Beauty That Must Die:

Hägglund's *Dying for Time*

Robert S. Lehman (bio)

Martin Hägglund, *Dying for Time: Proust, Woolf, Nabokov*. Harvard University Press, 2012. $49.95 (hardcover). 208pp. ISBN 9780674066328

In *Dying for Time: Proust, Woolf, Nabokov*, Martin Hägglund advances the project he initiated in *Radical Atheism: Derrida and the Time of Life* (2008). In the earlier text, Hägglund underscored the "ultratranscendental" status of temporal finitude in the writings of Jacques Derrida, and so demonstrated the absurdity of attempts to marshal these writings for ethico-religious ends. The same notion of finitude is central to the argument of *Dying for Time*, though here Hägglund is much more willing to speak in his own voice. The results are impressive: a compelling rethinking of the link between time and desire coupled with singularly insightful readings of novels by Marcel Proust (*À la recherche du temps perdu*), Virginia Woolf (*Mrs. Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse*), and Vladimir Nabokov (*Ada or Ardor: A Family Chronicle*). Both as theory (of desire) and as practice (of literary analysis), *Dying for Time* is an unqualified success, though given the short length of the book—not quite two-hundred pages—questions are bound to remain concerning some of its claims. At the end of this review, I shall turn to one of these questions—the question of the specificity of the literary in Hägglund's argument, and what it means for the relationship between this argument and a more traditional philosophical aesthetics. Before doing so, however, I need to address in more detail what Hägglund describes as the "chronolibidinal" interlacing of time and desire.

Under the heading of "chronolibido," Hägglund develops an original theory of desire, one for which desire is grounded in the ineluctable finitude of temporal existence rather than driven forward by the experience of lack. The latter theory, for which desire is always the desire for an absent fullness, has been regnant in the philosophical tradition since the time of the Greeks and governs even the most sophisticated versions of psychoanalysis. The chronolibidinal alternative, Hägglund explains, describes the necessary co-implication within desire of "chronophobia" and "chronophilia." All desire is *chronophobic* because all desire is directed toward spatio-temporally finite beings, beings that—as finite—can, and finally will, be lost. And so, desire "fears and resists the passage of time that negates every irreplaceable moment" (29). And all desire is *chronophilic* because the very fact that the object of desire *is* finite, *is* capable of being lost makes it something to be pursued or sheltered in the first place. An object that could not be lost could not motivate desire; it could never inspire "care" (9). The theory of chronolibido thus reminds us that desire, even when it appears to have been satisfied, is constitutively insecure. Its horizon is the experience of loss brought about by the negativity of successive time.

Chronolibido is perhaps easiest to grasp when the object of desire is another person. When we desire an other, we desire someone whom we could fail to attain and, if attained, we could always lose. This threat of failure or loss, coupled with the irreplaceability of the object, structures chronolibidinal desire. And yet, Hägglund insists that this desire is no less effective in cases of so-called "auto-affection," in situations where the object of desire is ostensibly oneself. If I desire myself—if I desire to preserve myself in a certain state, for example—both the subject and the object of my desire are subject to the passage of time. If I desire my own happiness, I desire the origination or perduration of a state that invites desire because its loss is inscribed within it as a necessary possibility. If, on the other hand, I could be assured of an eternal happiness, a happiness that could not be lost because I had reached or would reach a heavenly state of immortal bliss, I could not relate to this happiness in terms of desire. Why? Desire, Hägglund argues, is the desire for *survival* (one's own or another's), for a temporal "living on" rather than for immortality (8). The latter—a state indistinguishable from death—would extinguish desire by separating the object of desire from the process of temporal alteration, from the finitude that makes it something desirable in the first place.

The real force of these claims becomes apparent when Hägglund distinguishes his own theory of chronolibido from the theory that has dominated—practically from its inception—the Western philosophical tradition. The latter, the traditional notion of desire, culminates in the psychoanalytic theories of Freud and Lacan, to which Hägglund dedicates an immanent critique in *Dying for Time*'s longest and most philosophically dense chapter. The traditional notion of desire is, however, already at work in the writings of Plato, in *The Symposium*, where Socrates outlines a notion of desire "predicated on a constitutive difference, since one can only desire to be what one is not" (3). One desires happiness because one is unhappy; one desires wealth because one is poor, and so on. This is a conception of desire based on *lack*, and its truth is the desire for eternity, for immortality, that which all finite creatures necessarily lack. It is this notion of desire—originating in lack and pointing to eternity—that the chronolibidinal theory of desire shows to be untenable. This demonstration is not effected by opposing to the claims of Socrates-Plato the chronolibidinal alternative, however, but by locating within the Platonic text the sources of its own chronolibidinal undoing. Hägglund thus turns to Diotima's discourse in *The Symposium*, where what appears at first as a paean to mortals' "passion for immortality turns out to describe a passion for survival" (7), for "living on" through one's children or one's works; and to Socrates' discourse in *The Apology*, where a celebration of death, of reposing in an eternal, unchanging state, proves impossible to

Theory & Event
Volume 16, Issue 1, 2013

differentiate from a celebration of immortality (11).

When Hägglund argues that psychoanalysis reproduces the Platonic notion of desire, his claim is neither that Freud and Lacan assume that our lack could ever be filled, nor that they fail to recognize that the attainment of fullness is indistinguishable from death; rather, his claim is that they never doubt that this fullness motivates desire—that, in some sense, "we desire to be dead" (12). He focuses his critique on the Freudian notion of the death drive, on its supposed radicality and position "beyond" the pleasure principle. In Freud's own account, the death drive is meant to explain the aim of the organism to attain a zero-degree of tension, and so to return to the state of equilibrium that existed prior to the excitation of life. But, Hägglund notes, this is essentially the same aim that Freud attributes to the pleasure principle: to discharge its energies and, thus, "to return to the quiescence [*Ruhe*] of the inorganic world" (Freud, qtd. 125). And so, Hägglund continues, "far from being radical…the death drive is based on the same logic of lack as the pleasure principle. Both the pleasure principle and the death drive adhere to the traditional assumption that the aim of desire is to *not* desire" (132). Building on the critique of Lacan developed by Derrida in *The Post Card*, as well as on the Freudian notion of "binding" first articulated in the "Project for a Scientific Psychology" (1895), Hägglund argues that libidinal investment cannot be understood as originating from or tending toward this stasis, that the principle of desire is, rather, "postal" (132). Without origin or destination, it operates according to the deferral of death characteristic of survival.

Though Hägglund reads alongside Derrida in developing his position, he goes further than Derrida in asking us to recognize the agon that exists between deconstruction—which correctly identifies the constitutive investment of desire in survival—and psychoanalysis—which represses this investment (145). Now, Hägglund is careful not to overstep the bounds of what he can demonstrate philosophically, and so he limits himself to addressing those moments when Freud or Lacan relies on "speculative concepts" rather than on the "evidence of psychoanalytic experience" (114). This does little to dull the edge of his criticisms, however, for within psychoanalysis, desire is a weight-bearing concept. If Hägglund is correct and this concept proves unsound, then much of psychoanalysis will have to be rethought. Unsurprisingly, then, Hägglund's earlier formulations of his chronolibidinal critique of psychoanalysis have already met with considerable resistance.[1]

Roughly half of *Dying for Time* is dedicated to developing the chronolibidinal theory of desire through a critical dialogue with the philosophical and psychoanalytic traditions. The rest of the book demonstrates the usefulness of this theory as a tool for literary analysis through close readings of texts by Proust, Woolf, and Nabokov. Hägglund notes that his choice of texts is motivated not only by their sophisticated engagements with chronolibidinal themes—all deal explicitly with the relationship between time and desire—but also by the fact that these texts have been systematically misread by philosophers and literary critics (19). Each has been read in terms of a desire to transcend time; and it is, again, this desire that the theory of chronolibido calls into question. So, Proust's presentation of *mémoire involontaire*, which famously opens onto "time in its pure state," Hägglund reveals to be a discourse on the negativity of time, and so on the impossibility of a "return to the past" (32-33). Woolf's "moments of being" are shown to exhibit not a timeless plentitude but a traumatism of the instant, of the instant that arrives "too soon"—since it cannot be grasped at the moment of its arrival—and "too late"—since it is "not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, as in nightmares or intrusive memories" (61). And Nabokov's as well as his characters' putative desire to attain immortality through writing dissimulates, Hägglund avers, an opposed "chronography" (99), an inscription of the past through material marks that are themselves open to their future erasure.

Again, Hägglund opposes the rigor with which the novels of Proust, Woolf, and Nabokov develop chronolibidinal themes to the misapprehension of these themes by the novels' critics. Proust, for example, proves to be a much more astute theorist of desire than any of his readers, as Hägglund demonstrates—quite spectacularly—through a critical survey of secondary works by Samuel Beckett, Miguel de Beistegui, Leo Bersani , Malcolm Bowie, Gilles Deleuze, Vincent Descombes, Joshua Landy, George Poulet, Robert Pippin, Paul Ricoeur and others. The chapters on Woolf and Nabokov follow a similar pattern, as Hägglund multiplies examples of critics and philosophers who have failed to grasp the chronolibidinal logic that structures their objects of inquiry. These novels are simply better at articulating chronolibidinal desire than their readers. As a result, Hägglund can write that he himself has "learned as much about chronolibido from Proust, Woolf, and Nabokov as…from Plato, Freud, and Derrida" (19).

This last claim, however—as well as the numerous examples of literary insight and critical blindness that Hägglund details—ought to give us pause, not because the claim is especially dubious, nor because the readings are ever unconvincing, but because together they hint at a relationship between literature and chronolibido that *Dying for Time* never makes entirely clear. If Proust succeeds where so many critics and philosophers have failed, is this simply because Proust is more perceptive than his readers? Or is it because Proust—like Woolf, like Nabokov—is a novelist rather than a philosopher? Does *literature*—as opposed to philosophy or criticism—have some unique purchase on the chronolibidinal logic that Hägglund seeks to articulate? This last question might be read already in *Dying for Time*'s opening lines, where Hägglund writes that "the debate between philosophy and literature begins over the question of desire" (1). In this remark, Hägglund's aim is to emphasize the importance of desire to philosophy's self-definition as well as to philosophy's exclusion of literature. Literature—and here Hägglund points to Socrates' charge against Homer in *The Republic*—is said to "leave us in the grip of the desire for mortal life" (1). Of course, *pace* Socrates, Hägglund's point is that *all* desire is in some sense "the desire for mortal life." This desire is hardly the truth of literature alone. Nonetheless, the very lucidity with which the literary writings of Proust, Woolf, and Nabokov address the binding of finitude and desire would appear to confirm the letter, if not the spirit, of Socrates' charge. And so the question persists: why should literature prove a better source of chronolibidinal insights than philosophy or criticism?

An initial answer might be found in a tradition that *Dying for Time* leaves unremarked, in the tradition of philosophical—and specifically Kantian—aesthetics. In the latter, we encounter Kant's demonstration that

aesthetic experience is necessarily finite experience. When we "linger" [*weilen*] over something beautiful, Kant argues, we maintain ourselves in a state of receptivity to something singular—to *this* sunset, or to *that* poem. This singular object of our aesthetic experience is always in danger of being lost—not only to the disintegrative effects of time, but also to its being subsumed under a concept. When the latter occurs, the object ceases to be something unique, irreplaceable, and becomes a particular instance of a general category, as when the sunset becomes an *example* of atmospheric refraction, or when "If I Could Tell You" becomes an *example* of a villanelle. When we *linger*, however, we resist this loss. And this means resisting the sort of conceptual knowledge characteristic of philosophy, a knowledge that moves inevitably from particular to general. In this resistance, in this refusal to relinquish the particular thing, Kant observes, we experience the "feeling of life's being furthered" (*Critique of the Power of Judgment*, 5:244); we experience, then, a sense of persisting in a state of finite receptivity, and in this state we find pleasure. Pleasure in the beauty of finite things is pleasure in the furtherance of finite life. This is what Kant's aesthetics teaches.

Let us pause here to note that the novels Hägglund reads in *Dying for Time* are not only aesthetic objects (and so objects that solicit the essentially finite experience noted above). They are also thematizations of the aesthetic. All can be read, with greater or lesser ease, as *Künstlerromane*: Marcel becomes a writer, as does Van Veen; Lily Briscoe's painting develops alongside the Ramsay's lives and deaths; and Clarissa Dalloway's role as the "perfect hostess" recalls Woolf's own analogy between the hostess and the novelist in "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown." Furthermore, even the theoretical texts examined in *Dying for Time* are typically concerned with aesthetic problems. Plato's *Symposium* is a discussion not only of love but also of beauty, while Freud's "On Transience"—with which Hägglund begins his critique of psychoanalysis—concerns a poet's dismay over the transience of beauty. Finally, *The Post Card* completes the phase of literary experimentation that Derrida undertook beginning in the 1970s, and it makes good on Derrida's earlier assertion that literature is the "decisive" problem for psychoanalysis (*Positions*, 109). In each case, what is at issue is a mode of experience—aesthetic experience—that, so long as we maintain it, so long as we *linger*, maintains us in "the grip of the desire for mortal life."

I do not mean to collapse into one another these diverse engagements with and manifestations of the aesthetic, only to stress that there is something in the aesthetic—in the problem of beauty as Kant describes it, or, more narrowly, in the problem of the literary—that speaks directly to the concerns of *Dying for Time*, and so to underline the need to think through (more deeply than I can here) the complex braid uniting finitude, desire, *and beauty*. To do so would be to appreciate more fully the considerable contribution that Hägglund has made to our philosophical understanding of art.

Robert S. Lehman

Robert S. Lehman is Assistant Professor of English at Boston College. His writings have appeared or are forthcoming in *Theory & Event*, *New Literary History*, *The Journal of Modern Literature*, *Angelaki*, *Criticism*, *Modernist Cultures*, *diacritics*, *Modern Philology*, and *Frakcija*. He is currently completing a book entitled *The Impossibility of Being Modern:Time, Tradition, and Event in Modernist Literature and Philosophy*. Robert can be reached at robert.lehman@bc.edu

Note

1. See, for example, William Egginton, "On Radical Atheism, Chronolibidinal Reading, and Impossible Desires," *CR: The New Centennial Review* 9.1 (2009): 191–208; and Adrian Johnston, "Life Terminable 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.