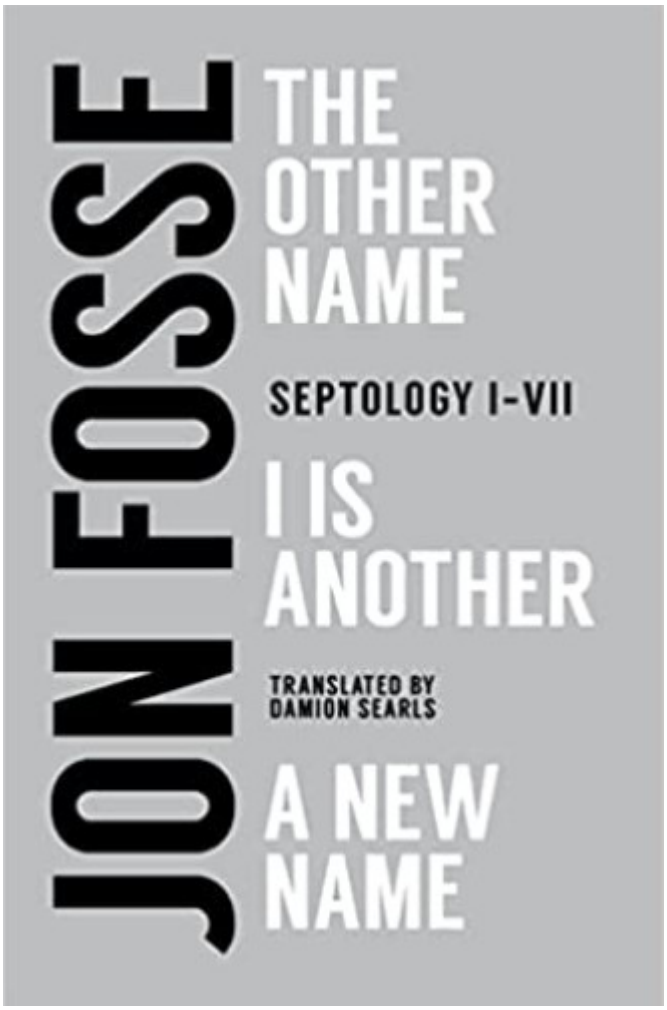
Prayer as mourning, mourning as prayer

In Jon Fosse's *Septology*, a tragic vision of faith shines with a luminous darkness.

by Mac Loftin in the May 2023 issue

In Review



Septology

By Jon Fosse, translated by Damion Searls
Transit Books
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Of the many, many charges Friedrich Nietzsche levels against Christianity in *The Anti-Christ*, one hits me harder than the others. He accuses Jesus' followers, from the very first disciples, of being unwilling to sit with the pain and the grief of his death.

Nietzsche sees the whole of the Christian tradition as one great refusal to mourn this founding loss, one great flight from "the feeling of being shaken and disappointed to their depths" into reassuring stories promising that disappointment has been reversed and loss restored.

The point certainly lands against a wide swath of Christian theology, but the idea that Christian faith might look less like triumph and more like mourning is not as unthinkable as Nietzsche supposes. Jon Fosse's novel *Septology*, written in Norwegian as a series and recently issued in a single English-language volume, shows how such a tragic vision of faith can shine with a luminous darkness.

Septology unspools slowly, in seven parts over 600 pages. Asle, a lonely Norwegian painter, stares at his paintings, drives back and forth to the city of Bjørgvin, eats with his neighbor Åsleik, grieves for his wife, Ales (names in *Septology* range from similar to identical), and prays. One night just before Christmas, driving back from Bjørgvin, Asle's thoughts turn to his friend and doppelgänger—also named Asle, also a lonely painter—whose loneliness has driven him to drink. Asle thinks about stopping and checking in on the other Asle but doesn't and continues home. Then, for reasons he can't explain, he gets back in his car and makes the trip back to Bjørgvin, where he finds the other Asle on the sidewalk, half-frozen and dying of alcohol poisoning, and takes him to the hospital. For the rest of the novel, Asle frets over his dying friend, continues to mourn Ales, and wonders whether he should accept Åsleik's invitation to have Christmas dinner with his sister.

At the beginning of each of the novel's seven parts, Asle stares at the same painting: a cross made of a brown line and a purple line, "and where the lines cross the colours blend beautifully and drip." Similarly, *Septology* blurs mourning, hope, prayer, care, and sorrow to indistinction. Asle's grief over Ales, his halting and threadbare prayers and concern for the other Asle, and the hopeful possibility of sharing a meal with Åsleik and his sister all bleed into each other until it is impossible to tell where one begins and the other ends.

Asle converted to Catholicism for Ales, but he remarks again and again that the faith was all hers. When he prays, it's only because Ales used to pray. His prayers bring

him no consolation but only sharpen her lack. But he feels Ales's absence so strongly it becomes a kind of presence:

> And when I sit down with one of Ales's rosaries in my hands we kind of talk to each other for a long time, about anything and everything, before we say goodbye to each other and say that it won't be long before we meet again and then I hang the rosary back up on the hook, and I miss Ales so much, and why did she have to die and leave me, so young, so suddenly?

These pangs of grief lead Asle to wax theological, but his thoughts about God are punctuated with protestations that it was Ales who believed all this, not him: "Anyway that's what Ales thought, I think and I think that maybe these are just empty thoughts and I think them anyway." Still, thinking these "empty thoughts" makes him feel closer to Ales, so he thinks them again and again, always denying that they mean anything. Asle is simply unable to think of one without thinking of the other.

At one moment, missing Ales so much that he feels her next to him, Asle remarks, "I can't always tell if it's God or her who's near me." Asle's relationship to God, like his relationship to Ales, is marked by separation and longing: "And I think that it's when I'm most alone, in my darkness, my loneliness, because it really is lonely, to tell the truth, and when I'm as quiet as I can be, that God is closest, in his distance." His faithless heart grieves, and in grieving, he says the words that Ales once said, and in saying Ales's words, he comes to know something of her faith. The work of grieving—for Ales, for his sister, for the other Asle—folds him into the work of prayer and worship.

And this is where *Septology* offers an important lesson for theology. If mourning is a kind of prayer, perhaps prayer is a kind of mourning. Asle's thoughts continually return to the death of Jesus and the absence of God—a God who "reveals himself by hiding."

Asle's blending of absence and presence, loss and faith looks much like what Freudian psychoanalysis calls *melancholia*. In *Mourning and Melancholia*, Freud described the melancholic as one who is unable to move on after loss, instead internalizing the lost love and identifying with them. Asle is a textbook melancholic. Near the end of the novel, when Åsleik's sister, Guro—herself abandoned by a deadbeat husband—makes a pass at Asle, he tells her, "But my wife and I are still

married.” “You can’t be married to someone who’s dead,” she replies. But the melancholic is precisely one who is married to the dead, who refuses to lose love just because love’s object is lost.

While Freud originally saw melancholia as a pathological form of “healthy” mourning, he argues in the later work *The Ego and the Id* that this process of incorporating lost loves is not only normal to the grieving process but developmentally necessary for building up what he calls the “character” of the ego. The pain of loss, that is, reveals that we are not islands; my ego, the most fundamentally “me” part of me, is built up of those I have loved and lost. Rather than closing me in upon myself, mourning and melancholia lay bare that there is no “myself” without my relationships with others. Asle’s internalized losses are a void across which he makes new connections. His concern for the other Asle, his care for Asle’s dog Bragi, his attendance at a small church in Bjørgvin, his courage to take up Åsleik’s invitation to Christmas dinner—all arise from his grief for Ales, for his sister, for a life of heaped-up losses.

Standing behind all these deaths is the death of Jesus. The absence of God spurs Asle’s sorrowful “longing for God.” *Septology* presents a vision of faith as mourning, or what we might call a melancholic faith, in which the death of Jesus is the loss that forever shapes us, an absence that promises by the very longing it provokes that love will escape abolition.

The novel’s tragic Christianity echoes the brilliant and underread theologian-priest Louis-Marie Chauvet, who drew on Freud in his book *Symbol and Sacrament: A Sacramental Reinterpretation of Christian Existence*, calling faith “a permanent work of mourning” and “a test of melancholy.” Too much theology, Chauvet laments, forgets just how radical is the Christian claim that God is revealed in the crucified Jesus of Nazareth. On the cross, he argues, every conception of God as “Supreme Being” or “majestic Esse” is “crossed out.” At the moment in which God is most fully revealed to us, we find not an omnipotent being but a human being, utterly despairing of God. “The fact that we can confess the very glory of God in the sub-humanity of him whom human beings have reduced to less than nothing revolutionizes every representation of ‘God,’” he writes, away from the language of being and toward the language of nothingness and lack. The church is faithful if it heeds the lesson of the cross and “consents to the presence of the absence of God.”

Chauvet describes the church as a school of mourning that teaches how to live in the wake of a founding loss, a loss that the resurrection does not overcome but deepens: “Now, as risen, Christ has departed; we must *agree to this loss* if we want to be able to find him.” And even when we do find him, it is not directly. We must “give up the hope of finding the lost body of Jesus” in order to “meet him, alive, in the symbolic mediation of the Church.” The church is thus “the privileged place of [Jesus’] presence” only by being at the same time “the most radical mediation of his absence.” Chauvet sees Christian faith as markedly similar to what Freudian psychoanalysis calls “constitutive melancholia.” Prayer and worship are practices by which we take this founding loss and incorporate it, letting ourselves be shaped by our lost beloved and the love between Christ and us, opening ourselves to new loves in this loss’s wake. Not for nothing does Freud describe the sacrament of the Eucharist as “an interesting parallel” to melancholic incorporation.

Asle’s sorrowful and tattered prayers—cobbled together from others’ beliefs and others’ words, punctured by doubt, awash in grief and bereft of hope—are not a desperate grasping after faith; they are faith itself. We are built up of our loves and losses, and for Christians, no loss is more foundational or formative than that of Jesus. To have faith is not to fill this lack with consolations but to remain faithful to the lack itself, to let ourselves be shaped by it, to let our longing draw us out of ourselves and toward others in their longing and sorrow. And if God is the one who, in Chauvet’s words, “manifests Godself as God by refusing to be God,” then our embrace of our own and others’ lack might draw us deeper into the broken heart of God.

Near the end of the fifth part of *Septology*, Asle’s protestations that it’s “too painful” to think about Ales give way. While driving the snowy road to Åsleik’s house for dinner a few nights before Christmas, he parks and sits for a while, allowing his memories of her and her death to flood in. It’s after this—after he allows himself to dwell in the fullness of his grief—that he finally agrees, after years of refusal, to join Åsleik and Guro for Christmas dinner. What enables Asle to step tentatively into new relations is not the resolution of his grief but the opening of his wound.

Still, this is not a novel of happy endings, where new loves make good the losses suffered on the way. Asle doesn’t get to say good-bye to the other Asle, and he doesn’t fall in love with his friend’s sister. Even the long-awaited Christmas dinner doesn’t happen. *Septology*’s theological challenge is to uncouple love—and faith—from reward. The novel acknowledges that to live at all is to move from loss to

loss.

But if to love is, inescapably, to lose, then the stubborn promise of faith is that love itself will not be lost. The very fact that the death of a beloved in no way lessens our love for them bears witness to Christianity's proclamation that in the death of Jesus, the God who is love has defeated death. We get a glimpse of this faith in one of Asle's prayers near the end of the novel: "And then I give thanks for my life and for letting me meet Ales," he prays, "and then I just say thank you." His love cannot bring back the dead or make them speak. But if, as Asle puts it, "God hides in silence, I think, and also in love, I think," then perhaps love, weak and wounded as it is, is enough.

Christian faith is often imagined as an escape hatch from mourning, a quick reassurance that sorrow is temporary on the way to a final reward. *Septology* offers a different vision. More difficult, perhaps. Sadder, definitely. But also more trusting in the promise that love can withstand any separation. Such a faith looks less like an investment with an eye to a future payout than like grief—the ceaseless work of mourning Jesus' death, of incorporating this loss and being shaped by it, feeling the lack as the presence of a longing that will not be assuaged, a love that will not be abolished.