

W_{oolf}
S_{tudies}
A_{nnual}

Volume 19, 2013

PACE UNIVERSITY PRESS • NEW YORK

Dying For Time: Proust, Woolf, And Nabokov. Martin Hägglund (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2012) xi+ 197pp.

Martin Hägglund's revolutionary new text, *Dying for Time: Proust, Woolf, Nabokov*, concerns itself with challenging various readings of Marcel Proust's entire *À la recherche du temps perdu*, Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* and *To The Lighthouse*, and Vladimir Nabokov's *Invitation to a Beheading* (as well as specific texts of Freud, Lacan, and Derrida). As Hägglund notes in his introduction, all the modernist novels on which he focuses have been regarded by critics as texts that seek to transcend time, while his project instead rests in providing a "chronolibidinal" approach (his term), whereby he attempts to prove that instead of transcendence of time, these texts reveal a desire to "survive" rather than "transcend." Hägglund, the Swedish literary scholar and philosopher and author of the highly regarded *Radical Atheism: Derrida and the Time of Life* (2008), claims that we are all continually engaged in both "chronophilia" and "chronophobia," for the very aspects of life that we desire, and desire to keep and to which we are bound, require that we die:

The key argument here concerns the co-implication of chronophobia and chronophilia. The fear of time and death does not stem from a metaphysical desire to transcend temporal life. On the contrary, it is generated by the investment in a life that can be lost. It is because one is attached to a temporal being (chronophilia) that one fears losing it (chronophobia). Care in general, I argue, depends on such a double bind. On the one hand, care is necessarily chronophilic, since only something that is subject to the possibility of loss—and hence temporal—can give one a reason to care. On the other hand, care is necessarily chronophobic, since one cannot care about something without fearing what may happen to it. (9-10)

To remain the same forever, embedded in the concept of and desire for immortality, would mean that we would not be bound to anyone or anything, for in order to experience desire we must also recognize that with it comes inevitable loss, and unless we experience the possibility of loss, we are not bound to life.

By structuring his text with an introduction that explains his theory of *chronolibido*, Hägglund considers a chronolibidinal reading of Socrates while challenging Plato and Epicurus and laying out his project concerning Proust, Woolf, and Nabokov. In Chapter 1, "Memory: Proust," his project is to debunk all readings of Proust's *Recherche* that perceive Marcel's focus on "involuntary memory" as

a means of transcending time, while Chapter 2 focuses on “a chronolibidinal conception of trauma and mourning to give a new account of temporality in Woolf’s writing,” using “Woolf’s aesthetics of the moment” as his point of departure (17). Chapter 3, “Writing: Nabokov,” analyzes *Ada* in view of Nabokov’s “aesthetics of time and memory” whereby Häggglund reads Nabokov’s “persistent dramatization of the act of writing” as a culmination of Proust’s “notions of involuntary memory” and Woolf’s “aesthetics of the moment” (17). Chapter 4, “Reading: Freud, Lacan, Derrida,” is, in the author’s words, an articulation of “the double bind in a general theory of chronolibido,” for “If one is bound to mortal life, the positive can never be released from the negative” (18). Thus he contests Freud’s and Lacan’s “theories of the death drive,” arguing that his own theory involving the “chronolibidinal notion of binding allows for a better account of the trauma, violence, and repetition compulsion of psychic life” (18), while showing how Derrida “stages this double bind in his own text” and thus linking Derrida’s writing to that of Proust, Woolf, and Nabokov (18).

Though all of Häggglund’s chapters clearly further his theory of chronolibido, his analysis of Proust is perhaps the strongest given its wealth of pertinent examples. After closely examining Proust’s depictions of involuntary memory, Häggglund states that it is, in fact, the “experience of involuntary memory [that] leads Marcel to pursue a chronolibidinal aesthetics” rather than “reveal the timeless essence of a true self” (22), as believed by such critics as Poulet, Ricoeur, Genette, Girard, and even Deleuze. Through involuntary memory, Marcel relives the past, recognizing that “the past is no longer and will never be again” (32); thus, “[w]hile a past self is retrieved through involuntary memory, the one who remembers can never be identical to the one who is remembered” (23). Whatever joy of resurrection occurs “is immediately traversed by the pain of mourning” rather than a “timeless essence” (33). Ultimately, Häggglund argues, it is not immortality but survival that Marcel seeks, including demonstrating that Marcel’s desire to write the novel we have been reading is punctuated by his fear that he will not live long enough to do so.

In “Trauma: Woolf,” Häggglund begins with a discussion of *To the Lighthouse*, arguing against Ann Banfield’s thesis that “the fleeting world of temporal existence is opposed to the atemporal being of the moment” (57); rather, he writes, “precisely because Woolf seeks to convey singular moments, she has to convey that these moments are temporal rather than eternal. If the moment were not temporal, it could not be distinguished as a moment, since it would not be irreplaceable” (37). Häggglund’s analysis of *Mrs. Dalloway* further delves into the themes of trauma and mourning, persuasively revealing over and over how “the threat of trauma, then, is latent in even the most precious experience” (73): “Beyond the depiction of specific traumas, however, Woolf displays how experience in general

is characterized by a delay and deferral that can be described as traumatic. The characters' streams-of-consciousness convey how they are always in the process of comprehending past experience (delay) and how their present experience can be apprehended only in retrospect (deferral)" (63), as is seen in Clarissa Dalloway's early morning foray into the streets of London. While either a discussion of *To the Lighthouse* or *Mrs. Dalloway* rather than both would have been welcome, as the integrity of Hägglund's argument for a chronolibidinal reading of Proust and Nabokov is strengthened by his focus on one work, albeit a multi-volume one in the case of Proust, it is because every aspect of this author's brilliant discussion of each of Woolf's texts is illuminating that a more extended exploration of one or the other would be desirable, especially *To the Lighthouse*, with its own underlying consideration of the condition of temporality, yet it receives even less attention than *Mrs. Dalloway* and far less than Proust's *oeuvre* or Nabokov's *Ada*.

When focusing on Nabokov's *Ada* in "Writing: Nabokov," Hägglund maintains that Nabokov's writing also demonstrates chronophobia:

It follows that chronophobia—in spite of what Nabokov sometimes claims—does not stem from a metaphysical desire to escape "the prison of time" (*Speak, Memory* 18). On the contrary, it is because one desires a temporal being (chronophilia) that one fears losing it (chronophobia). Without the chronophilic desire to hold on to the moment, there would be no chronophobic apprehension of the moment passing away. It is the chronolibidinal desire to keep temporal events that motivates Nabokov's autobiographic protagonists. They seek to record time because they are hypersensitive to the threat of oblivion. (82)

Thus, Van's and Ada's lifelong effort at constructing a dual autobiography, contends Hägglund, is also a product of the desire to survive in time rather than transcend it: "Even at the height of youth and in the midst of a summer day there is a sense of ceasing to be that induces the passion for the moment" (109), he writes, as we remember that Van and Ada are constructing their various versions of the moment only as death comes nearer.

In "Conclusion: Binding Desire," Hägglund returns to Proust, Woolf, Nabokov, Freud, Lacan, Derrida, and issues of binding and desire, in particular in Derrida's *Envoies*, seeing Derrida as staging "the double bind of survival in his own text and thereby pursu[ing] a version of the literary writing of chronolibido that is at the center of the preceding chapters"(18). As Hägglund demonstrates throughout this text, "*the same bond* that binds one to pleasure binds one to pain and the same bond that binds one to life binds one to death":

To be invested in living on is therefore not only to desire but also to fear survival, since survival entails that one may be left to mourn or to suffer an unbearable fate. This condition of chronolibido cannot be cured; it is rather the source of hope and despair, compassion and aggression, protection and exposure. It follows that there is chronophobia at the heart of every chronophilia and chronophilia at the heart of every chronophobia. (167)

Dying for Time: Proust, Woolf, Nabokov ultimately convinces one of the validity of its author's Derrida-influenced challenge, as Martin Häggglund carefully refutes prominent critics, as well as Freud and Lacan, and consistently proves the validity of his chronolibidinal reading of these texts. Not only do we see how deconstruction is put to a new advantage via Häggglund's approach, but one is also moved by the elemental struggle to survive depicted in each of these three modernist writers. As the author reminds us in his conclusion, quoting Proust, "the true paradises are the paradises one has lost," for the true paradise is "here and now" for it can be enjoyed and appreciated only in retrospect, when it is *too late*" (154).

—Helane Levine-Keating, *Pace University*