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Transcendence and the Secular: Reading Jon Fosse Through a Theological Lens

Transcendencja in sekularno: branje Jona Fosseja skozi teološko prizmo

Abstract: Secularism is one of those contemporary phenomena to which there are contradictory theological responses in the West: from negative and critical to positive and accepting. Writer Jon Fosse in his literary works describes the secular world as in need of transcendence. Thus, his literature offers at least the possibility of a dialogue between the secular and the transcendent. Fosse's works resonate theologian John Milbank's vision of secularism as a theological heresy. This study explores the shared principles of theological and literary perspectives of Fosse and Milbank and argues that literature is important contemporary *locus theologicus* and a common ground for dialogue between religion and the secular.

Keywords: Jon Fosse, John Milbank, transcendent, literature, contemporary theology, dialogue, critique of the secular

Povzetek: Sekularizem je eden od sodobnih pojavov, na katerega v zahodnem svetu obstajajo protislovni teološki odzivi: od negativnih in kritičnih do pozitivnih in razumevajočih. Pisatelj Jon Fosse v svojih literarnih delih sekularni svet opisuje kot svet, ki potrebuje transcendenco – njegova literatura ponuja vsaj možnost dialoga med sekularnim in transcendentnim. Fossejeva dela odražajo vizijo teologa Johna Milbanka, da je sekularizem teološka herezija. Prispevek tako raziskuje skupna načela teoloških in literarnih perspektiv Fosseja in Milbanka in trdi, da je literatura pomemben sodobni *locus theologicus* ter skupna podlaga za dialog med religijo in sekularizmom.

Ključne besede: Jon Fosse, John Milbank, transcendentno, literatura, sodobna teologija, dialog, kritika sekularizma

The idea of a secular world gained enormous popularity in the twentieth century in the Christian intellectual atmosphere of the West. It was caused especially due to the work of Charles Taylor and other scholars who developed his ideas (Miklaszewska 2017, 43–49). As for secularism itself, it is generally understood as

“indifference to or rejection or exclusion of religion and religious considerations” (Merriam-Webster [n. d.]). It is seen either as a space of non-religious affairs, as a naturalistic worldview – thus being close to humanism, or finally as advocating strict opposition between Church and State. Even the *New Dictionary of Christian Apologetics* (2006) considers secularism to be seen as “a descriptive term, a militant world-view or a social process” (Hicks 2006, 657). Despite many different meanings of the term, one may agree that contemporary man understands secularism as unsympathetic and even antagonistic to religion and even to transcendence, focusing its principles and activity solely on the present life and physical world, creating thus a space of autonomy from religion.

In this study, secularism understood in this sense is the framework for analyzing a specific phenomenon – a literary work. Also, we offer a broader and reverse-vectoring view because we assert that based on literary works, treated as cultural facts and a record of human experiences in concrete circumstances, certain conclusions about secularism and its consequences can be made.

The secular world is the environment in which Jon Fosse (1959-), the winner of the 2023 Nobel Prize in literature, creates his work. He even describes his literature as “the secularized world’s mysticism” (Fosse 2015, 63). However, neither his theoretical reflections nor literary fiction have yet been examined regarding the phenomenon of secularism, which is a very important context for both (Nymoen 2018; Griffiths 2023; Collum 2024). This study will show Fosse’s literary texts and theoretical essays on literature from the perspective of Western Christianity and its specific understanding of secularism, because such understanding is closest to the writer since Fosse’s spiritual path led him from the Church of Norway through a period of atheism to Catholicism (Fosse and Skjeldal 2024).

Fosse’s unique manner of connecting the secularized world with Christianity offers a bridge between the secular and the transcendent. He is not a theologian, and his work does not have theological ambitions. Although he does not explicitly engage with philosophical theories within an academic framework, as a writer, he offers a profound and insightful perspective on reality. His work presents not only a depiction of the secular but also clues to the problems of secularity as a state of mind and secularism as an ideology.

He shows the experience of a man living in a secular world who feels the urge to go beyond this world. His works provide a very interesting and the most contemporary example for a theological debate about literature being a true *locus theologicus*. Fosse’s notion of transcendence, being close to the experience of the secular everydayness in the West, is not so distinct from some philosophical-theological considerations that do not agree with completely contradictory positions of secularism and religion. Emphasizing the illusory nature of these contradictions, Fosse will be presented as a paradoxical writer for whom the combination of opposites functions as both a creative method and a cognitive pattern. Thus, highlighting the paradox is essential for interpreting Fosse’s works. The starting point for our analysis will be the ideas of a philosopher and theologian John

Milbank (1952–), whose description of the origins of secular ideas and the secular world is valuable to our study since it offers not a completely separate reality of Christianity and secularism, but the origin of secularism within Christianity itself.

1. Milbank's Presentation of the Secular

“Once there was no ‘secular.’” (Milbank 2006, 9) This sentence from John Milbank’s work *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (1990) has already become a classic since it started the new philosophical and theological school of thought Radical Orthodoxy. Milbank insists that secularism is an artificial mode of reality that once did not exist; that man must always find himself in a religious position under God’s providence within transcendental reality. Therefore, principles of both modernity and postmodernity (in its broadest definitions of neutral spheres of existence without God) are human inventions and secularism was invented “both in theory and practice” (Milbank 2006, 9).

In his search for an answer to these questions—When did the space for the invention of the secular open? When did the apprehension of autonomy from the divine begin? – Milbank proposes a theory that secular modernism has its roots in theological debates as far back as the Middle Ages. In his opinion, the theologian who indirectly caused the invention of the secular was the fourteenth-century Franciscan theologian, John Duns Scotus (1265/6–1308). (Milbank 2006, XXIV) Milbank accuses Duns Scotus of an erroneous shift in the debate about *being*, which had been dealt with already by Thomas Aquinas (1225/7–1274) in Thomas’ concept of analogy and participation in God’s being.¹ In Milbank’s critique, Duns Scotus’ effort to preserve the possibility of approaching God’s existence through the existence of creatures in a univocal way resulted in a new and neutral manner of speaking about *being*:

“For insofar as Aquinas appeared to leave some ambiguity regarding how it was possible to speak of God by first speaking of finite beings, Duns Scotus resolved it in an untraditional direction by affirming that this is because one can first understand Being in an unambiguous, sheerly ‘existential’ sense, as the object of a proposition, without reference to God, who is later claimed ‘to be’ in the same univocal manner.” (Milbank 1997, 44)

However, instead of preserving the closeness of God and man on the level of being, Duns Scotus posited that man suddenly found himself not participating in God’s being, but rather existing autonomously from God’s existence, thus enabling him to see God as a different object in relation to himself. It was not God in whom everything subsists anymore, but God who exists along with creation, “just like

¹ Milbank was criticized for his approach to Duns Scotus. Among other studies, Milbank’s critique of Duns Scotus was the subject of *Antonianum* 76/1 (2001). Also, many commentators have already addressed the criticism of Milbank’s interpretation of Aquinas, for example Nicholas Lash, Laurence P. Hemming, Wayne Hankey, Lawrence Dewan, John Marenbon, Paul DeHart, and others.

the Newtonian God among the planetary bodies in Newtonian space” (Milbank 1997, 28). A theological plan to bring God closer to man collapsed in a terrible separation of man from God and, in Milbank’s words, in “a separation between ontology and theology” (Milbank 2006, 306).

In Milbank’s reading of history, a new autonomous space developed into a secular space of modern and postmodern eras where a man could, with God-like power, decide what he wanted to become and do separately from God. In the secular, transcendental reality was left behind; human reason became a sufficient power to discover and to create on its own.

Milbank’s interpretation of the roots of the secular in medieval theological debates about *being* shows that secularism is actually a parasite of Christianity’s categories and narrative, while at the same time narrating its own new *mythos* of reality instead of only staying in some neutral domain of reason.

“Secular discourse does not just borrow inherently inappropriate modes of expression from religion as the only discourse to hand /.../, but is actually *constituted* in its secularity by ‘heresy’ in relation to orthodox Christianity, or else a rejection of Christianity that is more ‘neopagan’ than simply anti-religious.” (Milbank 2006, 3)

Secularism is not a simple desacralization but a theological invention of neopaganism as a new religion. It is the perfection and totalization of pagan logic: “Indeed, I argue that, from the perspective of Christian virtue, there emerges to view a hidden thread of continuity between antique reason and modern, secular reason.” (Milbank 2006, 5)

Milbank accentuates that secular reason stepped out from the domain of philosophy and theology and influenced other sciences as well and eventually, the whole of human life. As a concrete example of such a universal vision, based on—or, rather, influenced by, the secular—Milbank uses liberalism.

“Liberalism /.../ proceeds by inventing a wholly artificial human being who has never really existed, and then pretending that we are all instances of such a species. This is the pure individual, thought of in abstraction from his or her gender, birth, associations, beliefs and also, crucially, in equal abstraction from the religious or philosophical beliefs of the observer of this individual.” (Milbank and Oliver 2009, 339)

For Milbank, liberalism concluded what univocity of being started: namely, the separation of man from God resulting also in man’s separation from society. Man is left in an empty space—neither in the world of nature nor in the world of grace; he is only “a bare being, existing univocally no more and no less than God himself taken as an abstract possibility and not as the creator” (Milbank and Oliver 2009, 340). According to Milbank, this line of thinking from Scotus through liberalism continues within modernism and postmodernism and leads, eventually, to nihilism.

Since Milbank’s thinking offers a rather bleak reading of history, his plan with Radical orthodoxy begins with a positive vision: “The central theological frame-

work of radical orthodoxy is ‘participation’ as developed by Plato and reworked by Christianity, because any alternative configuration perforce reserves a territory independent of God.” (Milbank, Pickstock and Ward 1999, 3) Milbank’s goal is to unite, not to divide: human is not against divine, reason not against faith, philosophy not against theology. And precisely because of this, Milbank believes that to achieve this goal necessarily means refuting the narration offered by secularism. In other words, there is no dialogue, no compromise with secularism as Milbank and Radical orthodoxy understand it (Shakespeare 2007, 55–58).

Milbank’s radical reading of history thus offers a philosophical-theological lineage crowned with Thomas Aquinas and his understanding of participation, which was distorted by Duns Scotus and his innovative idea of univocity of being. It was precisely this moment in history that opened the possibility of neutral autonomous space appropriated by liberalism and ending in nihilism. It was this problematic deviation of Aquinas’ participatory ontology, of this purely Christian orthodoxy, that led to problematic novel heterodoxy.

Some important conclusions stem from this brief outline of Milbank’s and Radical orthodoxy’s project: the secular is an invention; the secular was once joined to Christianity and still is connected to it (at least in the sense of being a heresy of it); the narration of secularism must be overcome by the narration of Christianity. Ultimately, it means a choice: either secularism or Christianity.

This study agrees with Milbank in first two conclusions; however, it disagrees with the third one: there does not have to be a complete refutation of secularism. If we take Milbank’s analysis seriously, we must consider the possibility that the heresy of secularism is not an enemy to be refuted but a partner that must be seriously engaged. A dialogue means not accepting all of my partner’s ideas as a whole but reinterpreting the tensions between us to reach a deeper level of understanding. Theology should thus uncover and utilize the good behind the erroneous ideas of secularism because, despite its many negative principles, despite its antagonism and negativism toward the supernatural order, secularism is a living reality, not a fiction. It has possessed not only theoretical systems of sciences, but also minds and hearts of people.² Christianity cannot choose to refute secularism as a theory while forgetting about people who truly live as if there was no God. Nor can it concentrate on simply pointing out the consequences of secular life – nihilism – without arguing with the theoretical principles of secularism that have come to dominate the present.

This is where Milbank’s grammar of secularism as a heresy appears to be very useful, despite Milbank’s different understanding of this idea. Heresy does not mean offering a complete lie, but rather highlighting some specific element of truth while the rest is relegated to the background. Probably G. K. Chesterton put it best: “For a heresy is not often a mere lie; as Thomas More himself said, ‘Never was there a heretic that spoke all false.’ A heresy is a truth that hides all the other truths.” (Che-

² In his study *Humanity and Transcendence*, John Berry takes for granted the assertion that “The quest for identity has shifted from being rooted in God to one solely within oneself. This marks a shift towards an anthropocentric viewpoint. In other words, humanity and its future are no longer perceived in terms of the inherent nature of human beings, from an eternal standpoint” (Berry 2025, 49).

sterton 1990, 505) Heresy hides behind the appearance of full truth; however, still carrying a part of it. As such, there is a connection between secularism and Christianity, which can lay a basis for a genuine contemporary dialogue between them.

2. Dialogue between Christianity and Secularism

The possibility of such a dialogue has already been suggested by other thinkers in the past as well as in the present. Richard Kearney in his book *Anatheism: Returning to God after God* offers examples of such thinkers, e.g. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Stanislas Breton, and Gianni Vattimo. Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote in his cell in 1944 that “secular and sacred are not opposed but find their unity in Christ /.../ That which is Christian is to be found only in the natural, the holy only in the profane” (Bonhoeffer 1998, 44). A provoking idea came from the philosopher Vattimo, who considers Christ’s incarnation and kenosis as turning over all his power to the secular order so that secularization is the “constitutive trait of authentic religious experience” (Vattimo and Rorty 2005, 35). In Kearney’s words, even the contemporary philosopher Raimon Panikkar offers a possibility of cooperation between the secular and religious, if one follows the original meaning of the word secular: “Only secularization can prevent the sacred from becoming life denying, while only sacralization can prevent the secular from becoming banal.” (Kearney 2010, 140–141)

The last citation offers the possibility of a true dialogue and mutual enrichment of both partners. Thus, Christianity can benefit from secularism for not becoming “life denying” while, at the same time, secularism shall benefit from dialoguing with Christianity so as not to become banal, as the real-life experiences on various occasions have already demonstrated.³

3. Fosse’s Paradoxical Method

The question of the dialogue between the secular world and Christianity resonates in a peculiar way in the work of Jon Fosse, who as a writer seems to be completely immersed in reality. He focuses on human existence, and the images he uses are almost entirely recognizable from the reader’s own life. Not because all readers have the experience of living in the same environment as Fosse’s characters, but because the writer conveys a very deep and basic experience, as common as feeling cold, hot, wet, thirsty, frightened, worried or lonely. It is these basic feelings that create the framework of the physical world in Fosse’s work. His style is often described by critics as “mystical realism” (Margalit 2021).

³ John W. Matthews mentions that many young Americans who live without traditional religious experiences and expressions still demonstrate the need for devotion and spirituality, “even when reduced to a ‘Moralistic Therapeutic Deism.’” Such examples confirm that to speak about “living without God” in secular society is not the same as truly living without God. (Matthews 2017, 163) Another author, Robert H. Nelson, talks about the presence of implicit elements of what “we usually call ‘religion,’ even when it seems to be ‘secular.’” Thus, even the ordinary secular life could be religious life in disguise. (Nelson 2015, 283)

This term refers to the fusion of transcendental reflections and ordinary situations, as well as transcendental situations and thoughts about everyday actions. This concept does not exist in dictionaries of literary terms but can be explained periphrastically and by analogy with existing varieties of realism that clearly exceeded the limitations of physical space. Fosse's realism does not rely on the incorporation of magical elements into the narrative but on the intersection of temporal perspectives and personal stories.

For the writer, mysticism is in everyday life, permeates everyday life, and everyday life is its source and material, which means that it is also its form of expression. The very blending of the various parallels of everyday life is already transcendent. And all of these problems are presented using a very clear and simple vocabulary, which enables the reader to reach all these complicated and inexplicable questions very clearly and precisely, more through associations, intuition and feelings than through words.

As one might guess from this brief description of Fosse's writing method, it is completely paradoxical. And indeed, paradox seems to be one of Fosse's main artistic tools. What can be called a tool for the writer is in fact the most natural characteristic of human existence, of his life, his world, his faith and his art. Reality is rich in paradoxes, and so is good art. The physical world, which is an environment for life that denies the existence of God and is full of signs of God, and what's more, the same world in which God sent his Son to share man's life and suffering, is also deeply paradoxical for Fosse.

4. Secular Everydayness and Secularism as Heresy

When we speak of Fosse's secularism, we could, of course, recall other understandings of secularism and secularity, more firmly rooted in modern thought and associated with the well-known theory of the "secular age" (Tischner 2018; Taylor 2007). Secularism can be seen then in a completely different way than Milbank's theological model, for example, as a manifestation of the so-called "disenchantment of the world" (Taylor 2008), referring to the condition of modern man, who does not see anything particularly important in religion. According to many observers of contemporary culture and philosophers, this deep "disenchantment of the world," which was supposed to be a consequence of the modernist model, has led to a surprisingly opposite phenomenon, a re-enchantment, which ultimately resulted in the thesis of a post-secular age at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

In this context, Fosse would then be a rather blurred representative of the type of identity for which the model of the "buffered self" (Taylor 2008) is not sufficient, one who is looking for an indeterminate meaning outside himself. We have to stress, however, that re-enchantment does not imply a reappraisal of the value of religion as such or a reversal of secular trends. Thus, we want to show the writer's work in a very specific light: the Christian life and the Christian world.

The characters in his prose or dramas reject faith, deny its social significance, or recognize it as one of many ways of dealing with the pressures of the contemporary world (Sunde 2007, 58). At the same time, these characters follow daily routines and reflect on everyday problems, unnoticeably entering the realm of extraordinary experiences and ultimate matters. In this sense, which is perhaps another paradox in the work under examination, mysticism is seen both in the Norwegian writer's texts written before and after his conversion to Catholicism.

In *The Girl on the Sofa* (2002), a play that creatively remodels the conventions of twentieth-century theatre, the motif of an old woman's death appears within the stark and economical depiction of everyday family relations and individual traumas of the main character. This death constitutes the end of a failed relationship between mother and daughter. The protagonist of the play, called here by the generalized names, Girl or, afterwards, Woman, cannot forgive her mother for her dryness, lack of family warmth, and pursuing her own happiness. The protagonist sees her unsuccessful life, her lack of self-confidence, her poor life decisions, and even subsequent difficulties in her artistic work as due precisely to this bad relationship with her mother.

The mother's long illness preceding her death can be an opportunity to work through mutual guilt, renew relationships and forgive. Girl, however, wants nothing to do with her dying mother, nor does she want to see the potential of forgiveness. She wants to stop at the existential meaning of death, as the definitive elimination of one person from the world of other people (Partyga 2009, 26). And yet, in this image of death, distorted and degraded from a Christian perspective, there are many moments that have the opposite connotation. It turns out that the mother's death does not mean the definitive end of this character's presence in the drama. Even then, among the many alternating temporal perspectives, the call for a reunion still echoes repeatedly in the play. This in turn seems to put death, understood as a definitive end, in doubt.

Girl's declarations that she wants to disappear have a similar significance, emphasizing the perspective of transcendence. She repeats several times the desire not to exist. Girl-Woman only wants to be a painted image, not to live, to symbolically pass into the realm of things and remain a thing. However, the conclusion expressed by her creates a kind of dissonance for the understanding of the world only in a realistic dimension deprived of the supernatural sphere.

"I can't paint things out
they're always there
Therefore I can't paint." (Fosse 2011, 101)

Human creativity has neither the power to make something begin to exist nor to make something cease to exist. Thus, without deep theological considerations, Fosse refers to God, who created the world out of nothing. This reference can be called mythological, and it does not imply a relationship with God, still, it goes beyond the realm of the physical world. The quote cited above completes the concept of changing temporal perspectives, where life continues simultaneously

in multiple dimensions, and where none of the endings is the definitive end of the story (Landro 2022, 227–229).

The secular world can be considered as the world of everyday life, the milieu of human existence, in which man focuses on one dimension of reality and does not take the trouble to look for meaning beyond himself, even though his life is full of situations prompting him to do so. This world does not exclude transcendence, but it does not mean either that the secular consciousness is open to supernatural matters. Fosse's perspective is completely different, for he shows that the secular point of view is unable to exclude transcendent matters from human experience, for they simply exist, and their existence undermines the very foundations of secularism and makes the secular point of view more questionable than the transcendent world.

It would be fair to say, then, that in the light of Fosse's work, the world of everyday life cannot eliminate transcendence, but it can drown out the human ability to recognize it. In essence, this echoes Milbank's idea of secularism as heresy. Literature is able to open up to this transcendence by conveying a feeling of emptiness, by evoking a need for an inner exploration that goes beyond the scope of psychological traumas and relationships that need to be worked through. Fosse expresses it in a manner typical of his paradoxical method, that is, by what is not there, what is missing, what is unsaid (Fosse 2015, 81–82).

5. Literature as "Secular Mysticism"

Fosse is a writer who is very aware of his writing technique and well prepared theoretically for his occupation. As a student of philology, a teacher of creative writing and finally, as an observer of the world, he is interested in the different ways of conceptualizing the ideas which are important to him and getting to the root of the trends of contemporary culture. He is an ideological maximalist and at the same time an intellectual ascetic, since the result of his deep consideration and extended research is the resignation of a sophisticated narrative, the dropping of theorizing and the shift to a position that can be called apophatic theory. It consists of limiting himself to a few main concepts, most of which are negative, since they point to what does not exist, what cannot be described, and what cannot be expressed.

It is worth stressing that Fosse's essayistic works mainly come from the period before his conversion and, for this reason, offer a very interesting example of the deconstruction of the secular perspective. Fosse's theory of literary work, written mostly in the 1990s and influenced by various philosophical texts opening up new currents in contemporary literary studies and referring, for example, to the considerations by Mikhail Bakhtin, Georgy Lukács, Jacques Derrida, Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin or Harold Bloom, bursts out from the secular approach to the world and the concept of literature in "the secular age."

Fosse brings out in the thoughts of each of the cited authors what is closest to him, that is, idealistic elements, which he transforms into reflections on the my-

stical value of literature, emphasizing a spirituality that is no longer visible in the context of “sciences of the mind and spirit,” but of religious mysticism rooted in the Middle Ages. In his essays, Fosse tries to answer the most important questions about the art of literature, for example: what is literature? who is the writer? what are the means and methods that literature uses? or what is the purpose of literature? In all his answers, he very clearly emphasizes what can be called the spiritual sphere. We will present here only a few elements of a minimalist, negative and personal theory of literature depicted by the writer in his essays.

To begin with, Fosse believes that not all literary work is literature. Its basic distinctive feature is the ability to convey what is most important and relevant to all people without any exception. He states: “Literature is common to all people. Literature is what is common to all people.” (Fosse 2015, 35) Trying to define the matters that are the subject of literary reflection, Fosse points again to the simplest and most natural themes, namely life, death and love (34). However, this does not mean that literature speaks directly about general matters, equally applicable to everyone and understandable to everyone. For the question of life and death remains an unsolved mystery that is manifested in different ways.

Fosse writes in the essay *The Novel in Its Great Irony* (1990) that the novel constantly oscillates between great and small matters. He contends that literature cannot express a universal truth, while an exclusive focus on trivial matters fails to fulfil its broader ambitions (27). The historical development of the novel, and therefore of literature in general, can then be presented metaphorically as an endless search for meaning.

Thus, literature is born somewhere between the general and the individual, constituting a different experience for each recipient. This is the experience of contact with an imagined author, and with what he presents in his work, but at the same time, it is contact with something completely different, which goes beyond the events presented in the plot and what the author planned to write. That is why Fosse states in his other essay that literature is between the fictional author and religious mysticism (41).

In his essay *The Deepest Need for Speechlessness* (1990), the Norwegian writer recalls Walter Benjamin’s thesis that language was born when the “human being as well as the human race, became and becomes separated from God” (30). For Fosse, this is a starting point for a reflection that literature was also born out of this breaking of direct contact with the divine (Fosse and Skjeldal 2024, 54–55). In the secular world, literature is both an effect of this separation and a way of overcoming it. Fosse’s theory thus somehow supports Milbank’s critique of secularism, which is the bearer of the separation of man from God, and which, according to him, leads to nihilism.⁴

Fosse completely changes the classical views on literature according to which the audience should understand what the author wanted to convey. For the author

⁴ Zern (2008, 104) claims that nihilism is a necessary step on the way to mysticism for Fosse.

himself does not really know what the effect of his writing will be, since this effect is always doubly modified in relation to the writer's intention: due to the imperfection of the tool, i.e. language, and due to the specificity of literary description, which implies the creation of a certain image of the author, i.e. some kind of fictional person. The meaning of the work thus reaches the reader through a double mediation, that of language and that of the imagined author.

Paradoxically, the literary work created in this way is always more than the author planned, expressing even what the author is not aware of and cannot verbalize, not because of his deficiency of talent, but because some things, for example, things from the spiritual realm, cannot be described in words. The additional meaning is precisely that void, insufficiency, seeking, and is therefore negative. Notably, it can be read precisely because it is absent and not put into words.

Fosse claims that his own practice of writing led him to the observation that writing became a source of mystical experience (Fosse 2015, 43). Writing made it impossible for him to remain an atheist, even though he was not yet ready to describe himself as a believer. It was at this moment in his religious path that Fosse introduced the concept of literature as "negative mysticism" (53–55) – a mysticism that is an expression of a seeking of God and a lack of contact with him. This mysticism is not expressed explicitly in a literary work and cannot be identified by specific themes or motifs. For it is based on what is silenced, what is omitted, what cannot be verbalized, what is best expressed in the form of silence. Fosse does not identify a personal God as the ultimate source of this inner experience, limiting himself to the Lukács-inspired thought that the novel "preserves the divine in a godforsaken world" (54).

In his Nobel speech, as a long-time Catholic convert, Fosse summed up his work as a constant striving to "write the unsayable" (Fosse 2024, 20) and put silent speech into words, and he then humbly, not from a position of teaching authority, mentioned "It is only in the silence that we can hear the voice of God" (16). Thus, one can observe a gradual but consistent process of Fosse's identification with the Christian attitude to God.

It must be said that in his earlier works, the writer's search for transcendence is of a non-confessional, universal nature, fitting in with general contemporary post-secular tendencies (Nymoén 2018, 220). In his later works, on the other hand, Fosse clearly directs the reader's attention to the Christian tradition, in varieties that reflect his own spiritual experience.

As another essential characteristic of literature, or more precisely of those literary works that Fosse considers as literature, the writer points out that it has no purpose beyond itself (Fosse 2015, 63). That is to say, it is not created with a view to conveying any teaching or communicating anything. It is made to be precisely literature with all its limitations, and the process of its creation is an opportunity for the writer's mystical experience. It is surrounded by the secular world and has no ambition to explain or change anything in it, which is why Fosse calls it the mysticism of the secularized world.

Such literature can be read in a special way that reveals its anagogical meaning (66). Fosse, who usually follows the newest trends in literary theory, here returns to the old models of literature from the late Middle Ages and early Renaissance, known from the writings of Dante, according to which there are four levels of meaning in a literary work, generating four ways of reading it. Regardless of historical transformations in reflecting on literature, for Fosse, the anagogical value of literature, which allows the reader to perceive its mystical meaning, remains the most important. Literature is thus an enclave of meaning in a secular world, even if this meaning is hidden, unspoken and undefined. It is, as Fosse writes, meaning, even though it has no defined meaning. Moreover, equipping literature with anagogical meaning cannot be the writer's aim, for then literature contradicts itself and the anagogical level disappears. Literature is thus best defined by a series of paradoxes because it belongs and does not belong to the world, it operates with a meaning that is not there, it is extremely heavy and at the same time extremely light.

A particularly interesting feature of this true literature for our consideration is that it must be in dialogue with the world. It must be surrounded by differently oriented texts, other works and other ways of reading (64). For, in order to appreciate the value of silence, one must know what silence is not; in order to perceive the silent language, one must experience the language of the everyday.

6. Fosse's Mysticism as a Return to Participation in God

The most recent novel by the author under study, *Septology* (2019–2021), provides very rich material for the exploration of the practice of mysticism in literature. The work, considered by critics as Fosse's *opus vitae*, is clearly located within the realm of Christian mysticism (Žmudziński 2023; Beha 2023; Landro 2022). Here we will try to outline some of the characteristics of the novel through which we will explain this other, openly Christian, side of secular mysticism.

The plot of the work is an extended story about the daily life of an elderly painter named Asle, a widower who lives alone in a remote village surrounded by the rugged and beautiful landscape of the Norwegian fjords. Asle's only contact is with his closest neighbor, Asleik, and the art gallery owner, Bayer, who lives in the nearest larger town and sells his paintings. Technically, the style of the novel can be called stream of consciousness, but unlike the focus on recording impressions that is characteristic of this type of narrative, here it is a reflection clearly directed towards a goal that is outside the text and not the subject of description.

It is a story that covers a whole life, although it takes place in the few weeks leading up to Christmas. The aim, mentioned above, is to establish the identity of the protagonist and thus show the coherence of all the facts of the man's life, despite the fact that the narrative seems to be disjointed and made up of a huge number of episodes that flow seamlessly from one to the next (Landro 2022, 237–238). The names of the characters mix and overlap, at one time indicating

similarities between the characters and at another time differences. As a result, the text, which is almost free of full stops, becomes a great story of life seen simultaneously from multiple perspectives and multiple time dimensions, each time at a different pace, with an in fact uncertain subject.

Thus, the impression is created that man, in an everyday reality that does not recognize God, as this is the world of most of the characters depicted, is never actually sure of his identity and his story, because at the same time he is and is not himself; he has his own story and does not have one. For he only has access to a small piece of reality and is unable to read the signs of a transcendent realm. In contrast, the path that Asle chooses, the path of the believer who begins each part of his story with contemplation of his painting and ends with prayer, is different. Asle sees more, unconsciously experiences other people's lives, and avoids the tragedies that have touched them. Fosse seems to propose kind of a reunion of man with himself, of man with mankind, and eventually of man with God. This is a reflection of Christianity lost, as Milbank saw present in Christian orthodoxy, and which is a main theme of his own theology: a necessity of returning to the participative ontology, where man is one with God and through this union also with all creation (Milbank 2011).

Time in *Septology* is relative, everyday insignificant activities unfold slowly, filling whole paragraphs in the description, while important, decisive matters, turning points in a person's life, happen in a flash, overlapping each other. In written form, this results in a text in which whole pages are devoted to preparing tea or putting logs into the stove, while decisive life events are condensed to a few words (Fosse and Skjeldal 2024, 34). The narrative in *Septology*, then, is a permanent participation in some hard-to-define event, in a mystery that is happening constantly and that cannot be described in words or defined by any other available categories. It is prose that reflects a state of unending vigilance, readiness and expectation. Prose that resembles abiding in prayer.

Prayer is also made present in *Septology* in other ways. Its impression is created by the repetitive character of numerous elements in the text. Words in the dialogues and whole passages of the narrator's thoughts and descriptions of his daily activities are repeated, and these repetitions acquire the meaning of a ritual, or even some kind of liturgy encoded in the mundane. They slow down the flow of the story and introduce a distinct rhythm that is alien to physical reality, while it is characteristic of a prayer, or a service that is always celebrated according to a certain scheme and in a certain rhythm and with certain words.

This association is confirmed at moments when Fosse explicitly presents the motives for prayer. Quoted in full, the texts of Asle's spoken prayers appear relatively frequently in the novel. The words are accompanied by descriptions of the actions involved in prayer, such as moving fingers over rosary beads, making the sign of the cross or breathing between parts of the Jesus Prayer.

"I hold the brown wooden cross between my thumb and index finger and I say inside myself Pater noster Qui es in cælis Sanctificetur nomen tuum

Adveniat regnum tuum Fiat voluntas tua sicut in cælo et in terra Panem nostrum cotidianum da nobis hodie et dimitte nobis debita nostra sicut et nos dimittimus debitoribus nostris Et ne nos inducas in tentationem sed libera nos a malo and I move my thumb and index finger up to the first bead and I say Our Father Who art in heaven.” (Fosse 2023, 700–701)

The indentations in Fosse’s text suggest a momentary pause, stopping the flow of thoughts and emotions, but not stopping time. They are moments of silence in which the most significant events of the characters’ internal sphere take place, when, for example, they learn about themselves or discover the meaning of their relationship with each other. The writer also introduces silences for situations which the characters do not understand and of which they do not realize the importance. Some help to understand the meaning of this silence can be found in Fosse’s essays, in which the writer uses an example from the principles of Quaker spirituality. Silence is understood there as the moment of the dominance of the inner light, of the inner experience, of the individual encounter with and individual feeling of God (Fosse 2015, 49). For speech is understood here as something external, as an externally imposed language that is incapable of describing this inner light (67). Silence, therefore, clearly has mystical connotations in the novel, as a moment of God’s invisible action or a place of unbounded contact with him.

We can, therefore, say that the Christian version of mysticism in literature does not cancel Fosse’s theoretical reflections on secular mysticism. For the world surrounding the protagonist of *Septology* is still a secular, everyday world that denies the significance of religion. The sense of the everyday seems to be turned in on itself, disregarding any other dimension. Moreover, the mysticism of Fosse can still be called negative mysticism, for it appears as a reaction to the desire for contact with God, to lack, to darkness. The spiritual world becomes entangled with the world of everyday life to the extent that spiritual experiences become blurred in routine. And yet it is precisely in this routine and in the inability to go beyond the sphere of mundane matters that the essence of secular mysticism lies.

7. Conclusion

Literature, as the written result of genuine human experience and the product of the author’s deepest reflections, brilliantly addresses issues that, in theoretical form, are the subject of complex academic analysis. Secularity, secularism and the secular sphere, which are strongly separated in theoretical reflections, are presented here in an unusual way, mutually defining each other.

In his literary works and theoretical essays, Fosse-writer offers a surprising number of common points with theological reflections on secularism and transcendental reality. Like Milbank, he reveals the ineffectiveness of the secular narrative. Milbank theologially discusses the heretical status of the secular autonomy; Fosse narratively depicts the secular world as impossible without glimps-

ses of the unspeakable transcendent reality. Milbank offers a sturdy theory; Fosse simply offers a portrait of everyday life. For both, the natural world does not exist without the supernatural entering it. The people may not be aware of it; however, they experience it.

Literature, no matter how separated from theology – and thus being a symbolic representation of the secular world – if it conveys meaning by being a silent observer of real life, can reconnect the natural with the supernatural precisely because it “sees” and “feels” the unspeakable. In other words, true literature has the power to connect the religious concept of transcendence with the secular experience of the unspeakable. Thus, literature becomes a *locus theologicus* for contemporary dialogue between religion and the secular world: it unmasks a falsity of secular existence and its seeming distance from the unspeakable, while at the same time it cleanses religion of its total supremacy over transcendent reality. True literature, i.e. those works which Fosse calls literature and which convey meaning, becomes a mediator which pushes religion to regularly confront itself with the secular existence and inculturate the gospel in a proper language, while at the same time it ridicules a secular claim that abandoning all religious realities is even possible and normal.

Literature as secular mysticism is a meeting point where religion and the secular can lead a dialogue not only about the principles of the opponent, but also about their own convictions and discrepancies which need to be clarified and corrected. And since true literature, according to Fosse, operates in the space of the unsayable and the unexpressed, it offers to both religion and the secular a fresh look at what is not present and unsaid. Thus, literary work can open a new path to return to God, the one and only truly Unsayable.

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