



PROJECT MUSE®

## The Persistence of Temporality

Keith Leslie Johnson

symploke, Volume 22, Numbers 1-2, 2014, pp. 334-336 (Review)

Published by University of Nebraska Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5250/symploke.22.1-2.0333>

symploke  
editor  
Jeffrey S. Eklun

AUSTERITY

Volume 18 Numbers 1-4

➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/566852>

# THE PERSISTENCE OF TEMPORALITY<sup>1</sup>

KEITH LESLIE JOHNSON

Few academic careers have proceeded quite so meteorically as Martin Hägglund's. *Radical Atheism* at once synthesized and swept aside decades of scholarship and revealed not just a "new" Derrida, but one who, uncannily, had been there all along. And it wasn't just the claim itself that was compelling—that Derrida's so-called "ethical turn" was, as it were, always already adumbrated and radicalized from the outset—but the careful and lucid argumentation in which the claim was couched. And to crown it all, it was that hoariest of philosophical concepts, *Time*, that proved central to Hägglund's revision—not the Sign, not the Other, but Time: Time as auto-immune, as radical non-coincidence, as the trace of a finitude "that makes the fullness of being unthinkable as such" (Hägglund 2009, 30). The auto-immunity of Time disqualifies the Levinasian binary of totality and infinity upon which the conception of the wholly other depends. Ethics now has to occur at eye-level, without the asymmetry, the "dimension of height" (Levinas 1996, 18) that makes things like the gift, hospitality, democracy, and justice possible as absolutes. Rather, Hägglund contends, for Derrida "every decision is haunted by the undecidable coming of time" (Hägglund 2009, 41), meaning ethical categories are conditioned not on a metaphysical structure of infinitude, but on ineluctable contingencies, moment-to-moment negotiations, contaminations, and mis-carriages. In fact, ethical categories have no coherence except against the backdrop of temporal finitude. The effect of this argument was seemingly to moot a long-standing debate between Derrideans of the ethico-theological camp (Bernasconi, Critchley, Caputo, et al) and, well, everyone else; what Hägglund demonstrated was the untenability of the (a)temporal structure that could support the notion of an infinite other, and further he demonstrated how both sides of the debate were complicit in maintaining such a structure. —Which isn't to say that *Radical Atheism* has been universally accepted as the final word on Derrida. But it has had the salutary effect of galvanizing reactions across a broad spectrum of ideological positions: it has *activated* thought. In other words, its own blindspots have proven as intriguing as those it exposed. If it does, in John

---

<sup>1</sup>Review of Martin Hägglund, *Dying for Time: Proust, Woolf, Nabokov*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2012.

Caputo's damning phrase, oddly recast "deconstruction as logic not *écriture*" (Caputo 2011, 33), it nonetheless has helped delineate the stakes of Derrida scholarship for a new generation as well as the old. And if it does, as Nathan Brown perceptively notes, even more oddly imply "that we can deduce the general condition of finite being from a statement concerning the relation of mortality to life" (Brown 2009, 52), it nonetheless has fomented a reconsideration of conditions of finitude for materialist ontologies.

Hägglund's new book, *Dying for Time*, proceeds from the same premises as *Radical Atheism*, offering "chronolibidinal" readings of modernist writers (Proust, Woolf, and Nabokov) who are particularly engaged with the implications of temporality. Because it focuses on human life, it does not directly suffer from the under-theorization of finitude Brown points up in *Radical Atheism*, but it shares other of its predecessor's vices as well as virtues. "Chronolibido," first of all, is a useful concept, a way for Hägglund to "account for the constitutive difference of desire without interpreting it as an ontological lack" (3). Rather, desire for Hägglund is linked to the condition of time, a condition always already divided within itself. Desire implies not so much a lack as such—the *ontological* non-coincidence of desire and object—but the trace of time—the *temporal* non-coincidence of desire and object: desire is the index of a not-yet while at the same time an index of a (potential) no-longer. This attachment we have to life, to its possibilities and fleeting fulfillments, Hägglund calls "chronophilia," which is definitionally imbricated in "chronophobia" or fear of loss; together these two affective relations to time constitute chronolibido, a non-teleological "investment" in (i.e. non-indifference to) survival that conditions affectivity as such. If this conception of time (let alone its relation to affect) sounds more than a little Eurocentric, well, that's because it unabashedly is. Just as *Radical Atheism* deduced "the general condition of finite being" from the "provincial" case of human finitude, so does *Dying for Time* deduce the general condition of temporal affectivity from the "provincial" case of European modernism.

Again, though, for Hägglund's purposes in this relatively modest work—which is, after all, concerned almost exclusively with European modernists—this particular provincialism is not so problematic. It only becomes so when he tries to move from the more hermeneutic concerns of the first three chapters, which offer admirably thorough readings of specific novels, to a general theory of chronolibido in the fourth chapter, which reads Freud (and to a lesser extent Lacan) against Derrida. In the first three chapters, Hägglund's aims are largely corrective: the works of Proust, Woolf, and Nabokov do not fantasize an aesthetic *escape from* or *triumph over* Time so much as evince a profound desire for persistence *in* mortality, for survival *within* Time. On the face of it, this might seem a subtle, even quibbling, assertion—survival and immortality amounting to more or less the same thing, right?—but Hägglund cannily argues why a commitment to life—chronolibido—discloses quite a different picture of "modernist" temporality. Along the way, he bracingly

upturns influential readings by Leo Bersani, Hillis Miller, Brian Boyd, Robert Alter and others.

The introduction upturns no less a figure than Socrates himself, in whose logical inconsistencies regarding Time, desire, and lack in the *Symposium* Häggglund finds the kernel of chronolibido. The auto-immunity or tracing of Time is the cause, and chronolibidinal investment in survival the effect, of these inconsistencies: it is only from within the constitutive gap of such inconsistencies that we can have an affective relation to Time at all. To dream of a reprieve from Time is for Häggglund a paradoxically self-canceling act: to dream of dreamlessness, immortality as death itself. Häggglund sees this paradox as the inevitable terminus for any affective theory of temporality that does not firstly acknowledge the non-teleological economy of chronolibido. To demonstrate, then, the value of this insight, Häggglund reflects on modernism's occulted investment in survival as it emerges in precisely those texts that have "persistently been read in accordance with a desire to transcend mortal life—whether through an epiphany of memory, an immanent moment of being, or a transcendent afterlife" (14). The readings of *À la recherche du temps perdu*, *To the Lighthouse*, *Mrs. Dalloway*, and *Ada or Ardor* that follow all exhaustively reinscribe Häggglund's counter-thesis that, as he writes in his conclusion, "the desire for immortality dissimulates a desire for survival" (151) and that far from rationalizing the death-drive, "the notion of chronolibido provides the resources to read the internal contradictions of the supposed desire for fullness" (152) in ways that the death-drive alone cannot.

The relation of literary texts to chronolibido seems largely indexical, and Häggglund's careful close-readings can therefore become rather repetitious. The book has through its first three chapters the feel of a B-sides compilation—a set of case studies, applications, or demonstration—which is to say that Häggglund's argument is convincing, but not compelling, at least not in the way *Radical Atheism* was. This sense of rehearsal is further reinforced when we consider the chapters in relation to each other, or rather non-relation since they are, occasional allusions aside, compartmentalized. Even the introduction and conclusion make little effort to present the intervening material as a through-line or accumulation. But this is not to downplay the importance of the central idea itself, or the transformative effect it can have on how we read the texts in question or their broader association with modernism.

Until the fourth chapter on Freud (and Lacan) and Derrida, Häggglund doesn't give much of a sense of the stakes of his argument, apart from correcting the "misreadings" of various critics. He's not exactly reducing the opposition to straw men, but neither is he engaging them in the full nuance of their arguments. Rather, he seems primarily interested in convincing the reader that his is an authoritative reading, which means that its novelty often hinges on an over-hasty consolidation of "established views" (occasionally resulting in strange bedfellows, as when Deleuze finds himself lumped together with Georges Poulet). Häggglund generally works *against* rather than *with* his interlocutors, and doesn't always seem comfortable dealing

with critics who anticipate or agree with his own position. An example might be Walter Benjamin, whose "On the Image of Proust" is consigned to an endnote ("his remarks are...suggestive of the the argument that I am pursuing" [175]); given the proximity of Benjamin's argument to Hägglund's own and the importance of that particular essay within Proust scholarship, I should have liked a fuller engagement in the body of the chapter itself. But I suspect I am here asking too much of a work that is in so many other respects comprehensive.

At any rate, things begin to come together more coherently in the fourth chapter (as well as the brief conclusion that follows). Psychoanalytic types might complain that Hägglund's critique of Freud feels somewhat blinkered, relying largely on a single essay, "On Transience," but otherwise it is here that the reader will have the strongest sense of synthesis, of a single powerful idea, thoroughly supported. At the same time, as noted above, chronolibido is less satisfying when presented as the general (and ineluctable) condition of temporal affectivity. Chronophilia and chronophobia do not strike me – and less still those with a more thorough background in non-European thought – as the only affective options we have to Time, and to assert as much out of logical exigency seems indelicate, to say the least. A Deleuzian or Buddhist or post-colonial thinker might find therein much grist. To put it another way, the strength of the first three chapters lays, for me, in their careful logic, even though they lack organic connection; conversely, the strength of the fourth chapter lays in the way it rhetorically (if implicitly) draws together the disparate threads of the preceding chapters, even though the crowning claim itself is problematic. That said, the virtue of Hägglund's strong formulations is to elicit equally strong responses. Where much secondary literature seems deliberately anodyne, Hägglund's restrained polemic is only too refreshing. The simple fact, whatever reservations I've voiced, is that *Dying for Time* is an important book by an important thinker, one that ought to serve as a fillip to modernists and theorists alike.

COLLEGE OF WILLIAM AND MARY

## References

- Brown, Nathan. "To Live without an Idea." *Radical Philosophy* 154 (March/April 2009): 51-53.
- Caputo, John D. "The Return of Anti-Religion: from Radical Atheism to Radical Theology." *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory* 11.2 (2011): 32-124.
- Hägglund, Martin. *Dying for Time: Proust, Woolf, Nabokov*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2012.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Radical Atheism*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2009.
- Levinas, Emmanuel. "Transcendence and Height." *Basic Philosophical Writings*. Eds. Adriaan T. Peperzak, Simon Critchley, and Robert Bernasconi. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1996.