



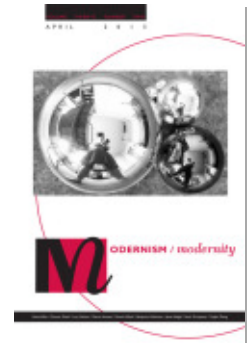
PROJECT MUSE®

**<em xmlns:m="http://www.w3.org/1998/Math/MathML" xmlns:mml="http://ww
xmlns:xlink="http://www.w3.org/1999/xlink">Dying for Time: Proust,
Woolf, Nabokov by Martin Hägglund (review)**

Adam Kelly

Modernism/modernity, Volume 20, Number 3, September 2013, pp.
589-591 (Article)

Published by The Johns Hopkins University Press



➔ For additional information about this article

<http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/mod/summary/v020/20.3.kelly.html>



Book Reviews

***Dying for Time: Proust, Woolf, Nabokov.* Martin Hägglund. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012. Pp. 208. \$49.95 (cloth).**

**Reviewed by Adam Kelly, Harvard University
and University College Dublin**

In *Dying for Time*, Martin Hägglund argues that our common beliefs about temporality, mourning, and desire should be tested against the representation of these human processes in the modernist novel. This is not in itself an unusual proposal, but what distinguishes this important book is that it allows us to understand these canonical modernist concerns in a wholly new way. Hägglund revisits long-held assumptions about the “aesthetic and metaphysical vision” (16) of Marcel Proust, Virginia Woolf, and Vladimir Nabokov in order to overturn those assumptions. He does so by arguing stridently against canonical critical positions, by questioning extra-literary statements by authors about their own work, and even (in a fascinating move I will return to) by privileging the logic of certain descriptive passages in their fiction against more explicit synoptic statements in the same texts. As a consequence, Proust, Woolf, and Nabokov (along with Jacques Derrida, also the subject of Hägglund’s groundbreaking book *Radical Atheism*) emerge not so much as philosophers of time as *writers* of time. Their literary way of describing temporal experience outstrips attempts to conceptualize temporal being in a more traditionally philosophical manner.

Literature and philosophy are best distinguished not by their respective conceptions of time, however, but by their accounts of desire. Hägglund opens by citing Socrates’ famous claim in Plato’s *Republic* that while Homer leaves us in the grip of a desire for mortal life, it is the philosopher’s role to teach us that the immortal and eternal are what we ought to desire. This basic assumption about the desirability of immortality has long characterized western thought, even among those who want to resist privileging philosophy over literature. “To be sure, Plato’s denigration of poetry has been subjected to centuries of critique,” Hägglund writes, “Yet defenders of poetry have traditionally not pursued Plato’s insight into the link between the affective power of aesthetic representation and the investment in mortal life” (2). *Dying for Time* aims to pursue this insight through a revised account of

MODERNISM / *modernity*

VOLUME TWENTY,

NUMBER THREE,

PP 589–618. © 2013

JOHNS HOPKINS

UNIVERSITY PRESS



590 desire. Hägglund calls this account of desire “chronolibido”; the readings it produces he terms “chronolibidinal.”

Chronolibidinal reading challenges the understanding of the modernist novel as a writing against time. Proust’s involuntary memory, Woolf’s aesthetics of the moment, and Nabokov’s invocation of a transcendent afterlife have long been understood as driven by the attempt to resist temporal passing in favor of preserving a transcendent moment of full being. According to Hägglund, this understanding proceeds from a misconstrual of what he dubs the “constitutive difference” of desire (4), the difference between what we are and what we desire to be. Conventionally conceived, this is a difference between the imperfect and the perfect: our being and happiness are imperfect because they are temporal, therefore it is perfect, eternal being and happiness that we must desire. The chronolibidinal reading questions this logic of lack—central to Freudian-Lacanian psychoanalysis (the subject of the lengthy fourth chapter of *Dying for Time*), as well as to the work of religious thinkers like Augustine—by tracing the constitutive difference of desire to the condition of time. For time to exist, it must be the case that no moment can be in itself, that “every moment must negate itself and pass away *in its very event*” (3). The consequences of this seemingly straightforward insight are in fact radical: because things “can only be themselves by not coinciding with themselves,” it is never the case that a mortal subject desires an immortal object (whether God, everlasting fame, or eternal heaven). Instead, “both the subject *and* the object are from the very beginning temporal” (3). We can in fact only desire what is temporal, precisely because only what is temporal is threatened with destruction. In his beautifully written conclusion to the book, Hägglund formulates this problem urgently and humanly: “The fundamental trauma of libidinal being is that *pain and loss are part of what we desire*, pain and loss being integral to what makes anything desirable in the first place” (152). Eternal happiness, then, would be an oxymoron; happiness is internally characterized by the awareness of its fleeting quality and by the unavoidable investment in a life that is bound to pass. “The chronolibidinal logic at work here,” Hägglund clarifies, “does not deny that we dream of paradises and afterlives. Rather, it seeks to demonstrate that these dreams themselves are inhabited and sustained by temporal finitude” (88).

It is the role of literature to reveal to us the double bind we are in, both bound to time and in fear of its effects; it is literature that shows us that “what is at stake is to think fulfillment as essentially temporal” (4). Yet the novels of Proust, Woolf, and Nabokov have primarily been read as conceiving fulfillment as essentially atemporal. The classic reading of Marcel’s experience of involuntary memory in Proust’s *Recherche*, for instance, is that it reveals a timeless essence. Summarizing a critical tradition that includes Beckett, Poulet, Ricoeur, Genette, Girard, and Deleuze, Hägglund argues in his opening chapter that this timeless essence is taken to underlie Marcel’s discovery of his “aesthetic religion”: “After having been led astray by the desires and fears of mortal life, Marcel at last finds the immortal Truth of art” (22). But art is not immortal, according to Hägglund: rather, it enables us to confront our mortality as the very condition of possibility for the experience of memory and desire. “Instead of exempting him from death,” Hägglund argues, “Marcel’s sense of literary vocation thus increases his fear of death” (24). And neither can the successful creation of literature defend against death, because “the recording of time does not redeem the temporal condition but is itself subjected to it. The threads of memory may be broken and the piece of writing may be destroyed” (51). The condition of time as rendered in the *Recherche* is therefore characterized by “the synthesis of survival and extinction” (34). It is not the purpose of art to transcend or undo this synthesis: “For a chronolibidinal aesthetics, the point is not to redeem the condition of temporality but, on the contrary, to mobilize it as the source of pathos” (45).

Similarly, Hägglund reads Woolf’s aesthetics as driven by a passion for the moment that can only be stirred by the recognition of that moment’s ephemerality. In the shortest but most

consistently insightful chapter in *Dying for Time*, familiar passages in *To the Lighthouse* and *Mrs. Dalloway* are read through the lens of trauma, but against recent critics such as Tammy Clewell and Christine Froula, who assume that Woolf affirms the value of life against trauma. What Häggglund shows, on the contrary, is that Woolf's novels expose a basic undecidability in the value of life: "Life is the source of both the desirable *and* the undesirable, so the promise of the future is at the same time a threat" (61). Septimus Warren Smith and Clarissa Dalloway offer the two poles of this relationship to life, but it is significant that temporality is traumatic for *both*, not only for Septimus (although his reaction is the more violent and conclusive one). By crystallizing moments in her work, Woolf is therefore not recording them as eternal but demonstrating how their living on in time "highlights the traumatic deferral and delay at the heart of temporal experience" (62). As with Proust, Woolf's writing does not solve the problem of time so much as generate pathos from it: "Woolf's achievement is not to have offered a cure for the violent condition of survival but to have rendered its complexities" (72).

While Proust focuses on memory and Woolf on the present moment, Nabokov dramatizes the act of writing as the tracing, revision, and (re)construction of memory, moving his work toward the more radical skepticism found in postmodern fiction. Central to Häggglund's third chapter, which explores how "Nabokov's *Ada* ups the ante on Proust's *Recherche*" (106), are the technologies of writing and recording, and the way "the act of writing emerges as a chronolibidinal drama in itself" (91). The main critic under scrutiny here is Brian Boyd, whose reading of Nabokov's metaphysics has long dominated discussion of the novelist's fiction. Häggglund does not deny that Boyd's interpretation of Nabokov's stated metaphysics is accurate, but he does argue that "the philosophical position that Boyd rehearses does not become any more coherent just because the incoherence in question can be traced back to Nabokov's own thinking" (85).

This claim opens onto one of the most interesting aspects of *Dying for Time*. Häggglund does not shirk from the fact that many statements in Proust's *Recherche* and Nabokov's *Ada* seem explicitly to promote a metaphysics of transcendence and immortality. He quotes the passages in question, but goes on to contend of Marcel's remarks that they "are contradicted by the logic of Marcel's own text" (23) and "are incompatible with Marcel's actual description of the experience of involuntary memory" (49). Similarly, Van's philosophical claims in the "Texture of Time" section of *Ada* "do not answer to the logic of Van's writing" (94). By "logic" Häggglund actually means something closer to experiential or phenomenological description, because there is not only one logic at play in either the *Recherche* or *Ada*. There are in fact two: a logic of synthetic statement, and a contradictory logic of description.

What validates the privileging of description over statement? Although it is not fully thematized by the book's author, this question goes to the heart of the methodology of *Dying for Time*. Häggglund's philosophical answer is that the desire for fullness present in synthetic statements is "a rationalized repression of the double bind" of libidinal being (152), a double bind that is more easily observed in the less conceptual, more affective lens of description. Occluded but identifiable here is something like a revisionary theory of literary realism, where the synthesis offered by the narrator or subject of a text can in fact be viewed as a repression of the true lessons of his story, embodied not in summary but in description. Paradoxically, this is what makes credible Häggglund's claim that he has "learned as much about chronolibido from Proust, Woolf, and Nabokov as . . . from Plato, Freud, and Derrida" (19). Although his conception of time and desire is argued from philosophy, it is actually based on a structure—the structure of the trace—that is easier to perceive in the descriptive force of literature. When Marcel claims to have discovered "the eternal man" in himself, an "extra-temporal being" who resides "outside of time" (quoted on 23), he is therefore misinterpreting philosophically the evidence of his temporal experience. It is the true nature of temporal experience that we are returned to by Häggglund's profound and brilliant book, a work of literary criticism as timely as it is untimely.