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Language, Loss, and the Lacanian Lack: A Psychoanalytic Approach to Jon Fosse

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Abstract

To voice the unutterable, Jon Fosse employs a minimalist aesthetic that functions not merely as a stylistic exercise but as a formal enactment of the breakdown of the Lacanian Symbolic order. This research examines how Fosse's specific syntactic choices— characterised by hypnotic repetition and the absence of conventional punctuation— stage a crisis of signification in which traumatic loss remains trapped in "the Real," inaccessible to the structures of language. By focusing on *Aliss at the Fire* and *Trilogy*, this study demonstrates how Fosse's prose formally reproduces the temporal distortions and the psychic afterlife of trauma as theorised by Jacques Lacan and Cathy Caruth.

In *Aliss at the Fire*, the narrative employs "free indirect vision" and long, unpunctuated sentences to blur the distinction between past and present, mirroring the protagonist Signe's suspended state in a melancholic relationship to her husband's disappearance. The text's refusal of using period acts as a formal analogue for the absence of mourning, where the traumatic "Real" persists through unassimilated, spectral repetitions. Similarly, *Trilogy* investigates the instability of identity through the lovers' attempts at nominal transformation, ultimately illustrating the Lacanian insight that the subject is perpetually alienated within the pre-existing network of the Symbolic order. The "syntax of suspension" in these works enacts a desperate drive toward a fusion that remains structurally out of reach, as language itself inaugurates a primordial lack that can never be filled. Ultimately, this analysis posits that Fosse's formal innovations do not merely invite psychoanalytic interpretation but constitute a rigorous mode of psychoanalytic thinking that implicates the reader in the very experience of linguistic failure.

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Introduction

The 2023 Nobel laureate Jon Fosse is frequently celebrated for a minimalist aesthetic that, in the words of the Swedish Academy, “gives voice to the unsayable.” This paradox, voicing the unutterable, serves as the cornerstone of Fosse’s work. His characteristic use of hypnotic repetition and sparse punctuation is not merely a stylistic exercise, but a profound engagement with the psychic afterlife of trauma. In *Aliss at the Fire* (2004) and *Trilogy* (2014-2019), characters exist in a state of temporal suspension, unable to fully symbolise their grief. Within these narratives, memory fails to provide clarity, returning instead in fragmentary loops that resist closure, while language becomes a site of uncanny repetition and inadequacy. This analysis posits that Fosse’s minimalist prose does more than represent the experience of trauma; it formally enacts the breakdown of the Lacanian Symbolic order. Drawing on Lacanian psychoanalysis and contemporary trauma theory, the study argues that *Aliss at the Fire* and *Trilogy* stage a crisis of signification in which loss remains trapped in “the Real,” inaccessible to the structures of language. In *Aliss at the Fire*, Signe’s obsessive return to the memory of her husband defies the conventional logic of mourning, leaving her suspended in a melancholic relation to an absence that cannot be named. Similarly, the protagonists’ attempts in the *Trilogy* to navigate identity through nominal changes only underscore the Lacanian insight that the self is perpetually alienated within linguistic structures. Fosse’s specific syntactic choices, long, unpunctuated sentences that collapse the distinction between past and present, formally reproduce the temporal distortions characteristic of traumatic experience as theorised by Cathy Caruth. By focusing on these two specific texts, this study demonstrates how Fosse’s stylistic minimalism operates as a psychoanalytic strategy. The analysis suggests that Fosse’s formal innovations do not merely invite interpretation via psychoanalytic concepts; rather, they constitute a mode of psychoanalytic thinking. Ultimately, these works implicate the reader in the very experience of linguistic failure they depict, revealing the fragility of the Symbolic order and the persistent intrusion of the unspeakable Real.

Theoretical Framework: Lacan, Trauma, and the Crisis of Representation

Jacques Lacan’s psychoanalytic system is structured around three fundamental orders: the Real, the Symbolic, and the Imaginary. Rather than a sequence of developmental stages, these orders represent overlapping dimensions of psychic experience that remain operative throughout a subject’s life. Each order defines a specific mode of relation between the subject and the world, together forming the architecture of subjectivity. Grasping these orders is essential for

understanding how Lacan reconceptualises trauma, identity, and language, all of which are central to an analysis of Jon Fosse's literary technique.

The Symbolic order constitutes the domain of language, law, and social structure. It is through entry into the Symbolic that an infant becomes a subject, inscribed within a pre-existing network of linguistic and cultural meaning. This order is not merely an individual's use of language but the entire socio-linguistic system that precedes subjectivity. As Sean Homer explains, "To be fully human we are subjected to this symbolic order—the order of language, of discourse; we cannot escape it, although as a structure it escapes us. As individual subjects, we can never fully grasp the social or symbolic totality that constitutes the sum of our universe, but that totality has a structuring force upon us as subjects" (Homer 44). Crucially, the Symbolic is also the realm of absence. Language operates by substituting signifiers for objects, meaning that naming something simultaneously marks its absence. The word "tree" is not the tree itself but a placeholder within a differential system. The Symbolic order is therefore inherently structured by lack, promising a coherence and meaning that it can never fully deliver.

In contrast, the Imaginary order is the realm of images, identifications, and fantasies of wholeness. Lacan associates the Imaginary primarily with the mirror stage, occurring roughly between six and eighteen months, when an infant recognises its own image and experiences an anticipatory sense of bodily unity. This recognition is fundamentally a misrecognition, as the image provides an illusion of mastery that contrasts with the infant's experience of fragmentation. Lacan describes this process as "a drama whose internal thrust is precipitated from insufficiency to anticipation...which will mark with its rigid structure the infant's entire mental development" (qtd. in Homer 25). The ego is formed through this imaginary identification, functioning as a defensive structure that perpetuates the illusion of coherence. The function of the ego is, as Homer notes, "one of mis-recognition—of refusing to accept the truth of fragmentation and alienation" (Homer 25). The Imaginary is characterised by duality and the fantasy of unity; still, it is the site of alienation, since the subject's sense of self is constituted through an external image that is fundamentally "other."

The Real is the most elusive of Lacan's three orders. Unlike the Symbolic, which is governed by language, or the Imaginary, which is governed by images, the Real is precisely that which resists all symbolization. It is not "reality" in the conventional sense, as reality is a construction of the Symbolic and Imaginary orders. Instead, the Real is what lies outside the symbolic network, acting as the traumatic kernel that cannot be integrated into thought. Homer

clarifies that "the real does not exist, as existence is a product of thought and language and the real precedes language. The real is 'that which resists symbolization absolutely'" (Homer 83). The Real intrudes upon symbolic reality in moments of rupture or trauma, when language fails, and meaning collapses. Associated with the death drive and *jouissance*, the Real is a void around which the Symbolic order is constructed. It both supports and undermines symbolic reality, acting as the traumatic absence that the Symbolic must repress even as it persistently returns to disrupt the coherence of meaning.

The relationship between these three orders is dynamic. A subject attempts to construct a stable reality through the coordination of Symbolic structures and Imaginary fantasies, yet this construction is perpetually threatened by the intrusion of the Real. In the context of trauma, this dynamic becomes acute. Traumatic experience represents a failure of symbolization where the Real breaks into the Symbolic order, producing repetition and temporal distortion. The traumatised subject becomes caught in a loop, compulsively returning to the unrepresentable event because it cannot be integrated into the symbolic network.

This tripartite structure provides a powerful framework for understanding Fosse's formal innovations. If his characters exist in states of temporal suspension, unable to articulate their losses, they can be understood as existing at the intersection of the Symbolic and the Real. In these instances, language persists, but it no longer functions to organise experience. The long, unpunctuated sentences and repetitive structures of Fosse's prose act as formal enactments of this crisis, staging the exact moment when the Symbolic order fails, and the Real intrudes.

For Lacan, the concept of lack is foundational to understanding human subjectivity and desire. Unlike earlier psychoanalytic theories that posit a subject with pre-existing needs or drives, Lacan argues that the subject is constituted through a primordial absence. This lack is not something that occurs to the subject but is rather constitutive of the subject itself. The subject does not exist before language and then enters it; instead, the subject emerges through its entry into the Symbolic order, an emergence always marked by fundamental division and incompleteness. Lacan's understanding of the Symbolic is inseparable from his theory of language. Lacan famously proclaims that "the unconscious is structured like a language" (*The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XX* 48). As Jacques-Alain Miller writes, "He took the unconscious not as a container, but rather as something existent—outside itself—that is connected to a subject who is a lack of being" (qtd. in Homer 21). This lack cannot be filled or overcome, as it is the permanent condition of human existence within language.

Desire, in Lacanian theory, is inextricably linked to this structural lack. It is not the pursuit of an object that will satisfy the subject once obtained, but rather the subject's perpetual attempt to recover or fill the void that constitutes its being. As the subject enters the Symbolic order, it loses access to the imaginary wholeness experienced during the mirror stage. While language promises meaning and coherence, it can only provide these through the play of signifiers, the substitution of one sign for another. Because meaning is never fully present in language but always deferred, always dependent on what is absent, desire is fundamentally structured around this impossibility. The object of desire is thus always inadequate; it can never fully satisfy because what the subject ultimately desires, a return to pre-linguistic wholeness, is impossible. Consequently, desire perpetuates itself endlessly, circling an absent object that language cannot capture.

This leads to Lacan's crucial insight regarding the sliding signifier. In language, a signifier, such as a word, image, or name, does not have a fixed relationship to a signified, the concept or thing it represents. Instead, meaning is generated through difference and deferral, where the signifier "cat" carries meaning only in relation to what it is not, such as "dog" or "tree." Furthermore, the same signifier can carry multiple, sometimes contradictory meanings depending on the context. This instability of meaning, what Lacan calls the "sliding of the signifier," implies that identity is similarly unstable. A person's name, social roles, and self-understanding are all signifiers that lack a stable, essential referent. They slide and shift depending on circumstances. Homer summarises this central insight by noting, "Lacan summarises this in his famous statement, the subject is that which is represented by one signifier to another. The seminar on *The Purloined Letter* is nothing less than an exposition of this, whereby the subject is caught up in the chain of signification, and it is the signifier that marks the subject, that defines the subject's position within the symbolic order" (45). The subject does not possess a stable identity that then uses language; rather, the subject is an effect of language, caught perpetually in a chain of signifiers where meaning is continuously deferred.

The instability of the signifier and the structuring of desire around lack have profound implications for identity and interpersonal relations. If identity is constituted through unstable signifiers within a Symbolic order that cannot deliver coherence, the subject remains perpetually divided. In social interactions and the attempt to assert one's identity, the subject encounters a fundamental impossibility: the other can never fully recognise or complete the self because the self is an illusion constructed through language. This is the tragedy of human subjectivity in Lacanian theory: we are beings constituted by lack, our desire is structured

around an impossible object, and our very identity is unstable and dependent on the sliding of signifiers.

While Lacanian psychoanalysis provides a structural account of how the subject is constituted through language and haunted by the Real, trauma theory offers a complementary framework for understanding how catastrophic experience disrupts this very structure. Trauma, in contemporary psychoanalytic and literary theory, is not simply a terrible event that happens to a subject; rather, it names a specific psychic experience characterised by belatedness, repetition, and the failure of narrative integration. Trauma theory thus intersects with Lacanian thought at a crucial juncture, as both frameworks understand the subject as fundamentally split, emphasise the limits of symbolization, and conceive of the past not as something that can be mastered, but as something that returns, unbidden and unassimilated, to haunt the present.

The concept of belatedness is central to contemporary trauma theory, particularly as developed by Cathy Caruth. According to this model, trauma is not fully experienced at the moment of its occurrence because the event exceeds the subject's capacity to comprehend it in real time. As Boulter explains, quoting Caruth, "the event of trauma...is experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known and is therefore not available to consciousness" (Boulter 189). This belatedness ensures that the traumatised subject remains out of sync with linear time; the past is never truly past but remains vividly present, while the current moment is shadowed by an event that was never fully lived in the first place. Caruth further clarifies that trauma is "an event that...is experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known and is therefore not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly, in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor" (qtd. in Boulter 191). Trauma thus produces a peculiar temporality in which chronological sequence collapses and the subject is caught in a repetitive loop.

This leads to the second defining feature of trauma, repetition. Freud observed that traumatised individuals compulsively repeat the circumstances or affects associated with the original event, a phenomenon he termed repetition compulsion. In Lacanian terms, this repetition is the insistence of the Real, the traumatic kernel that has not been successfully integrated into the Symbolic order and therefore returns to disrupt the subject's attempt to construct a coherent narrative. Boulter notes that trauma "works to displace the 'normal' structure of time" by "compelling the victim back into the scene of trauma repeatedly" (Boulter 41). Repetition is not a conscious act of remembering but an unconscious compulsion driven by the failure of language to contain the traumatic Real. The subject does not choose to repeat;

rather, the traumatic event repeats through the subject, manifesting in intrusive thoughts and behaviours that operate outside of conscious control.

The third feature of trauma is its unspeakability, its inherent resistance to linguistic representation. Trauma exceeds the capacities of narrative, as it cannot be fully told, explained, or integrated into a coherent life story. This is not merely because the event is painful to recount, but because the trauma was never fully registered in consciousness to begin with. As Boulter argues, "memory, history, the past makes claims on the subject that cannot be denied, that can never be metabolised" (Boulter 48). Language, which operates through the logic of substitution, fails when confronted with the void of trauma. The subject may speak endlessly about the event, circling it in fragmented discourse, but the core of the trauma, the Real at its centre, remains unrepresentable. Consequently, trauma literature is often marked by gaps and formal disruptions, which serve as accurate reflections of trauma's resistance to narrative closure.

The intersection of Lacanian psychoanalysis and trauma theory offers a powerful framework for analysing texts that depict subjects caught between language and silence. When a literary text stages the failure of symbolization through repetition and syntactic fragmentation, it is not merely depicting trauma thematically but formally enacting the psychic structures that trauma produces. In Jon Fosse's fiction, where characters exist in states of suspension and language circles obsessively without achieving closure, we encounter the meeting point of the Lacanian Real and the traumatic unspeakable. Fosse's minimalist prose does not explain trauma; it performs it, implicating the reader in the very experience of linguistic and temporal failure that defines traumatic subjectivity.

Aliss at the Fire: Haunting, the Real, and Melancholic Repetition

Jon Fosse's *Aliss at the Fire* (2004) resists conventional narrative structure from its opening lines. The novel centres on Signe, an elderly woman living alone in an isolated house by a Norwegian fjord, haunted by the disappearance of her husband, Asle, who vanished twenty-three years earlier while rowing out onto the water. Yet to summarise the novel in such linear terms is to miss the most essential aspect of its formal operation, as *Aliss at the Fire* does not recount a story so much as it stages a psychic collapse of temporal boundaries. Past and present do not succeed one another in an orderly sequence, but instead fold into one another, overlap, and become indistinguishable. Signe exists in what can only be described as a traumatic temporality, caught in a perpetual present haunted by an unassimilated past.

The novel's narrative voice operates through a technique that might be called "free indirect vision", where Signe is both the subject and object of the narration, simultaneously experiencing and observing herself. In the opening pages, she sees "Signe lying there on the bench in the room" (Fosse 6). This split perspective, with Signe seeing herself and narrating her actions in the third person, immediately establishes the formal logic of the text. Identity is divided, unstable, and constituted through an act of doubling or mirroring. Signe does not simply remember Asle; she sees him, hears him speak, and watches herself interact with him in scenes that occurred decades ago. The hall door opens repeatedly. Asle enters, announces he is "going out onto the fjord for a while" (Fosse 14), and departs. These scenes are not flashbacks in the conventional sense, as they are not clearly marked as memories distinct from the present moment. Instead, they intrude upon Signe's present experience with the force of hallucination or compulsion.

The temporal structure of the novel is profoundly non-linear. Signe moves fluidly between multiple temporalities, the present day, the day of Asle's disappearance in 1979, and even further back to the lives of her ancestors. Most notably, her ancestor Aliss appears in vivid, almost hallucinatory scenes on the shore, singeing sheep heads over a fire while her young son toddles dangerously close to the water. These temporal layers are not neatly separated by chapter breaks or typographic markers; they bleed into one another within single, unpunctuated sentences that can span multiple pages. Fosse's prose refuses the period, the comma, or the paragraph break, all the conventional markers that would impose order, hierarchy, or closure upon experience. Instead, the text flows onward in a breathless, circling rhythm that mirrors Signe's own inability to escape the loop of her grief.

This temporal collapse is not merely a stylistic flourish; it is the formal enactment of trauma's psychic structure. As Caruth and Boulter have theorised, trauma disrupts linear chronology; the past does not remain in the past but returns, unbidden and unintegrated, to haunt the present (Caruth; Boulter). Signe's experience precisely fits this model. The day of Asle's disappearance is not a completed event that she can recall and narrate; it is an event that continues to happen, one that she continues to live through repeatedly. The novel's refusal of narrative closure, its insistence on repetition, and its cycling through the same scenes with slight variations, formally reproduces the structure of traumatic repetition. Signe does not move forward; she circles back, compulsively, to the moment of loss that she can neither fully grasp nor relinquish.

The title of the novel itself gestures toward this temporal layering, as *Aliss at the Fire* refers not to Signe but to her ancestor Aliss, whose scene by the shore becomes a kind of primal image that haunts the text. The fire, burning on the shore, appearing and disappearing, large and small, near and distant, functions as a visual and temporal cypher. It is both literal, in the case of Aliss burning sheep heads, and spectral, seen in Asle's vision of fire on the water the night he disappears. The fire collapses past and present, the living and the dead, into a single flickering image that refuses a stable location. In this sense, the novel stages what Lacan would call the intrusion of the Real into the Symbolic, an image or event that resists symbolization, cannot be integrated into narrative, and therefore returns compulsively as hallucination, repetition, and temporal distortion.

The traumatic event at the centre of *Aliss at the Fire*, Asle's disappearance on the fjord, is never directly narrated. The novel refuses to provide a stable, linear account of what occurred on that Tuesday in late November 1979. Instead, the drowning exists as an absence around which the narrative circles obsessively, approaching the event from multiple temporal and subjective positions without ever fully grasping or representing it. This formal evasion is not a failure of narrative but rather a precise enactment of what Lacan calls the Real, that which resists symbolization absolutely and therefore cannot be integrated into the Symbolic order.

Signe experiences Asle's departure not as a completed past event but as an ongoing present. The scene repeats throughout the novel with slight variations, as Asle stands at the window, announces he is "going out onto the fjord for a while," and departs (Fosse 14). Signe watches him go, feels a vague anxiety, and waits, yet the novel never provides closure to this sequence. Readers are told that Asle "disappeared and stayed gone" (Fosse 6) and that "his boat...was found floating in the middle of the fjord, empty, one dark fall evening" (Fosse 69). However, even this information arrives belatedly, embedded within Signe's circular ruminations rather than as a direct narrative statement. The text refuses the conventions of exposition; instead, the drowning remains spectral and ungraspable, a void that structures the narrative without ever becoming fully present within it.

The fire on the shore functions as the novel's central image of the Real, a traumatic image that refuses stable location in time or space. Throughout the text, characters see fire burning on the shore, Aliss at the fire in the 1800s, singeing sheep heads, Asle on the night he disappears, seeing a fire "there in the middle of the fjord, a pale purple fire" (Fosse 68), and Signe in the present, seeing two boys looking at a burning rowboat (Fosse 70). The fire appears and disappears, grows and shrinks, and moves between shore and water. It is simultaneously

literal, in Aliss's actual fire, and hallucinatory, in Asle's vision, occupying both past and present. In Lacanian terms, the fire represents the intrusion of the Real into the Symbolic, an image that cannot be stabilised within narrative time or fixed within a single interpretive framework. It is the traumatic kernel around which meaning collapses.

Crucially, Signe cannot speak about the event. She thinks repeatedly, "I can't think about it," "I can't bear to think about that," or "no, she mustn't think about that" (Fosse 69). This refusal is not wilful repression but rather the formal registration of trauma's unspeakability. As Boulter notes, trauma represents an experience of that which cannot be experienced, an encounter with the Real that shatters the symbolic frameworks through which we ordinarily make sense of the world (Boulter 208). Signe's inability to narrate the drowning reflects the fact that the event was never fully registered in consciousness at the moment it occurred, as it happened "too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known," as Caruth describes trauma (qtd. in Boulter 189). The drowning exists for Signe not as a memory that can be articulated but as a gap, an absence, and a site of linguistic failure.

The novel's temporal structure mirrors this failure of symbolization. Time does not progress linearly; instead, past scenes intrude upon the present with hallucinatory vividness. Signe sees Asle "standing there in the doorway" (Fosse 68), hears him speak, and watches him leave, not as memories belonging to the past but as events happening in the present moment of narration. This collapse of temporal boundaries formally enacts what trauma theory describes as the "temporal delay or deferral" of traumatic experience, where the event "is not experienced as it occurs" but instead "returns belatedly, in the form of intrusive memories, flashbacks, and repetitive actions" (Boulter 191). Signe is not remembering Asle's departure; she is reliving it, caught in a compulsive repetition driven by the failure of the Symbolic order to integrate the traumatic Real.

The text also stages this failure through its syntactic structure. Fosse's long, unpunctuated sentences refuse the period, the grammatical marker that would signal closure or the end of a thought. Sentences continue for pages, folding back on themselves and circling the same images without resolution. This syntactic circularity mirrors Signe's psychic state, just as she cannot reach closure in relation to Asle's death, the text cannot reach syntactic closure. The absence of periods becomes a formal analogue for the absence of mourning; there is no final punctuation mark because there is no final integration of the loss into the Symbolic order. The traumatic Real persists, unassimilated, repeating endlessly.

The drowning, then, functions not as an event but as a structural absence, a void around which the entire novel is organised. It is the Real that cannot be symbolised, the trauma that cannot be spoken, and the loss that cannot be mourned. Fosse's formal choices, including the temporal loops, the spectral repetitions, and the refusal of punctuation, do not merely represent this psychic condition. They enact it, implicating the reader in the same experience of linguistic and temporal failure that defines Signe's traumatised subjectivity.

Fosse's choice to leave out periods mirror something raw, specifically Lacan's idea of the Real, which slips beyond words entirely. According to Homer's reading, the Real stands before language; it cannot be said to exist in any usual sense because being known depends on naming (Homer 82). Without periods, time does not stop neatly where meaning clicks into place. Punctuation often acts like a lid, closing off moments so stories can move forward, yet here, nothing seals the edges. The flow stays open and unsettled. This openness is not just a matter of style; it lets what resists form enter directly into how the story is told.

Signe's compulsive repetitions within the unpunctuated text register what Homer calls the essential problem of trauma. He notes that "no matter how often we try to put our pain and suffering into language, to symbolise it, there is always something left over. In other words, there is always a residue that cannot be transformed through language. This excess, this X as Lacan will call it, is the real" (Homer 84). In *Aliss at the Fire*, this residue manifests as the drowning itself, an event that Signe cannot think, speak, or integrate into a narrative. It keeps coming back to silence, as seen when she thinks, "no, she can't think about it, she thinks, she can't bear it, she can't think about that, she thinks" (Fosse 69). Not once, but three times, the word "can't" piles up, building a wall where meaning should be. Instead of moving forward, the sentence stumbles into itself again.

Repetition becomes its own kind of trap, where what looks like progress is actually just another turn inside the same locked room. Something breaks down each time speech tries to reach the core. This pattern mirrors what resists being said. Trauma lives, as Homer writes, in what cannot take shape in words (Homer 83). It stays fixed, unprocessed, and lodged deep within.

A shape forms where punctuation might have been, carrying what cannot be named. Instead of moving forward in clear steps toward answers, Fosse's writing resists arrival. Lines spill over pages, looping and returning to familiar sights with no release. Breaks appear strongest when pain surfaces, such as when Signe watches Asle leave for good. Time blurs in these moments; she is by the window yet also seated on the bench, and he appears, vanishes,

and reappears as past and present mix without borders. Carried forward without pause, the flow of speech mirrors Boulter's idea of the melancholic archive, resisting what Freud describes as ordinary grieving. Rather than resolving pain, the story holds onto it, making loss immediate again each time it circles back.

What Boulter describes as the "melancholy archive" fits neatly here, as it is a form holding on to traces of those gone rather than letting go through processing (Boulter 40). Since periods do not appear, completion never arrives, and grief stays outside of settled meaning. Trapped inside repetition, Signe circles one moment again and again, asking without pause, "Why didn't he come back? What happened to him? Why did he disappear?" (Fosse 67). Without endings marked by punctuation, each question floats, unanswered and recurring.

What looks like a refusal might actually be a kind of holding. Instead of finishing, the sentences drag forward without stops, mirroring how some grief refuses to settle. Ending too soon would mean faking completion where none exists. Punctuation is withheld as if silence speaks louder than periods ever could. Each run-on line keeps the wound exposed, not healing it but keeping it visible. This is not storytelling about pain; it is pain shaped into grammar. Structure does not merely reflect suffering; it becomes it. Loops replace conclusions, and the page returns, never arriving.

Trilogy: Naming, Flight, and the Instability of the Symbolic

Jon Fosse's *Trilogy* presents a narrative structured around two young lovers, Asle and Alida, who attempt to escape the social structures that define and constrain them. The central crisis emerges when Alida becomes pregnant, leaving the couple unable to marry or find legitimate shelter due to their unmarried status. Consequently, they flee to the city of Bjørgvin, yet their journey is not a conventional escape narrative. Desperate to evade the legal and familial authority that hunts them, they adopt new names, where Asle becomes Olav, and Alida becomes Åsta. As Fosse writes, "now his name is Olav and her name is Åsta", and "their son Sigvald" becomes their lifeline (Fosse 81). The couple believes that this nominal transformation, specifically the claim that "their last name is Vik" and that "they are Åsta and Olav Vik," will create new identities and new lives beyond the reach of the law (Fosse 83).

However, this fantasy of escape reveals a deeper philosophical truth: the lovers cannot outrun the Symbolic order because they are fundamentally constituted within it. Their names, their identities, and even their capacity to love are products of the very linguistic and social systems from which they seek to flee. The police, their families, and the generalised apparatus

of social authority shadow them throughout their journey. The ending of *Trilogy* is not one of triumph but of suspended tragedy, as the lovers remain in perpetual motion without ever achieving the stable ground or identity they seek. Importantly, their pregnancy, which should embody futurity and hope, becomes instead a weight that tethers them irrevocably to the social order they wish to transcend. This is felt most acutely when Åsta senses with prophetic dread that "she will never see Olav again" (Fosse 77).

The renaming scenes in *Trilogy* constitute the text's most explicit engagement with the Lacanian theory of the Symbolic order. When the lovers assume new identities, they harbour a fundamental belief that language can be reset, that the past can be erased through nominative transformation, and that meaning can be stabilised and controlled through the simple act of renaming. This belief is precisely the fantasy that Lacan's theory of the Symbolic dismantles.

In Lacanian psychoanalysis, a name appears to be a stable anchor for identity, yet this appearance masks a deeper instability. As Sean Homer notes in his exposition of Lacan, the subject is fundamentally alienated within language, as "the subject is not the same as the person; it is de-centred in relation to the individual" (Homer 45). He defines the signifier as: "a signifier is what represents the subject to another signifies" (Lacan, *Écrits* 694). The name does not convey an essential identity but instead inscribes the subject into a pre-existing symbolic network. The gap between the name and the identity it claims to represent is constitutive of subjectivity itself. To change one's name, therefore, is not to escape the Symbolic order but to become doubly aware of its structuring force.

Fosse renders this insight formally through the text's treatment of nomenclature. When Olav is confronted with the question of his identity, the text captures his obsessive need to assert and reassert his new name, "if someone should come and ask his name, or ask her name, she must say that his name is Olav and her name is Sta, the way they've decided" (Fosse 73). Yet even as he speaks these words, attempting to solidify their new identities through verbal assertion, the narrative reveals their futility. The renaming is a desperate act of denial and a refusal to acknowledge that the Symbolic order cannot be evaded through nominal transformation. The very compulsion with which Olav must repeat and reinforce the names reveals their instability, since if the names were truly secure, they would not require such anxious repetition.

Moreover, the pursuit by police and family authority demonstrates that the Law, the Symbolic order in Lacanian terms, cannot be outrun. Significantly, Åsta recognises this impossibility before Olav does. Her premonition that "she will never see Olav again" is

grounded in a deeper understanding of the inescapability of fate. She knows this because "what happened to Pa Aslak would happen to him... he too walked away and was gone forever" (Fosse 77).

This cyclical repetition of disappearance, with the father vanishing and the lover destined to vanish, suggests that the Law is not external but internalised, forming part of the very structure of their subjectivity. History repeats itself not as farce but as tragedy. In this sense, renaming becomes an act of desperate denial. As Homer explains, "the subject assumes its position within the symbolic order and is thus able to act," but the subject cannot simply escape the linguistic order that constitutes it (Homer 74). The text's persistent return to questions of naming thus dramatizes a core theoretical tenet: the subject cannot escape the Symbolic order, even in flight or in the creation of new names.

The central emotional and philosophical motor of *Trilogy* is the lovers' desire for complete union, a fusion that would transcend separation and lack. Yet Lacan's theory reveals why this union remains perpetually out of reach. As Lacan articulates, "Desire is neither the appetite for satisfaction, nor the demand for love, the difference that results from the subtraction of the first from the second" (qtd. in Homer 72). For Lacan, desire is fundamentally structured around lack, it is the desire for what is absent and what cannot be possessed. This occurs because the subject, upon entering the Symbolic order, experiences a primordial separation from the mother and the illusion of completeness. Language inaugurates this lack by substituting signifiers for actual presence.

In *Trilogy*, the lovers' relationship is shadowed by something they cannot name or fully articulate. The pregnancy intensifies this haunting, as it becomes both a symbol of their union and evidence of their separation. There is another, a third term, that emerges from their bond. Fosse captures this paradox in a moment of tender but ultimately fractured intimacy. After Sigvald is born, the text registers an apparent unity that immediately reveals its own impossibility, as seen when Asle claims there is "only us left," only for Alida to remind him of "little Sigvald" (Fosse 50). The child is at once their creation and a remainder that neither can fully possess. The simple conjunction "and" that introduces the child into the sentence reveals the structural impossibility of their union. There is always a third, and the dyad is always already fractured.

Their love is thus haunted not by overt conflict, but by silence and moments in which language fails them entirely. When Alida goes into labor, a moment that should theoretically bring them together in the most fundamental way, communication breaks down. She cries out

desperately that she is about to give birth and needs help, yet Asle sees only that she is "lying there calmly now, the way she usually does" (Fosse 51). This failure of communication registers the impossibility of their fusion at the most intimate level. Her urgent cry is met not with responsiveness but with a perception of calm indifference. Language fails, touch fails, and even the shared physicality of childbirth cannot bridge the gap that exists between them.

Fosse's syntax enacts this psychic structure with remarkable precision. The long, breathless sentences that characterize *Trilogy*, much like those in *Aliss at the Fire*, do not convey stasis. Rather, they enact the attempt to fuse and to maintain connection through a continuous flow of utterance without the arresting force of a period. When describing their flight to Bjørgvin, Fosse extends a single sentence across multiple actions and temporalities, describing how they walk "slowly along the street in the dark and the cold and the rain, now in late autumn, and they cross the street" (Fosse 34).

The refusal of punctuation simulates their desperate attempt to move together and to maintain union through unbroken speech. The lack of periods mirrors their desire for a continuous, uninterrupted connection. Yet the very fact that periods must eventually arrive, that sentences must end, and that breath must be drawn, all formally register the impossibility of the fusion they seek. The syntax becomes a site where desire, the drive toward unity and continued utterance, meets its structural limit. Desire pushes endlessly forward through the run-on sentences, seeking completion, yet finding only the inevitable termination that every sentence must eventually reach.

Trilogy, much like *Aliss at the Fire*, employs long, unpunctuated or minimally punctuated sentences as its primary formal strategy. Yet the effect in *Trilogy* differs markedly from that in *Aliss*. While *Aliss* stages a melancholic return by compulsively circling a fixed point of trauma, *Trilogy* suspends its lovers in perpetual flight. This syntax of suspension is a syntax of refusal, it is a refusal to land, to ground, or to achieve a stable meaning and identity.

The absence or minimization of periods functions as the formal correlate to the lovers' inability to arrive anywhere. A period usually marks an endpoint or a momentary closure where meaning settles, however provisionally. In *Trilogy*, the refusal of periods represents a refusal of arrival. The lovers move from place to place and assume names only to abandon them, yet they never find the stable ground they seek. When Olav finally announces his departure for Bjørgvin, Fosse renders the scene through syntax that simulates forward motion without a destination, noting how Olav mentions he should go to Bjørgvin today since he has been thinking about it, while Åsta pleads with him not to go (Fosse 68).

The prose pulls them along through interconnected clauses and minimal punctuation, leaving no exit, no arrival point, and no moment of rest. The conjunctions, specifically the repeated use of "and," accumulate endlessly, linking one clause to the next without hierarchical structure or a clear terminus. This syntactic suspension formally instantiates a Lacanian insight, which is that the subject cannot escape the Symbolic order. The lovers seek to transcend the Law and create new identities outside the structures of social authority, yet the Symbolic order is not a place one can leave, it is the very condition of being a speaking subject. Just as they cannot escape the linguistic order that constitutes them, they cannot escape the syntactic structures that bind them. The prose enacts their impossible freedom, leaving them forever suspended between desire and its impossibility.

Furthermore, Åsta's prophetic vision is rendered through this same refusal of syntactic closure. Her certainty about their separation cannot be articulated through finished sentences, instead, it emerges only in the flow of her consciousness and in the continuation of Fosse's long sentences that trail off without resolution. The form of *Trilogy* thus becomes inseparable from its content. The inability to arrive, to achieve closure, or to escape the Symbolic order is enacted in every line.

This is evident in the extended passage where they prepare to leave Bjørgvin, a moment that should bring clarity but instead dissolves into indecision. Asle stops when Alida asks where they are going, and though she questions if they did not enjoy it there, he insists they cannot stay because he feels someone is out to get them (Fosse 42-43). The structure of this exchange, with question following question and refusal following request, enacts the lovers' entrapment in a dialogue that cannot resolve. Asle cannot explain and Alida cannot understand. The lack of punctuation creates a sense of breathlessness and continuous pressure without forward movement. They are suspended in language, unable to achieve the understanding or closure that words are intended to provide.

Conclusion

This analysis has traced the ways in which Jon Fosse's minimalist aesthetic operates as a psychoanalytic method, one that does not merely illustrate theoretical concepts but enacts them through formal innovation. In *Aliss at the Fire*, the absence of narrative closure, the obsessive return to traumatic scenes, and the temporal collapse created by minimal punctuation formally reproduce the structure of trauma itself. In *Trilogy*, the crisis shifts from the mourning of a lost past to the evasion of a present social order. Yet the formal strategy remains consonant, the

long, unpunctuated sentences characterizing both texts become the specific site where the subject's impossible relation to language and identity is performed.

What Fosse's work demonstrates across both novels is that form and theory are inseparable. The stylistic choices frequently celebrated as "minimalist" or "spare" are not decorative, rather, they constitute a rigorous mode of psychoanalytic thinking. The breathless, unpunctuated prose does not simply represent trauma, lack, or desire, it performs these experiences for the reader. We are implicated in the very linguistic crisis the texts depict. The fragility of the Symbolic order, including its inability to fully contain the Real and its production of subjects who can never fully coincide with themselves, becomes legible through Fosse's formal choices. As Homer writes, "the structure of the symbolic order is never complete. There is always something left over an excess or something that exceeds the symbolic" (Homer 65). Fosse's work exploits precisely this excess, this remainder that cannot be symbolised and the Real that resists integration into narrative meaning.

This contribution to Fosse scholarship suggests a broader methodological point, which is that contemporary literature, especially that which engages with minimalism, can constitute a mode of philosophical and psychoanalytic thought. The diminishment of language through the refusal of explanation and conventional closure becomes, paradoxically, a form of depth. It acts as a way of gesturing toward what cannot be said and what resists the smooth functioning of the Symbolic order. Fosse's work involves the reader in this resistance. We are left suspended, much like his characters, unable to ground ourselves fully in stable meaning while experiencing the very psychic structures the prose enacts. In this way, Fosse's formal minimalism achieves what the Swedish Academy recognized, it gives voice to the unsayable, not by explaining the unspeakable, but by making its very impossibility felt at the level of syntax itself.

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