negativity of time" (84). In all of Hägglund's readings, hope and fear, chronophilia and chronophobia mark the affective investment of temporal being. None of the authors he considers can offer us a cure for "the violent condition of survival"; their achievement is rather to have "rendered its complexities" (72).

Dying for Time's literary readings are structured by debates with major critics (Gérard Genette, Leo Bersani, Joshua Landy, Ann Banfield, J. Hillis Miller, Brian Boyd, and Robert Alter, among a number of others), and Hägglund convincingly draws out assumptions that otherwise diverse readers hold in common. Still more convincing is the way he draws out evidence from the literary texts in support of his arguments, even if this means challenging those texts' own self-understanding. This is a strength of Hägglund's approach, and a strategy that owes much to deconstructive practices of criticism. His reading of Proust, for example, runs counter to claims made by Proust's protagonist about the aim of art and thus tackles the widespread problem of critics who conflate statements made by Proust's narrator with the position held by Proust himself. We cannot read fictional statements as if they were part of a philosophical treatise, Hägglund points out, nor isolate individual statements from a narrative at will (51). Rather, we need to "follow the sequence of articulation" of the narrative, the "logic" of the fiction in order to discern its meaning (51).

But what is it that pulls us along this "sequence"—a sequence constituted by the very activity of reading? What kind of desire might be at stake

in reading itself? Hägglund does not address these questions, though Proust himself hints at some answers. In Proust's hands, while conditioned by the passage of time, desire is also bound to problems of knowledge. Desire is often indistinguishable from jealousy, and jealousy is a hermeneutic problem: the problem of knowing the other person's whereabouts, the impossibility of knowing the truth of the other person's desire. Marcel can never know for certain whether Albertine is lying, for example, nor can he know anything about (what he suspects is) the pleasure she shares with other women. This form of difference—a cognitive difference, in addition to a temporal one—incites Marcel's desire. I would venture to say that such a cognitive difference is inscribed in the nature of literary language itself, insofar as what resists being read is integral to the activity of reading and provides it with its own temporality. Reading is surely temporal, but we also read because we desire to know, such that reading might be described as a displacement and deferral of the difference between knowing and not knowing.

As I mentioned, Hägglund's own practice of reading owes much to deconstructive approaches to literature, although he does not explicitly link his theory of desire to a methodology of reading, or to an account of literary language, or to any sustained consideration of the difference between literary texts and philosophical treatises. It would be interesting to hear him address such issues, now that he has taken up literary objects. A consideration of specifically literary forms of difference might bring something to bear on Hägglund's theory of desire and on the relationship between desire and the activity of thinking, perhaps attuning it to differences that are productive not only of time but of thought itself.

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