

Derrida, time and infinite finitude: weakening Hägglund's negative

ABSTRACT: This article presents a critique of the influential reading of Derrida proposed by Martin Hägglund, focusing in particular on the latter's account of time, *différance* and finitude in Derrida's work. It concludes that, at root, there is a persistent misapplication of a notion of the negative in Hägglund's reading, and that this feature can most revealingly be linked to a misconception about Derrida's thinking of mortal limits.

KEY WORDS: Derrida, Hägglund, time, finitude, mortality

In the decade or so following Derrida's death, the themes of time and finitude occupied a significant place in the work of his commentators.¹ No doubt this is partly attributable to effects of mourning, commemoration and the desire to circumscribe an epoch that often comes with the demise of those thinkers whose work is seen to define its intellectual times in some way. As part of that concern with the limits of an epoch, a preoccupation with relating Derrida's work to that of his supposed intellectual successors has also promoted a particular focus on questions of finitude and the infinite, with the obvious corollary of a consideration of questions of time.² In the case of time, this is despite a well-known passage by Derrida that appears not to bode well for the promotion of this theme as a cornerstone of his work. The passage in question launches the concluding section of "*Ousia and Grammē*," where a footnote in *Being and Time* provides the springboard for a consideration of Heidegger's conviction that, in Derrida's words, "the 'destruction' of classical ontology first had

to shake the ‘vulgar concept’ of time.” (*Margins* 31) Drawing to the conclusion of his discussion, Derrida summarizes his own reading as suggesting:

That perhaps there is no “vulgar concept of time.” The concept of time, in all its aspects, belongs to metaphysics, and it names the domination of presence.

Therefore we can only conclude that the entire system of metaphysical concepts, throughout its history, develops the so-called “vulgarity” of the concept of time (which Heidegger, doubtless, would not contest), but also that an *other* concept of time cannot be opposed to it, since time in general belongs to metaphysical conceptuality. In attempting to produce this *other* concept, one rapidly would come to see that it is constructed out of other metaphysical or ontotheological predicates. (*Margins* 63)

The immediate target of this warning is Heidegger’s wish to pursue a “primordial, authentic temporality,” in relation to which the “vulgar concept of time” would be a derivative, “fallen” variety, as the continuation of the discussion makes clear (*ibid.*), but the terms in which Derrida poses the inescapably “metaphysical conceptuality” of time are evidently far wider in reach. However, what one might add to these reflections is that nothing could be more bound to the most idealized form of metaphysical conceptuality than an attempt to think without temporal categories, even if such an attempt were conceivable; and moreover, ‘time’ would hardly be the only fundamental term freighted with metaphysical baggage: ‘being,’ ‘essence,’ ‘substance,’ ‘identity,’ even ‘difference’ for that matter would be in the long list that would join it. As Derrida famously observes in the essay “Structure, Sign and Play”:

There is no sense in doing without the concepts of metaphysics in order to shake metaphysics. We have no language — no syntax and no lexicon — which is foreign to this history; we can pronounce not a single destructive proposition which has not already had to slip into the form, the logic, and the implicit postulations of precisely what it seeks to contest. (*Writing* 280–1)

It's worth dwelling for a moment on the distinction made in this passage between different facets of a philosophical language — between a “syntax” and a “lexicon” — as we contemplate how to negotiate the unpromising choice between retaining the loaded term of ‘time’ and rejecting it in a gesture that threatens to leave us no less in the thrall of metaphysical presuppositions. Instead, we might envisage working with the term in order to highlight the interactions of syntax and lexicon; that is, to think of the term ‘time’ not just as a ‘keyword’³ in a purely conceptual lexicon but as taking its place, always, in a syntax, and further, to think of that syntax as something which does not just serve as the external, discursive vehicle of its lexical cargo, but which pervades that lexicon through and through; and, moreover, that does so in a restlessly dynamic mode — a mode that we might have to describe as inescapably ‘temporal.’

Martin Hägglund is one who has certainly been undaunted by Derrida’s caveat about the metaphysical baggage borne by the term ‘time,’ making it, and in particular his own coinage “chronolibido,” the cornerstone of his work, which so far includes two major studies published in English, *Radical Atheism* (hereafter, *RA*) and *Dying for Time* (hereafter, *DT*).⁴ In the former, Hägglund gives an account of the notion of “survival” that is central to his view of Derrida as effectively espousing the “radical atheism” of his title. Life as finite, temporal existence is constituted as a ceaseless process of survival:

every moment of life is a matter of survival, since it depends on what Derrida calls the structure of the trace. The structure of the trace follows from the constitution of time, which makes it impossible for anything to be present *in itself*. Every now passes away as soon as it comes to be and must therefore be inscribed as a trace in order to be at all. The trace allows the past to be retained, since it is characterized by the ability to remain in spite of temporal succession. (RA 1)

Although this is drawn from the introduction of Hägglund's study, sketching in outline some key positions that will subsequently be elaborated in detail, it already gives a sense of the bold clarity of his expositions, a quality that endows his argument with considerable power, but sometimes at the cost of masking some fundamental difficulties. This initial summary of the relationship between the structure of the trace and the treatment of time in Derrida's thought usefully situates that relationship in the context of a paradox that has preoccupied philosophical reflection on time since Augustine, at least: the idea that the temporal instant is never present as such, only ever graspable in the future or the past, as it approaches or retreats. Hägglund's summary of this aporia in relation to time and the trace introduces a cornerstone of his argument, but one that, notwithstanding the further qualifications and nuance which he will go on to bring to it, remains problematic in my view; the difficulty with his account, which I'll go on to explore in some detail presently, shows up here in the suggestion of a relationship between the negative power of time, effecting a ceaseless erosion of whatever comes to be, and the compensatory preservation afforded by the trace, to be understood in the sense of a spatial inscription, as Hägglund will later stipulate (RA 18). The upshot of the centrality of time in Hägglund's account of

Derrida's thinking is that each moment of life is constituted as survival: to live is ceaselessly to survive time's negation of each finite moment in a mortal existence that is likewise temporally finite. Life as survival, implacably eroded but by the same token relentlessly driven by the negation of time which constitutes life as mortally finite through and through, is therefore characterized by the structure of autoimmunity that Derrida developed in his later writings (notably, in *Rogues*) and whose effects Hägglund highlights right across his thinking: "[Derrida's] notion of autoimmunity spells out that everything is threatened from within itself, since the possibility of living is inseparable from the peril of dying." (RA 9)

A further distinctive characteristic of Hägglund's reading of Derrida is the key role he affords to a particular understanding of desire. Whilst acknowledging that desire in the sense that he develops it is rarely given explicit attention in Derrida's work, Hägglund nonetheless contends that a certain conception of desire necessarily underpins one of the characteristic expressions of undecidable or "autoimmune" structures in Derrida's writing, namely that whatever is posed as a chance to any given eventuality is also a threat to it, and that any desired outcome ("the best") can never be fully extricated from one that is feared ("the worst"): "the innumerable sentences in Derrida's work that refer to 'the chance and the threat' or to 'the best and the worst' demand that one understands what Derrida regards as a chance and a threat or what he regards as the best or the worst. In short, they demand that one understands his assessment of what is desirable." (RA 32) Life as temporal finitude is the inescapable context for any particular desires one may form, and the desire for survival therefore stands as a kind of meta-desire (my term, not Hägglund's). But what fuels that meta-desire is a life constitutively "contaminated" by death, so the desire to live on is a desire for the persistence of this mortal life rather than the desire

for an immortality that would “annihilate every form of survival, since it would annihilate the time of mortal life” (*RA* 2). It is on these grounds that Hägglund derives the titular “radical atheism” that he ascribes to Derrida. In a parallel development that is more immediately germane to the discussion I want to pursue here, this account of desire, mortal existence and time also gives rise to the notion of “chronolibido,” comprising a conflictual but indissociable amalgam of “chronophilia” and “chronophobia,” that he explores in the subsequent study, *Dying for Time*. The desire for survival is a desire to perpetuate temporal existence, hence a “chronolibido”; but since the life one thereby desires is bound up in an “autoimmune” relation with what destroys it — temporal existence is ceaselessly ravaged by time’s negation — then “chronolibido” is in effect a “chronophilia” that is inseparable from “chronophobia”: “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.” (*DT* 9)

In outlining the conception of time that is fundamental to his reading of Derrida, Hägglund is careful to note the imbrication with space that is essential to Derrida’s account of *différance*. In a well-known exposition of his famous neologism, given in the eponymous essay emerging from a 1968 lecture, Derrida glosses the temporal sense of the verb *différer* that is its root (its sense as ‘deferring’ rather than ‘differing’) as follows:

the action of putting off until later, of taking into account, of taking account of time and of the forces of an operation that implies an economical calculation, a detour, a delay, a reserve, a representation — concepts that I would summarize here in a word I have never used but that could be inscribed in this chain: *temporization* [*la*

temporalisation]. *Différer* in this sense is to temporize, to take recourse, consciously or unconsciously, in the temporal and temporizing mediation of a detour that suspends the accomplishment or fulfillment of “desire” or “will,” and equally effects this suspension in a mode that annuls or tempers its own effect. And we will see, later, how this temporization is also temporalization and spacing [*temporalisation et espacement*], the becoming-time of space and the becoming-space of time, the ‘originary constitution’ of time and space, as metaphysics or transcendental phenomenology would say, to use the language that here is criticized and displaced. (*Margins* 8)

Indeed, as Geoffrey Bennington, for one, has pointed out, the interrelation of space and time is already implicit in Derrida’s frequent espousal, particularly at this early phase of his work but also intermittently in later texts, of the term *espacement*, since the latter is “a spatial word with a perfectly current temporal usage in French,” (*Legislations* 37) that temporal sense of taking place at intervals being close to the sense of *temporalisation* as delaying, postponing or suspending.⁵ In this light, it is entirely understandable that Häggglund takes “spacing” as the cornerstone of his argument about Derridean time in *Radical Atheism*, where he notes near the outset that “spacing is shorthand for the becoming-space of time and the becoming-time of space,” before going on to suggest, a little more debatably perhaps, that “[a]lthough this coimplication of space and time defines all of Derrida’s key terms (such as *trace*, *arche-writing*, and *différance*), it has received little attention in studies of his work.” (*RA* 2) Thereafter, terms such as “the spacing of time” recur frequently to remind us of this essential coimplication (*RA* 3, 10, 19, and *passim*). In particular, Häggglund builds persuasively on the notion of *différance* as a “spacing of time” to undermine

the philosophical “logic of identity” that ultimately reposes on a punctual self-presence which, were it in fact to be fully present, could only be thought as standing outside of the ceaseless passage of time (*RA* 15–17).

It is not surprising, in this expository configuration of *différance* and the “spacing of time,” that Hägglund should also accord a central role to the notion of the “trace,” which is also frequently invoked by Derrida himself in just such a context at this period, and notably in the essay on “Différance” in a passage partly cited by Hägglund, where Derrida is expanding on the “interval” that necessarily divides the present from itself precisely as it constitutes itself as present:

In constituting itself, in dividing itself dynamically, this interval is what might be called *spacing* [espacement], the becoming-space of time or the becoming-time of space (*temporization*). And it is this constitution of the present, as an “originary” and irreducibly nonsimple (and therefore, *stricto sensu* nonoriginary) synthesis of marks, or traces of retentions and protentions (to reproduce analogically and provisionally a phenomenological and transcendental language that soon will reveal itself to be inadequate), that I propose to call archi-writing, archi-trace, or *différance*. Which (is) (simultaneously) spacing (and) temporization. (*Margins* 13, partially quoted at *RA* 18)

One might suggest, in passing, that in this final phrase (not quoted by Hägglund), it is almost as if the clustering of uncertainly suspensive parentheses were reproducing typographically something of the connecting-disjoining intervals effected in the present by the inscribed effects of the mark or trace, as Derrida is exploring it in that essay, in a manner analogous to the famously inscribed but inaudible transition from

différence to *différance* in Derrida's neologism. But it is not clear that the complex and paradoxical temporality that is at work in Derrida's notions of *différance* and the trace always characterizes Hägglund's deployment of the latter term. In his gloss on this passage from "Différance," Hägglund seems to take the interwoven spatio-temporal nexus of the trace in discrete stages, one might presume for the sake of clarity of exposition, first of all evoking its essential spatiality: "The trace is necessarily spatial, since spatiality is characterized by the ability to remain in spite of temporal succession." (RA 18) Then, having argued for a certain spatiality as affording the possibility of synthesis between past and future, but concomitantly stressing that spatial relations themselves are also temporally constituted, Hägglund reintroduces time into the trace he had spatialized moments before: "A trace can only be read after its inscription and is thus marked by a relation to the future that temporalizes space." (RA 18) But there remains a nagging sense that what has been sacrificed here to the interests of sharply defined, expository stages is the strong sense in which the trace marks the becoming-space of time or becoming-time of space, such that it is not first thinkable in strictly spatial or temporal terms. In fact, the tendency to map out the trace as an essentially spatial structure that only subsequently becomes temporalized as it allows whatever has been spatially inscribed to persist in time is by no means confined to this example. On the first page of his introductory chapter, for example, Hägglund had already set out a very clear but, I think, problematic position on the trace, time and survival:

The structure of the trace follows from the constitution of time, which makes it impossible for anything to be present *in itself*. Every now passes away as soon as it comes to be and must therefore be inscribed as a trace in order to be at all. The

trace enables the past to be retained, since it is characterized by the ability to remain in spite of temporal succession. The trace is thus the minimal condition for life to resist death in a movement of survival. (*RA* 1)

Notwithstanding Hägglund's insistence at certain points on the need to think time and space together as the "spacing of time," and in effect — to recall the passage from Derrida's essay quoted a moment ago — to accompany each other in a cooriginarity that suspends the notion of an absolute origin or priority, this is another of the numerous accounts he offers that tend to posit the trace as at root a spatial inscription that can withstand the incessant erosion of time, making persistence possible. Such a notion sits uncomfortably with some of Derrida's formulations of the trace in the "Différance" essay, as for example when he turns to Freudian *Nachträglichkeit* for a view of a certain past as retroactively constituted without basis in any past that might have been present and would now survive in "retentional traces" (*Margins* 21). On the contrary: "the concept of the trace is incompatible with the concept of retention, of the becoming-past of what has been present. One cannot think of the trace — and therefore, *différance* — on the basis of the present, or of the presence of the present." (*ibid.*)

Of course, Hägglund is alert to this thinking of *différance* and the trace as fundamentally non-present — it is essential to his own account of Derrida's deconstruction of the "logic of identity" — but the way in which he formulates the relation of past to present consistently points to a much more conventional model of time, and one which has telling ramifications in other aspects of his argument. The opening of his chapter on Derrida and Husserl is another such occasion, where the

model of writing he offers resembles a temporal bridge between a known past and an uncertain future:

To inscribe something is first of all an act of memory. Regardless of what, to whom, or why I write, my words become traces of the past at the very moment when they are imprinted. Accordingly, writing has a capacity to store historical data, to document and record what has taken place. By inscribing what happens on a particular occasion, I provide myself with a supplement that can retain details even if I forget them. (*RA* 50)

The view that writing's temporal dimension amounts to a kind of mnemo-technical support, a storage facility for what would otherwise fall prey to the unremitting erosion of time, risks conforming to a perfectly conventional dualism in which the permanence of inscription compensates for the ephemerality of the spoken word: *verba volant, scripta manent*. This is, of course, a dualism that Derrida undermines throughout his work, notably in the exchange with John Searle that followed the latter's critical reading of Derrida's essay "Signature event context." On that occasion, Derrida responds to Searle's challenge that he confuses iterability with the permanence of writing, this challenge revolving, Derrida argues, around Searle's misguided equation of *restance*, the neologistic term actually used by Derrida in that essay (and rendered by his translator as "remainder"), with permanence:

There is no doubt that the "permanence" or the "survival" of the document (*scripta manent*), when and to the degree (always relative) that they take place, imply iterability or remaining in general. But the inverse is not true. Permanence is not

necessarily an effect of remaining. I will go even further: the structure of the remainder, implying alteration, renders all absolute permanence impossible.

Ultimately, remaining and permanence are incompatible. (*Limited Inc* 54)

Now, Hägglund could rightly object that, far from invoking the supposed permanence of inscription, the fragility of the preservation effected by writing is something on which he repeatedly insists, as indeed he does at the very moment where I interrupted my quotation from the opening of his chapter a moment ago. The memory that writing preserves for the future involves a “precarious temporality” he notes: “The addressed future, however, is essentially perilous. When someone reads my text, I may already be dead, or the significance of my words may no longer be the same. Moreover, the inscriptions themselves always risk being erased.” (*RA* 50) But to gauge just how perilous this future is, and what kind of preservation writing can muster against the depredations of time, we need to examine some other key moments when Hägglund invokes the unpredictability of the future.

A number of these moments involve accounts of Derrida’s framing of the relation between undecidability and the decision. A significant example occurs in the context of Hägglund’s summary of deconstructible laws and the undeconstructible justice that stands as the condition of possibility and impossibility of such laws — just as, more generally for Derrida, an experience of undecidability is what occasions the making of determinate decisions (it is what makes them possible as decisions) but is not finally resolved or overcome by such decisions, remaining to haunt them and reopen their apparent determinacy (it is what makes them impossible as completed, determinate decisions). Hägglund aligns the undeconstructibility of justice with the “undecidable coming of time” (*RA* 41), arguing that it is the unpredictability of the

future that calls for decisions to be made, and laws to be laid down, but that at the same time renders these decisions and laws essentially precarious: “There is no opposition between undecidability and the making of decisions. On the contrary, it is *because* the future cannot be decided in advance that one has to make decisions. If the future could be predicted there would be nothing to decide on and no reason to act in the first place.” (RA 40) The unpredictable coming of the future is ceaseless — “infinite” — but the condition of temporal finitude compels us to make decisions, argues Hägglund. But in fact, the passage from Derrida’s “Force of Law” that he proceeds to quote in support of his analysis instead acts to undermine this equation of undecidability with unpredictability. “The moment of *decision as such*, what must be just, *must* always remain a finite moment of urgency and precipitation,” Derrida claims in the passage quoted, continuing: “Even if time and prudence, the patience of knowledge and the mastery of conditions were hypothetically unlimited, the decision would be structurally finite, however late it came — a decision of urgency and precipitation, acting in the night of non-knowledge and non-rule.” (“Force of Law” 255, quoted at RA 41) What Derrida’s hypothetical proviso effectively signals here is that Hägglund’s account of the future’s ceaseless unpredictability working to compel but also to undermine finite decisions is not adequate to this thinking of undecidability. Derrida’s hypothetical condition of limitless time and knowledge, which would still not eliminate the urgency and fragility of the decision, he notes, is a condition that would leave no room for mere unpredictability but is still prey to undecidability. This is because undecidability is not just the unpredictability of the future, but is also an inexhaustibility and, therefore, an unknowability of past and present. Now, it may be a fair approximation to express the temporal condition that gives rise to undecidability as the ceaseless arrival of the future, but only if one

stipulates that this ceaseless arrival not only dislocates the presence of the present, as Hägglund acknowledges often enough, but also maintains the past as constitutively uncertain and incomplete, and moreover takes the form of a future that never finally becomes present. We need to think of the arrival of the future in terms of a future “qui n’arrive pas à arriver” — which “happens not to happen,” (*Points* 356, trans. mod.)⁶ doesn’t manage to arrive or doesn’t arrive in its arrival, and which therefore heralds an undecidability that exceeds unpredictability.

Despite the occasional indication to the contrary, Hägglund’s temporal model habitually pitches a known and accessible past against an unpredictable future, with writing as preserving inscription acting as a bridge between them, and one which therefore risks appearing more stable than Derrida’s own accounts of writing in a generalized sense would allow. Thus, in his chapter on Derrida and Husserl, an analysis which seeks carefully to distinguish a deconstructive temporality from Husserl’s phenomenology of internal time-consciousness ultimately gives way to yet another account of writing’s mediation between past and present in which the temporality of writing is simplified to a stable succession, given that the “reason for writing in the first place is to preserve what happens as a *memory for the future*” (*RA* 72); the ensuing acknowledgement that such preservation is necessarily precarious does not remedy this simplification since the only precariousness threatening a writing that comes after a given past that it seeks to preserve is that restricted, provisional precariousness emerging precisely from the unpredictability of the future, not that ineliminable precariousness occasioned by a more thoroughgoing temporal undecidability. Once again, a quotation from Derrida that follows a page later, supposedly to support this analysis, actually belies it, since the passage in question from “Freud and the Scene of Writing” invokes an originary precariousness of

inscription that does not wait for the unpredictability of the future: “Traces thus produce the space of their inscription only by acceding to the period of their erasure. From the beginning, in the ‘present’ of their first impression, they are constituted by a double force of repetition and erasure, legibility and illegibility.” (RA 73, quoting *Writing* 226) The conflation of undecidability with unpredictability recurs in the following chapter on Derrida and Levinas where, explicitly reprising his earlier discussion of the decision, Häggglund claims that “Derrida emphasizes that one always acts in relation to what cannot be predicted, that one always is forced to make decisions even though the consequences of these decisions cannot finally be established” (RA 81). In a later discussion of Derrida’s “Circumfession,” the “desire for survival” (RA 155) evidenced by testimony is rightly said to be manifest also in the testimonial acts of signing or dating a text, but the same problematically sequential model of a past that writing preserves for the future seems to lurk in the claim that the “common denominator for signatures and dates is that they preserve traces of the past for the future and thus operate in view of survival” (RA 156). This echoes an earlier observation that “it is the divisibility of the instant — the fact that the moment passes away without ultimate witness — that induces the passion for testimony” (RA 154). The “divisibility of the instant” is a consequence of what Häggglund repeatedly invokes as the “negative infinity of time” (RA 3, 45, and *passim*), and it is to the ceaseless negation effected by time, in his account, that we should now turn.

In distinguishing Derrida’s accounts of *différance* from the descriptions of God in the tradition of negative theology with which those accounts have sometimes been compared, Häggglund contrasts the “positive infinity” beyond all ontological predicates of the God of negative theology with the relationship of *différance* to

ontological categories, which should not at all be thought as one in which *différance* stands absolutely apart from temporal and spatial predicates, as we have already seen. In relation to time, Hägglund observes that “*différance* articulates the negative infinity of time. No moment is given in itself but is superseded by another moment in its very event and can never be consummated in a positive infinity.” (RA 3) This account of the negative infinity of time entailed by *différance* is at root, and often explicitly, an elaboration of the difficult claim that Derrida originally made in *Voice and Phenomenon* that “*infinite différence is finite*,” (Voice 87) as is apparent from Hägglund’s ensuing remarks: “The negative infinity of time is an *infinite finitude*, since it entails that finitude cannot ever be eliminated or overcome. The infinite finitude of *différance* is at work before, within, and beyond anything one may circumscribe as being.” (RA 3) Mortal existence entails an unconditional exposure to temporal finitude: the coming of time therefore has, in every case, a finite horizon, but time’s advent is also infinite in its ceaseless divisibility. The identification of *différance* with divisibility is fundamental to Hägglund’s argument, and he is able to draw on Derrida for support in this, at one point citing a remark from *Resistances* that “if deconstruction were reduced to one single thesis, ‘it would pose divisibility: *différance* as divisibility’” (RA 25).⁷ In terms of the temporal dimension of this analysis, it is equally important that the ceaseless division of the instant effected by time be conceived in terms of negation. In *Dying for Time*, Hägglund underscores this idea in his introduction to the notion of “chronolibido.” Taking issue with a Bergsonian notion of duration as a continuous movement of time, he stresses: “In contrast, I argue that *time is nothing in itself*; it is nothing but the negativity that is intrinsic to succession.” (DT 15)

Up to a point, it may be helpful to think of the time of *différance* in terms of the advent of a division that fractures every instant as soon as it arrives, and as a negativity that strikes through any self-identity. But there is, at the very least, a strategic danger in thinking Derridean time as division and negation, in as much as such an approach, however carefully it is handled, tends to promote the idea of some undivided presence standing prior to the division and negation effected by time. There are countless signals of this danger in Derrida's writing (many of which Hägglund invokes, it should be noted). So, for example, in glossing the sense of *différance* as deferral in one of the early interviews collected in *Positions*, Derrida stipulates that "*différance* is not preceded by the originary and indivisible unity of a present possibility that I could reserve" until later. (*Positions* 8) Equally, in a characteristic move that Hägglund quotes and is at pains to take on board in his own account of the deconstruction of self-identity, Derrida stresses that the division that affects the present is also what sustains it as 'present,' is its condition of possibility and of impossibility: "An interval must separate the present from what it is in order for the present to be itself, but this interval that constitutes it as present must, by the same token, divide the present in and of itself, thereby also dividing, along with the present, everything that is thought on the basis of the present." (*Margins* 13, quoted at *RA* 17) The latter must include, one might add, division, negation, and of course time. Here, perhaps, we see something of the restless and difficult interactions of lexicon and syntax to which I alluded earlier. Something of the entanglement of lexical and syntactic complications can be glimpsed, I'd suggest, at those points where, in finding an object on which the negation of time, as he conceives it, can operate, Hägglund elects space as that object, and risks reinscribing the most traditional ontological categories in which time as negative, ideal interiority acts upon space as positive,

material exteriority. We saw this earlier, in relation to the account (RA 18) of the trace as necessarily being spatial in order to endure and survive temporal succession, even though Hägglund then undertook a kind of syntactic volte-face in his argument in order to retemporalize what he had just qualified as spatiality. An identical gesture occurs in the chapter on Proust in *Dying for Time*, when Hägglund says the following of the way in which the narrator of Proust's *Recherche* spatializes time in his conception of "embodied time": "Given that time is nothing but negation, it has to be spatialized to be anything at all. The very concept of duration presupposes that something remains across an interval of time and only that which is spatial can remain." (DT 41)

The strategic difficulty of presenting the temporal dimension of *différance*, which is the becoming-space of time and the becoming-time of space, seems at the very least to exert a disruptive pressure on the syntax of Hägglund's argument, compelling him at key junctures to schematize time as negation and space as that which endures through negation, only elsewhere to seek to undo that opposition by recalling the temporalizing of space and the spatializing of time. But perhaps the difficulty is more than strategic, if we take seriously the idea that the interval that divides the present from itself even as it constitutes it as present must also divide "everything that is thought on the basis of the present" including division or negation, and a fortiori time as negation. It's worth recalling, for example, what else Derrida says in *Voice and Phenomenon* regarding his famously challenging remark about infinite *différance* being finite: "*Infinite différence is finite*. It can therefore no longer be conceived within the opposition of finiteness and infinity, absence and presence, negation and affirmation." (*Voice* 87, trans. mod.) The dismantling of these oppositions is at work in numerous formulations of *différance*, and of the dynamic of

deconstruction that *différance* propels, that have become familiar. Thus, for example, whilst *différance* may be negative to the extent that it disrupts self-identity, Derrida also frequently insists on its affirmative dimension as that which opens a relation: “différance marks a *relation* (a ‘*férance*’) — a relation to what is other, to what differs in the sense of alterity, thus a relation to alterity, to the singularity of the other.” (*Negotiations* 93) Equally, just as divisibility and disassociation may be essential to *différance*, on occasion Derrida is at pains to distinguish *différance* from the kind of thoroughgoing division that Hägglund tends to prioritize. So, whilst the latter can rightly adduce a remark from Derrida glossing “*différance* as divisibility” (quoted at *RA* 25) as we saw earlier, one should also note counterindications that imply a reconception of an oppositional pairing of unity and division. Thus, in a 1994 interview, having emphasized “the difference, the disassociation, which is absolutely necessary for the relation to the other,” and underscored the danger of the “privilege granted to unity, to totality,” Derrida added: “Of course, we need unity, some gathering, some configuration. You see, pure unity or pure multiplicity — when there is only totality or unity and when there is only multiplicity or disassociation — is a synonym of death.” (“Villanova” 13) However, for the moment I want to focus particularly on the deconstruction of the opposition between “finiteness” or finitude and the infinite.

The need to do so in relation to *différance* is also highlighted in a key passage in *Of Grammatology* where, having signalled that the thinking of writing elaborated there entails thinking the *logos* as inscription rather than divine Word, Derrida warns that “it would not mean a single step outside of metaphysics if nothing more than a new motif of ‘return to finitude,’ of ‘God’s death,’ etc., were the result of this move. It is that conceptuality and that problematics that must be deconstructed,” and he

concludes the paragraph by insisting: “Differance is also something other than finitude.” (*Grammatology* 68)⁸ In the context of the argument about the originarity of a certain ‘writing,’ or ‘arche-writing,’ that he is pursuing in *Of Grammatology*, Derrida’s remark functions as a corrective to a possible misconception about thinking the *logos* as inseparable from material inscription. What is heralded by the uncertain finitude of infinite *différance* should not be read simply as an empiricist corrective to some transcendental idealism, regrounding the latter’s infinite reach in empirical finitude, for example. Geoffrey Bennington offers a helpful elucidation:

For Derrida, the transcendental position itself has a transcendental in what the transcendental calls the empirical or the contingent. This does not mean that the transcendental can simply be debunked in a positivist or empiricist spirit (the gesture of the human sciences), because such a gesture, which would correspond to the *reversal* stage of deconstruction, cannot fail to generate a new transcendental term it is unable to deal with (“experience,” “history,” “society,” “material conditions,” and so on, or even “writing”), but that it must be thought as a *movement* [...] which there is no question of *doing without* (in some fantasy of a purely immanent materiality). (*Interrupting* 12–13)

Incidentally, this would also lead us to question Hägglund’s own habitual recourse to the category of the ultra-transcendental, for which at one point he declares a “preference” to the “quasi-transcendental” (*RA* 210–11, n. 8), a preference which seems not to take stock of the extent to which, as Bennington’s summary makes clear, the one term is always flipping into the other.

However, in view of the connection between the thinking of time in Derrida's work and the question of *mortal* finitude, a connection which is tightly bound together in Hägglund's reading, I'd like to turn now to the source of the remark that "infinite différance is finite" as it appears in *Voice and Phenomenon*. The context for this remark is the culmination of a dense discussion of ideality in Husserl, which I cannot recapitulate here,⁹ but which revolves around the deconstructive insight that the projection of Husserlian ideality to infinity relies upon a possibility of repetition, or iterability, that cannot finally be separated from empirical materiality and that therefore always corrupts that ideality and effects a fundamental transformation in how that projection to infinity may be thought. Here's the key passage containing the famous observation about *différance*, a passage which in turn takes its lead from the suggestion Derrida has just made that the Hegelian thinking of positive infinity as the possibility for "the indefiniteness of différance to appear *as such*" could be directed critically at Husserl's conception of ideality in an analogous manner to how Hegel originally proposed it as a critique of Kant:

But this appearing of the Ideal as infinite différance can only happen in a relation to death in general. Only a relation to my-death can bring out the infinite différance of presence. By the same token, compared to the ideality of the positive infinity, this relation to my-death becomes an accident of finite empiricity. The appearing of infinite différance is itself finite. At which point différance, which is nothing outside this relation, becomes the finitude of life as essential relation to oneself as to one's death. *Infinite différance is finite*. It can therefore no longer be conceived within the opposition of finiteness and infinity, absence and presence, negation and affirmation. (*Voice* 87, trans. mod.)

Grasping the way in which *différance* undermines the opposition between the finite and the infinite in this context will involve taking stock of how the limits of the mortal must be thought differently in respect of death in general, on the one hand, and in respect of “my-death,” in its singularity, on the other; and as I shall try to evoke just briefly here, in relation to Hägglund’s reading once more, in the end that distinction cannot simply be maintained in terms of an opposition between the ideality of the former and the empiricity of the latter.

In a gesture which I take to be symmetrical with his treatment of time as “nothing but the negativity that is intrinsic to succession” (*DT* 15), and also, I think, with concomitant moves such as the equating of undecidability with unpredictability, Hägglund relies on a notion of death as sealing mortal finitude, constituting the desire for survival as a desire to live on in this mortal, temporal existence, these notions being essential, as we saw at the outset, to his notion of “chronolibido,” the “dying for time” of his more recent book, and to his argument for Derrida’s thought as confirming a “radical atheism,” in the title of his first English-language book. There are numerous discreet but telling indications that, in elaborating this argument, Hägglund is — indeed, has to be — working with a notion of death, and particularly — to the extent that this distinction must be provisionally sustained — with the notion of “my-death,” as something that falls within the scope of that finite existence. So, for example, in conducting an argument around the “death of God” that pits Derrida against Jean-Luc Marion, Hägglund defends his attribution of a radical atheism to Derrida on the grounds of a view of life as essentially mortal: “If to be alive is to be mortal, it follows that to *not* be mortal — to be immortal — is to be dead. If one cannot die, one is dead.” (*RA* 8) But the question this raises is not so much whether

one can be immortal, as whether one *can* be, fully and presently as it were, mortal; whether, in short, dying is something one *can* do.

To put it in such terms is of course to gesture towards continuities between Derrida's conception of death and that of thinkers such as Levinas and Blanchot, particularly in so far as they are variously engaged with Heidegger's thought of death as the "possibility of the impossibility" of Dasein, which, in so far as it is assumed by Dasein as the singularity of "my-death," stands as its "ownmost possibility." (*Being and Time* ¶ 263) Famously, for Levinas, by contrast, the approach of death heralds a moment when "we are no longer *able to be able* [*nous ne pouvons plus pouvoir*]." (*Time* 74)¹⁰ Derrida in turn revisits the question of the possibility or impossibility of death on countless occasions, notably in *Aporias*, much of which could be described as trying to maintain a warring tension between the positions of Heidegger and Levinas, in order to pursue the notion that death might be at once uniquely mine, and impossible for me, the point of this pursuit being in essence to ask, in relation to death, what 'mine' and 'me' might mean here. The paradoxical formulation we have been pursuing in relation to *différance* reappears in that essay, whose closing words imply that a mortal existence is one in which finitude is constitutively open, and that in our incomplete mortality we share, by way of an anachronous temporality, an existence that is "infinitely finite." (*Aporias* 81, trans. mod.)

For now, I'd like to end by suggesting one way of thinking of mortal finitude as infinitely finite, and that is to draw this conception of a death that is constitutively incomplete into proximity with the notion of the 'weakness of the negative' that has sometimes been proposed as a useful handle to characterize that philosophical lineage — comprising most notably Bataille, Blanchot, Levinas and Derrida — which has sought to unsettle the power of negation that fuels the Hegelian dialectic, especially in

its influential Kojévian guise, emphasizing death as the paradigm of the negation that propels the dialectic.¹¹ But in so doing, what I want to suggest is that this weakness of the negative is not simply something less powerful than the negative, but is rather something perhaps inconceivably greater than the negative. The thinking of death proposed here is one in which it is the *same* limit that both seals mortal finitude and unseals it infinitely; and this is only a weakening of that negative limit in the sense that the inviolable strengthening of it is precisely what weakens it as a limit of finite, mortal existence. It is, if you like, a hyperfinitude that is, by that same token, an infinitude. It is infinitely more finite than any finitude that I could grasp. It announces a future that is entirely other than unpredictable, and that withdraws in its unconditional arrival.

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¹ See, for example, Wood, *Time After Time*, itself just one stage of a sustained reflection on time in Derrida and modern European philosophy, coming a few years after the 2nd Edition, with a new preface, of his pioneering study of *The Deconstruction of Time*; also, Hodge, Currie 2007 and 2015, Cheah and Guerlac, Lampert, Maclachlan. To these, of course, should be added the studies by Martin Hägglund that I go on to discuss in detail.

² I have in mind, for instance, the thinking of finitude proposed by Jean-Luc Nancy, in contrast with a philosophical position such as Alain Badiou's, for whom a thinking of ontological infinity is fundamental; one might also highlight Bernard Stiegler's conception of time in relation to originary technicity, or Quentin Meillassoux's proposal for a move beyond the correlationism consequent upon philosophies of finitude. For an excellent survey of recent French philosophy, which periodically pursues questions of time, finitude and infinity, see James.

³ I have retained the term "keyword" here as a marker of the first version of this paper, presented at King's College London in a seminar series devoted to "Keywords." I am grateful to Patrick French for the kind invitation to give a talk in that series, and to the seminar participants on that occasion for their searching remarks and questions.

⁴ Hägglund's first book, in Swedish, was *Kronofobi: Essäer om tid och ändlighet* (Stockholm/Stehag: Brutus Östlings Bokförlag Symposion, 2002). His work has quickly proved very influential, as evidenced notably, but by no means exclusively, by two special journal issues devoted to his work: *CR: The New Centennial Review* 9.1 (2009), "Living On: Of Martin Hägglund"; and *Derrida Today* 6.2 (2013), "On Dying for Time." In the former, Michael Naas's focus on the status of Derridean "phantasms," and Henry Staten's suspicion that Hägglund's version of Derridean "writing" appears at times to shade uncomfortably into empirical inscription seem to correspond to some of my own reservations about *Radical Atheism*; so, I think, does Adrian Johnston's exploration of mortality, mourning and finitude, though I cannot pretend to fully meet the challenges of the complex psychoanalytic register

underpinning his argument. One should also mention Derek Attridge's searching review of *Radical Atheism* in *Derrida Today* 2.2 (2009), to which Hägglund responds — as he does elsewhere, trenchantly, with all the demurring readers I have mentioned — in *Derrida Today* 3.2 (2010).

⁵ For further discussion of the temporal sense of *espacement* highlighted by Bennington, see also Maclachlan 31–2.

⁶ For the original French phrase cited, see *Points de suspension: entretiens*, ed. Elisabeth Weber (Paris: Galilée, 1992) 367.

⁷ For the phrase quoted, see *Resistances* 33.

⁸ Interestingly, in the version of this part of *De la grammatologie* that had first appeared in 1966 in the journal *Critique*, having announced the need to “destroy” rather than “deconstruct” this conceptuality, Derrida had been even more emphatic in his assertion: “Differance is not finitude.” (“De la grammatologie II,” *Critique* 224 (1966): 23–53 (36), my trans.) On this passage from *Of Grammatology* and the earlier variant of it, see Maclachlan, “Something Other than Finitude,” in Gaston and Maclachlan 76–8.

⁹ For helpful syntheses of Derrida on Husserl and on related questions of time and finitude, see Bennington, “Derridabase” 64–70 and 114–18.

¹⁰ For the French text, see *Le Temps et l'autre* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, coll. “Quadrige,” 1983) 62.

¹¹ For a pioneering study that mobilized the notion of the “weakness of the negative” to telling effect, see Libertson.