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Dying for Time: Proust, Woolf, Nabokov by Martin Hägglund (review)

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HÄGGLUND, MARTIN. *Dying for Time: Proust, Woolf, Nabokov.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012. 197 pp. \$49.95.

To begin, *Dying For Time; Proust, Woolf, Nabokov* is a crucial follow up to Martin Hägglund's first book published in English, *Radical Atheism: Derrida and the Time of Life* (2008). In *Radical Atheism*, Hägglund masterfully rethinks the philosophy of Jacques Derrida in order to posit his theory of radical atheism, which disavows traditional atheism by refuting the very desire for immortality, the existence of the divine, and so forth that traditional atheism aims to reject in the first place. As Adrian Johnston and others like Michael Naas make clear in their trenchant responses to *Radical Atheism*, the theory of radical atheism hinges upon a theory of desire that is not yet fully developed in the early text. In part then, *Dying for Time* consolidates Hägglund's response to his critics who have challenged the theory of radical atheism on the question of desire. But as Hägglund takes on a more sustained engagement with psychoanalysis—in addition to his philosophical and literary investments—in order to develop his theory of chronolibido (the central theory of desire that drives the text) it quickly becomes clear that *Dying for Time* is a tremendous philosophical achievement that will make it hard to understand desire without turning to the arguments Hägglund makes in his book.

Hägglund introduces the notion of chronolibido through a scene in Plato's *Republic* in which Socrates proclaims his frustration with the tendency of Homer's writings to make even the most keen of philosophical minds fall prey to the dramatic paths of the *Iliad* and become victim to the "grip of desire for mortal life" (1). The problem for Socrates, in Hägglund's reading, is that the philosopher is precisely the figure who should otherwise remain immune to "the loss of mortal beings; he should rather turn his desire toward the immutable presence of the eternal" (2). Socrates, in other words, discovers himself at a remarkable impasse in which the task of the philosopher—understood as converting "the desire for the mortal into a desire for the immortal that can never be lost" (2)—is challenged by the fact that poetry both conjures and inspires a desire for a mortal life that is threatened by the possibility of its own loss. Hägglund sets up the scene of Socrates's discontent in order to elucidate how desire, in the tradition of western philosophy, is predicated on a constitutive difference between what one is and what one is not, and who one really wants to be and who one actually is. Hägglund also deftly deploys the scene of Socrates's polemical response to Homer's writings as an allegorical frame for establishing that desire has heretofore been erringly conceived—in psychoanalytic theory, contemporary literary studies, and in the tradition of western philosophy—as always therefore testifying to an ontological lack. Although Hägglund is careful to point out that the pervasive tendency to read difference in desire as affirming a fundamental lack of being does not indicate an inherent failure in logic, he does insist that this line of thinking fails to account for the very structural logic of difference in the first place.

In *Dying For Time*, Hägglund thus pursues a new account of the constitutive difference of desire that is not read as an ontological lack. To do so, Hägglund begins by tracing "the constitutive difference of desire to the condition of time" (3). Without spending too much time recapitulating the main tenets of the Derridean-inspired, Hägglundian logic of time that governs the chronolibidinal argument, it will suffice to say that Hägglund posits that the present is constituted by the simultaneous passing away of the past and the anticipation of a future that is yet to come. The present (and thus everything thought on the basis of presence), in other words, is not intrinsic itself; it is instead characterized by an infinite splitting between the past and the future. A particular moment can come into being only insofar as it is already becoming past and

superseded by another moment that has not yet arrived. The present is always therefore negating itself because the very event of it becoming present is at once preceded by its own passing away and overcome by the anticipation of the future. As such, the present is necessarily threatened by the possibility of its own erasure. Furthermore, the present is constantly differentiating itself between what is ending and what is anticipated, and among present moments. And without differentiation, there would be nothing other than sameness. The notion of chronolibido hinges upon this temporal process of alteration because it allows Hägglund to read the constitutive difference of desire as testifying to the fundamental investment in a mortal life rather than to the logic of lack that articulates immortality as the object of desire. It also critically provides the basis for Hägglund's distinction between survival and immortality, which he formulates in the following way: "[T]o be immortal is to repose in a state of being that is eternally the same," whereas "[t]o survive is to live on in a temporal process of alteration" (8).

As a central feature of the chronolibidinal argument, the structural relation between time and difference further enables the rethinking of the constitutive difference of desire as bound to and fundamentally defined by an investment in survival. We are invested in survival, and thus in a mortal life, precisely because it can be lost: "it is *because* of temporal finitude that one cares about life in the first place" (8). Survival, as such, is bound to temporal finitude for its own possibility, and insofar as it relies upon that finitude, survival is also always testifying to temporal finitude. It is also characterized by a double bind between chronophilia, the attachment "to a temporal being" and chronophobia, the fear of losing that temporal being (9). One is invested in life because it can be lost, and temporal finitude is intrinsic both to life itself and the state of being invested in life. Even though the exigencies of our investment in life may be expressed as the desire for immortality, and thus to live without time, Hägglund maintains that the very fact of our being affirms the preceding desire for a mortal life. Rather than answering to the logic of lack, Hägglund's theory of chronolibido offers a new model for reading the constitutive difference of desire as testifying to the very movement of survival across gaps in time and to the fundamental desire for temporal finitude. What we desire, in other words, is not immortality, but more accurately, to be a mortal being who lives on in time. Herein lies the central thrust of Hägglund's radical rethinking of desire in the notion of chronolibido: whereas philosophical, psychoanalytic, and literary tradition would have us understand the difference of desire as always answering to a fundamental lack of being that articulates the object of desire as the quest for immortality, that difference in fact testifies to the finitude of time, and to survival and mortality as the object of desire. Desire, we may thus say, is a dying for time, but it is also, by the same token, a living on in time.

From start to finish, Hägglund's analysis is powerful and incredibly rich. Without exception, the chronolibidinal argument adheres to an impeccable deconstructionist logic elucidated with remarkably consistent precision as it negotiates philosophical, literary, and psychoanalytic texts. Hägglund's chronolibidinal tour-de-force begins with Socrates's lament over Homer's poetry, but the first chapter draws us into the world of modernist literature with a sustained engagement with Marcel Proust's classic novel *À la recherche du temps perdu*. Followed by a concentrated focus on Virginia Woolf's two novels *Mrs. Dalloway* and *To The Lighthouse* and Vladimir Nabokov's novel *Invitation to a Beheading* in chapters two and three, respectively, Hägglund illuminates how each of these authors utilizes the novel as a unique form for staging the drama of desire and the profound complexities of a temporally finite life. In Hägglund's assessment, Proust, Nabokov, and Woolf have been consistently misread as interpreting the difference in desire as the desire to transcend mortal life. So in part, Hägglund turns to the realm of the literary to demonstrate further the pervasive misreading of desire as testifying to an ontological

lack. But Häggglund's close readings also work to develop his model of chronolibidinal reading, which deepens his notion of chronolibido and its implications on the reading of difference in desire.

Following his literary analyses, Häggglund pays particular attention to Freud's 1916 essay "On Transience" to demonstrate 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). Together with his subsequent discussion of the Lacanian model of desire, Häggglund's engagement with Freud seeks 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). Häggglund's reading of "On Transience" argues that Freud's essay testifies to the double bind of desire (between chronophilia and chronophobia) in the general theory of chronolibido, which then enables him to contest both Freud and Lacan's theories of the death drive on the basis of that bind. Häggglund closes with a compelling look at Derrida's love letters collected in *Envois* that reveals how Derrida's letters both stage the drama of the double bind between chronophilia and chronophobia and offer theoretical insights for thinking about the implications of that bind.

To praise *Dying for Time* as another remarkable achievement by Häggglund does not do justice to this work, which demands a more critical and thorough response than this review has provided. Like *Radical Atheism*, *Dying For Time* is argued with such masterful precision and clarity that it is hard not to be swept away into Häggglund's chronolibidinal world that always returns us to the condition of time. Still, however, *Dying For Time* leaves a few questions lingering in the balance: if we, above all else, desire survival, then why doesn't desire experience itself as what it genuinely desires?; how are we to account for the role of unconscious fantasy life and its influence on objects of desire in the very logical world of chronolibido?; and if the desire for immortality is always dissimulating the fundamental desire for survival, then are we to understand the role of the figural as strictly a guise for the structural, as not doing its own kind of work beyond a straightforward relation to the structural? To be sure, these questions are not lost on Häggglund, but he answers them by leading us back to the condition of time as the precondition for being. The task, then, is left to the reader to decide whether or not we are always dying for time.

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KONG, BELINDA. *Tiananmen Fictions Outside the Square: The Chinese Literary Diaspora and the Politics of Global Culture.* Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2012. viii + 278. \$86.50; \$26.95.

Tiananmen Fictions Outside the Square analyzes one of the most infamous events in modern history, training its focus on four literary works that portray, with varying degrees of directness, what has come to be known as the "Tiananmen Square Massacre" of June 4, 1989. (Reliable figures on the number of killed and wounded are unavailable, though the International Red Cross initially announced on June 5 that the death toll stood at 2,600, with most people actually killed to the west of the Square.) As Belinda Kong documents, the Tiananmen Square Massacre has been the subject of numerous representations across a variety of literary genres and artistic media (though most of these productions have not