

Althusser, Myth & Genesis 1-3

Roland Boer

Monash University

If the legacy of the Roman Catholic Church is well known in Louis Althusser's personal and intellectual life, and if his early writings are slowly making us accustomed to Althusser as a theological thinker (which then opens up a whole series of echoes in the later material), then Althusser as a biblical critic is virtually unknown. Did I write "Althusser as a biblical critic?" His moment of biblical exegesis would of course appear in a footnote, and it is the only time he engages directly with a biblical text, so perhaps I am claiming a little too much. But then, it is an astonishing footnote, one that deals at some length with Genesis 1-3. Let me begin with the text itself:

"The plunge of the product into Nature, which occurs as soon as the product escapes the producer's control and is no longer posited as being identical with him, gives us a better grasp of the creation myth. On the purest conception, God is the circularity of Love; he is sufficient unto himself and has no outside. The creation is literally a rupture in this circularity: God does not need the creation, so that it is, by definition, different from him. This non-identity of the Creator and his creature is the emergence of Nature. The product of the God-who-works escapes his control (because it is superfluous for him). This fall is Nature, or God's outside. In the creation, then, men unwittingly repress the essence of work. But they do still more: they try to eliminate the very origins of work, which, in its daily exercise, appears to them as a natural necessity (one has to work in order to live, work is a natural law entailed by the Fall – as appears in the myth of Eve: 'you will earn your bread by the sweat of your brow'). Moreover, work is inherently conditioned by nature, since the worker transforms a nature that is given. In the creation myth, this natural character of work disappears, because the Creator is not subject to any law, and creates the world *ex nihilo*. In God the Creator, men not only think the birth of nature, but attempt

to overcome the natural character of this birth by demonstrating that the creation has no origin (since God creates without obligation or need); that the fall has no nature; and that the very nature which seems to dominate work is, fundamentally, only as necessary as the (produced) nature which results from work.

Developing and deepening this myth would perhaps enable us to anticipate what Marx means by 'the identity of man and nature in work'. Approached in this way, that identity would have two aspects. On the one hand, men are identical with nature in that they are identical with what they produce; their products become nature for them (this immediate identity through labour re-emerges in revolutionary action; one may therefore say that this alienation is already overcome in thought – men no longer need a myth to represent it, since it has become the object of economic science). On the other hand, men would also be identical with the nature that forces them to work, and which they transform through work; this second identity would be clarified through reflection of the first. Here, however, we would have only an embryonic anticipation, for, in the obvious, elementary sense, identity is still beyond men's grasp. Men see clearly enough that the natural world is given to them, and that they themselves exist because they exercise a measure of control over it, thanks to their knowledge and industry; however, they have not completely overcome natural alienation: they are subject to the elements, illness, and old age, and obliged to work in order to live. Moreover, if the work of scientific knowledge and of the transformation of the world is itself a recurrence of, and recovery from [*reprise*], natural alienation, the recovery is not complete: circularity is not re-established, and human circularity will no doubt be established before natural circularity (in a socialist world, say the Marxists, one will still have to overcome natural alienation). This deficiency explains why it is still necessary to revert to myth in order to conceive a totality which has not yet attained its concept; it is in the story of creation, on this view, that men contemplate the *reprise* of natural alienation."¹

This text comes from Althusser's Masters thesis on Hegel, before his all too rapid dismissal of the early, humanist Marx, especially on the whole question of alienation. Here in the early Althusser we find an intense engagement precisely with those questions of alienation and nature, particularly in terms of the creation myth. But before I immerse

myself in Althusser's text, a comment on the immediate context. Althusser seeks to read the narrative of the Fall in light of Marx's argument concerning the fall of the product of human labor into nature. This argument follows a discussion of alienation in which the apparently natural form of economic determinism is in fact a human product: although the economy appears natural, to which human beings are subject, it only appears so because it is alienated from human beings. Thus, the realization of human freedom is the process of reclaiming this natural necessity as a human necessity. So also with labor, for the moment the product leaves the hands of men it falls into nature, appears perfectly natural, a signal of the alienation of labor (for the early Marx, whom Althusser read avidly before dismissing this work and the theory of alienation as not properly Marxist).

And then comes the footnote. There are three stages of his argument that I will exegete in some detail: the Fall as narrative of the alienation of labor; the story of creation itself as a counter to such alienation; and where such a myth might continue to function.

The Fall and the Alienation of Labor

Only once does Althusser quote from the Bible (Genesis 3.19), and this a misquotation to which I will return. But the solitary biblical reference indicates the heavily theological nature of his reading, where the narrative of Genesis 1-3 is overlaid with a number of Christian doctrines: the self-sufficiency of God, creation *ex nihilo*, original sin. The transition from the mention of the "creation myth," by which of course he means the creation myth of the Hebrew Bible subsequently appropriated by Christians, in the first sentence to the next couple of sentences on the self-sufficiency of God is not as smooth as it seems. Too quickly do we assume that he is still speaking of the creation myth of Genesis 1-3 (although even here we have two myths) when he already draws upon a particular Christian doctrine of God to interpret the narrative of Genesis. And this is the Thomistic doctrine of the self-sufficiency of God, that God does not need the world or anything outside of his triune nature to be complete, for otherwise he would be incomplete and therefore not God. Divine love

then becomes one of pure gratuity, one in which God loves the world precisely because he does not need to do so, a love that has no reciprocity about it and is thoroughly undeserved by God's creatures. It matters little whether the doctrine of God's self-sufficiency was developed in order to facilitate such a notion of love or whether self-sufficiency produces the particular idea of love that has to a large extent determined the perception and practice of love in the West.

To be sure, the creation narratives of Genesis 1 and 2 have been used to justify the doctrine of God's self-sufficiency, but it is hardly the case that the text itself is a pure, nor even contaminated, representation of the doctrine. The two forms of ancient Near Eastern myths that we find in the biblical text show all the marks of that indeterminate context, from the plural gods ("Let us make man in our image" Genesis 1.26) to the ambiguity of the first phrase of Genesis 1.1, which may be either "In the beginning God created" or "When God began to create the heavens and the earth, the earth without form and void." The implication of the second translation, based on the indeterminate first word in Hebrew, *bereshith*, "in a beginning" is that there was indeed something with which God began, rather than the vast emptiness that the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* assumes. And here we have the second traditional Christian doctrine that Althusser assumes in his discussion of Genesis 1-3, one that faces a good deal of trouble when brought face to face with the text.

However, I am not so much interested in charging Althusser with being a less than astute exegete of the Hebrew Bible than with the implications of such a heavily theological reading. To begin with, the overbearing presence of the Catholic Church is there in every word: for the Roman Catholic Church has been most insistent that the Church sets the agenda for interpretation of the Bible, that it provides the means and meanings by which the Bible must be understood. And for good reason, since the reading of the actual text raises perpetual problems for the doctrines the Church holds dear. Yet, the Roman Catholics only make explicit what is part of any type of Christianity, namely, that interpretation is always determined by the institution itself. The most subtle form that this takes is in the Calvinist notion that Scripture is sufficient

unto itself, that it can only interpret itself with no outside body imposing a foreign interpretation. I need not elaborate on the way this ensures precisely what it seeks to forestall, since any interpretation that runs against the institution is dismissed as a foreign body in the pure self-sufficiency of the Bible itself.

But what does Althusser do with his heavily theological reading of the creation myth? The doctrine of the self-sufficiency, or auto-generation and auto-telism, of God allows him to offer a reading of the doctrine, and then obliquely, of the narrative of the Fall, in light of the early Marx's notion of alienation. Given the theological - although not necessarily biblical - doctrine of the triune self-sufficiency of God, what Althusser calls the "circularity of Love," creation can only be something extraneous to God. It cannot be intrinsic to God (pantheism), and so nature is superfluous to the divine economy. The telling move is from arguing that nature is the result of the non-identity of God and his creature to the identification of God as worker who loses control of the product of his labor. On this reading God becomes the model of the worker (although it is not clear whether such a worker lives under capitalism) whose product falls into nature the moment it is finished; or rather, the Fall is itself nature. But just when we seem to have Althusser's point - the theological reading of the creation myth as a curious precursor to the pattern of work itself - he executes a double switchback: "In the creation, then, men unwittingly repress the essence of work."² God's creation is the model of work but only because it is a myth that "men" relate in order to explicate the meaning of work. But not quite, for Althusser writes, "men unwittingly repress": they do not express, explicate or elucidate the essence of work, but *repress* it. In other words, the Christian doctrine of creation with which Althusser overlays the creation myth is a narrative of the alienation of labor. In God's self-sufficiency, his auto-generation of the creature that is a stranger to him, that is not part of his nature, lies the alienation of labor. But what is repressed? For an early Althusser indebted to an early Marx, this will be un-alienated labor, that which is repressed by what he takes as the creation myth.

The close reader of Hegel and the early Marx that Althusser is at this point finds alienation (*Entausserung*) not only in the

objectification of the product of labor but also in the relationship with nature itself. And God in the creation myth is also the representation of this alienation. Nature is systematically excised: God is beyond the law, creates *ex nihilo*, which then becomes the absence of obligation and need, the tautological absence of the origin of creation, and the restriction of nature to the product of work which then falls into nature at the moment of its production. Except that all of these items in Althusser's list are very much part of the Christian doctrines of the God's self-sufficiency and *creatio ex nihilo*, as well as the philosophical category of nature, rather than the creation myths of Genesis themselves. This is not to say that these myths are somehow free from a whole series of problems of their own, many of them turning around questions of gender, ideology, politics, the Lacanian symbolic and so on.³ However, Althusser's theological reading of the creation myths does bring out another crucial element of these myths, namely, the question of labor.

It seems to me that this foundational material may in fact be read as part of a much larger political myth that runs from Genesis to Joshua, turning around the questions of the promise of a people and a land. If the former is realized ambiguously only when Jacob's family arrives in Egypt, outside the land that Abraham has spent his life traversing in the book of Genesis, the latter is almost inevitably delayed until its troubled fulfillment in the book of Joshua, the first book outside the Torah (Genesis-Deuteronomy). But what the myths of creation and the fall do work over is the question of the division of labor, revealing and attempting to deal with the myriad tensions of such a question in the way that myths are able to do like no other genre. And at the heart of the division of labor is the vexed problem of the logically, if not historically, primary division along the lines of sexual difference.

Although there is no explicit acknowledgement, the odd phrase and mistake in Althusser's text hints at the ways the questions of the division of labor and sexual difference might become central in a reading of Genesis. Let me return to the Fall, which for Althusser now becomes part of the creative act by God. The Fall is not something the human beings enact after the creation is complete, from which God is removed and thereby not

responsible. Rather, the Fall is on Althusser's reading inherent in the myth of creation itself. Unwittingly he picks up a tension in the whole creation-Fall narrative of Genesis 1-3: if the creation were perfect, why would God place the forbidden two trees in the garden, one of the knowledge of good and evil and the other of eternal life. Is there not a flaw in the crystal, one that is geared to the breakdown of paradise as a necessary narrative device? And the Thomist doctrine of creation onto which Althusser latches neatly captures the truth of this contradiction: the Fall is in the act of creation itself, which he now reads as a narrative of alienated labor.

What of the conventional Fall, that which is contained in Genesis 3.1-24? Is it merely an addendum to the real Fall in creation. What is usually identified as the "Fall" becomes an effort to "eliminate the very origins of work."⁴ Here, work becomes a natural necessity through an etiological narrative that mislocates the origins of work: as a result of their disobedience, their eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil at the enticement of the serpent brings about the curse of God on all three, serpent, man and woman. The serpent is to go upon his belly, eat dust and be at enmity with the woman and her seed; the woman will have her pain in childbearing multiplied and be subject to the man for whom she will feel desire; and the man will find the ground cursed, full of thorns and thistles, which he will need to work in order to eat: "in the sweat of your face you shall eat bread till you return to the ground" (Genesis 3.19). For Althusser, this narrative is not about the origins of work, but its very elimination, providing justification for the notion that one must work in order to live, that it is a "natural law entailed by the Fall."⁵

Here Althusser's argument takes a slightly different turn that is more than the "still more" that opens this part of his discussion. Rather than operating with an underlying assumption that there is un-alienated form of labor (he will return to this), he suggests that work itself is not a given for Marx. The criticism of Baudrillard, that labor becomes an ontological category for Marx, an eternal necessity for human beings, falls under Althusser's point.⁶ For Althusser, the idea that work is a natural necessity constitutes the elimination of the origins of work. The implication is that work properly understood is not a natural law, not

an ontological category, but one subject to the vagaries of history, with its own narrative of beginning and end. For Marx the origins and, if I may use the term, nature of labor, lie in the interaction of human beings with nature: work is not part of nature, is not a necessity of such a nature.

However, before I get to that point, which is the last part of Althusser's own re-reading of the creation myth, let me pick up a couple of symptomatic misreadings of Genesis. Neither is plainly wrong, but rather exploits an ambiguity in the text itself that allows it to run in an unexpected direction. The first, appearing earlier in the text than the long footnote that interests me so much, concerns the two trees in Genesis 2.9, 16-17 and 3.1-3. Althusser writes, "In Eden, Adam and Eve could eat of the tree of life, but were forbidden to touch the tree of knowledge."⁷ Of course, it is the tree of knowledge that interests Hegel, about whom Althusser writes his Masters thesis. But in this brief sentence Althusser takes a textual ambiguity on its own path. In Genesis 2.9, the "tree of life in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil" are specified out of all the other trees that God made grow and that were good to mouth and eye. By verses 16 and 17 we find a ban on the tree of the knowledge of good and evil by the command of God, "You may freely eat of every tree in the garden" (Genesis 2.16). The implication is as Althusser, reading Hegel, takes it: that Adam and Eve could indeed eat freely of the tree of life. But all is not so clear, for in the initial moments of the dialogue between the serpent and the woman, she says in response to the serpent's question, "God said, 'You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden, neither shall you touch it, lest you die'" (Genesis 3.3). However, in 2.17 the phrase "in the midst of the garden" applies to the tree of life and not the other one. In fact, Eve refuses to specify which tree she means, and it is only the serpent who clarifies that he means the tree of the knowledge of good and evil in the following verses. The hint of a mistaken arboreal identity in 3.3 - are both trees under a ban? Has Eve already acquiesced to eat of the tree of good and evil in her words? - unwraps in 3.22, where the risk of the human beings eating of the tree of life as well and thereby living forever prompts the (plural) God to banish the people from the garden: "Behold,

the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil; and now, lest he put forth his hand and take also of the tree of life, and eat, and live forever....” The only explicit proscription on the tree of life is belated, one that comes into effect when Adam and Eve broach the primary ban. Althusser’s reading, based on Genesis 2.9, 16-17, follows a perfectly viable way to read this text, except that like most it decides on one at the expense of other options. But it is an interpretation that rubs up against the expectations of readers for whom this text is intimately familiar.

In the end, Althusser’s wooden interpretation does not come to much, except perhaps to give a hint of the way he works with texts. It anticipates the much more consequential “misreading” of Genesis 3.19 in the footnote. Quoting from the Second edition of the Bible, which was found in his library after his death, he writes: “as appears in the myth of Eve: ‘you will earn your bread by the sweat of your brow.’”⁸ “Earn your bread” rather than the Hebrew “eat” (*HEB) lends itself more to a metaphorical interpretation, although this is not excluded by “eat your bread.” But what interests me is the curious phrase “as appears in the myth of Eve.” He does not write “as appears in God’s words to Eve,” which would be strictly incorrect, for the words are directed to Adam, not Eve: he is the one who shall work. Nor is it strictly a myth of Eve, but a myth of the Fall. Even so, Althusser seems to take the words as those addressed to Eve. Yet in Genesis 3 her “labor” is not to work the fields full of thorns and thistles, to toil in order to eat. Rather, God says to Eve: “I will greatly multiply your pain in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children” (Genesis 3.16).

We might read this slip on Althusser’s part in a number of ways. To begin with, he unwittingly identifies the problem with the whole question of labor itself, namely, that it is men who work and are alienated in their work, whereas women in gestation, childbirth and child-rearing do no work: it is a natural process beyond the realm of labor. Here his criticism of the myth of the Fall comes to bear: the very identification of “work” as natural is even more the case with the maternal body. If the elimination of the origins of work takes place with the idea that men must work in order to live, then the notion that childbirth is a natural process is an even greater elimination

of the origins of work, the ultimate form of the alienation of labor. Yet, this does not go quite far enough, and here I anticipate the later stages of his rereading of the creation myth. A second unconscious outcome of Althusser’s misreading is the commonplace of feminist criticism that Adorno and Horkheimer were the first to make: the identification of women with nature. In specifying Eve rather than Adam as the recipient of the curse of work, Althusser brings out the truth of the Genesis narrative: the pain of the woman’s childbirth is at one with the toil required of the man to produce bread. Althusser will later make this assumption crucial in his own argument with the statement that nature is a given, but here he provides a glimpse of the problem with such an identification.

Yet, a third level of reading Althusser’s misquotation picks up a final ambiguity of the Genesis narrative. On this level, and here I anticipate his discussion of the possibilities for un-alienated work, the problem becomes one of the parallelism between the curses for both the woman and Adam. He will toil and sweat over the ground in order to produce bread; she will labor in pain in order to produce children from her own body. In both cases they work, one with the ground, another with her body. But the problem with both is that the work they do becomes, through the myth of the Fall, a natural necessity. Their work, which is identified with pain and toil, is therefore part of nature, unavoidable. For Althusser, however, the key lies in Marx’s point that there is an identity of nature and work that does not make alienated labor a law of nature. Both woman and man remain alienated as long the products of their work fall into nature, that is, continue to become something beyond themselves and not identical with them. And, as long as there are pain, death, disease, natural disasters and so on, human beings remain alienated from the nature that forces them to work. On this highly eschatological point Althusser loops back to the last part of Genesis 3 on which I have focused for a few moments. But I have also anticipated the later part of his argument, to which I can return soon.

Yet, before I do so, I want to go back to the first reading of Althusser’s misreading, where I argued that the problem with the curse on Eve in Genesis 3 is that it makes childbirth a natural process and not work. Now all of this

is inverted, or at least becomes a new problem at another level of the dialectic: the most fundamental alienation is, if I may put it in such a convoluted fashion, the naturalization of labor that is itself an alienation of nature itself, or rather, between nature and work. In other words, the first alienation is to transform a natural process into work, and the second alienation is to make this work a part of nature. In this way I read Althusser's comment on the creation myth: "In God the Creator, men not only think the birth of nature, but attempt to overcome the natural character of this birth."⁹ The alienation of the labor of childbirth finds its ultimate expression in the Creator's act of creation, for here, in the very process of writing a myth of the birth of nature, "men" erase such a birth's natural character. Of course, Althusser is, as I mentioned earlier, dependent on the Hegelian notions of the alienation of the product of labor and of nature itself, but I want to suggest that it is precisely through such troubled categories, ones that he would soon reject, he is able to come, however obliquely, to a profound insight. Once there, he (or rather I) can kick away the ladder by which he got there in the first place.

Creation and Unalienated Labor

In the second paragraph of Althusser's footnote, one that I have been exegeting in some detail, he seeks to explicate, or rather develop and deepen, the creation myths (or what he continues to refer to as a singular myth, which it has indeed become in Jewish and Christian usage). The purpose: to see how it "anticipates" Marx's famous phrase: "the identity of man and nature in work." This "anticipate" is ambiguous, for although he suggests that a more sustained reading of the creation myth may turn it into a precursor to Marx's own formulation, he ends up reading the myth in Marxist terms. The "development," in a Marxist fashion, renders the myth an anticipation of precisely those Marxist categories. Dialectical or ambiguous? I am not sure, but what he does with the second paragraph is seek out the possibilities of un-alienated labor, the first option being the identity of worker and product, the second of worker and the nature that forces him to work. I find much of this less promising than the first paragraph, since Althusser slips back into assumptions that are troubled by his other

arguments, particularly the idea that nature is a given.

Thus, on the first point - the identity of worker with product and thus with nature - Althusser moves rapidly to argue that such an identity takes place in revolutionary action. He leaves aside the next step, but I am going to assume it in Althusser's cryptic argument: that the other side of the revolution would also embody such an identity of worker and nature. What interests me, however, is the concluding observation, "this alienation is already overcome in thought - men no longer need a myth to represent it, since it has become the object of economic science."¹⁰ It is no longer the creation myth per se, but any myth that is in question. For Althusser, myth itself will pass, and the condition for such a passing is the overcoming of alienation. Not the overcoming in reality, in terms of class, politics and economics, but in thought. When it becomes possible to think of an un-alienated condition, then the need for myth has gone and economic science takes over. Apart from the anticipation of Althusser's later scientific Marxism, he shares at this point the problematic assumption of other Marxists such as Benjamin and Adorno, for whom myth in all its ambiguity could ultimately only be negative. In contrast to Benjamin (for whom the myth of capitalism was one with its dream phantasmagoria) and Adorno (the dialectic of myth and history, as well the entwinement of nature and myth meant it would not so easily disappear and so what one requires is a constant mythological suspicion), Althusser relies here on a conventional notion of the early Marx, that myth itself is part of ideology, which is itself mystification and false consciousness, the mark and result of alienation. Eliminate alienation, and myth will follow.

I am not sure that there is much mileage in such a position on myth, and Althusser would only become less patient with the function of myth. At least explicitly, for his later theory of ideology implies a continued presence of myth in any political economic formation, for myth becomes one, eternal mode of representing the relationship with real social conditions. He hints at this in the second point ("On the other hand") on the identity of work and nature. Over against the abolition of myth in the promised union of labor and its product in revolutionary action, myth remains

to bridge the gap between labor and the nature that forces human beings to work. Spoken otherwise, one can imagine the identity of human beings and transformed nature (the nature that results from human work), but the identity of human beings and untransformed nature (that with which we first engage in work itself) is a thought that has yet to make its way into human consciousness. Or, in terms he uses a little later, “human circularity,” the overcoming of human alienation that echoes the language he uses for God earlier on, is conceivable, but natural circularity is not, for “in a socialist world, say the Marxists, one will still have to overcome natural alienation.”¹¹

However, just when I feel that I can accuse Althusser of falling back to a theory of myth as a gap-filler, as a temporary measure until a properly socialist society can be achieved, his argument becomes much more complex. The temptation to seize on his suggestion that nature is a “given” (is it a “given” as an unacknowledged and unrequited producer, like woman?), that existence relies on “control,” “knowledge” and “industry” (does this not posit nature as a hostile other that threatens human existence?) must hold off, since this is only the “obvious, elementary sense.”¹² I could point out that even since the time in which Althusser wrote nature has ceased to function in human consciousness in such a fashion: no longer a given with which human beings must wrestle, nature is that which human beings choose not to exploit, to preserve as smaller (national parks, wilderness and world heritage zones) and vaster regions (Antarctica). Or that the suggestion that the presence of illness, old age and the fact that human beings are still subject to the elements is a profoundly utopian image of a communist world. But Althusser moves on - “moreover” he writes - from the hint of the last item in his list of signs of natural alienation, namely, the continued presence of work as itself an interaction and transformation of nature in order to live. This work, as well as that of scientific knowledge and the transformation of the world itself is not merely a necessary process to the achievement of communist society, to the overcoming of natural alienation, but it is, more importantly, an incomplete “recurrence of, and recovery from [*reprise*], natural alienation.”¹³ Work itself, the need to interact with and transform nature, becomes in Althusser’s text, a mark of

alienation, a recurrence of natural alienation, as well as a recovery from that alienation. I could read this conjunction of recurrence and recovery as a trap, as the closing down of any possibility of moving into communism, for if the mode of recovery is the same process that perpetuates natural alienation, then the way out is barred forever. However, I will read differently, in the sense that work, understood in the basic Marxist sense, and this includes the work of science that Althusser would later favor so much in his ideal model of Marxism, will themselves pass when and if a communist society arrives. This would be a more radical reading of both Marx’s phrase with which Althusser begins the second paragraph, and of Althusser’s own interpretation. Simply put, if work is one of the signs of natural alienation, the antagonism between human beings and the rest of a nature from which they cannot be separated, then the overcoming of natural alienation means the abolition of work in any known sense. Here we come upon the limits of any language to speak of a thoroughly different world whose language cannot as yet be imagined. Is this not Althusser’s point in the end: that a fully communist society without natural alienation is unable to be thought.

The Possibilities of Myth

What, finally, of myth? Let me quote again the last sentence of Althusser’s footnote: “This deficiency explains why it is still necessary to revert to myth in order to conceive a totality which has not yet attained its concept; it is in the story of creation, on this view, that men contemplate the *reprise* of natural alienation.”¹⁴ The key lies with the French word *reprise*, which bears the senses of resumption, return and repair or mending. He has already used the word in relation to work and a communist society free from natural alienation; now myth takes on a function comparable to work: the resumption or return (as in tennis) and mending (as of a sock) of natural alienation is crucial to both work and myth. I want to pick up the wonderful image of darning or mending a sock, something I do regularly, along with other clothing, in order to speak of myth. Rather than the gap-filling function of myth, hinted at by the “still necessary,” or even the pre-scientific mode of thinking suggested by “not yet attained its concept,” myth takes on in this final sentence

of Althusser a more substantial function, both utopian and dialectical.

The two are, of course, intimately related, especially in Louis Marin's terms. Thus, myth conceives "a totality which has not yet attained its concept."¹⁵ This is more oriented to the future than Levi-Strauss's widely influential understanding of myth as the effort to resolve social contradictions (Althusser's later definition of ideology will draw closer to Lévi-Strauss). As a genre of thinking and imagination that seeks to circumvent the restrictions of language in order to speak about an inarticulable future, myth might be understood as an impossible attempt to draw its terms from that future. The dialectical leap of myth is not that it uses another means, an alternative genre, to speak about a desired world (in itself this is enough of a challenge to theories of myth that reiterate the crude designation of myth as circular and therefore locked into unchanging repetition), but that myth itself is an imperfect genre of thinking that derives its terms and very mode of operating from that future, reaching across to grasp in a loose and slippery grip a glimpse of that yet to be achieved totality.

The other side of the semi-colon in Althusser's sentence gives us the particular mechanism, if I may use the term, of myth's utopian function (all the while with Marin peering over my shoulder). As the *reprise* of natural alienation, both its return and mending, myth turns out to be for Althusser a thoroughly dialectical exercise. The impossible conjunction of recurrence and repair, perpetuation and overcoming, or my favored return and mending, is not so much the trap of myth as the utopian function of the dialectic. I am tempted to read this in Adorno's fashion, where one pushes each term of the dialectic as far as it will go until it unwillingly yields to the other term: in this case, the very condition for the mending that myth provides relies upon its recurrence of natural alienation. In other words, only through the return of natural alienation is the repairing, darning function of myth possible. But the more difficult obverse then also applies: that mending, when taken all the way through, sees a recurrence of precisely that natural alienation one sought to repair. But here Marin (1984) becomes extremely useful, for it is not in the content of the terms themselves that the possibilities for utopia

open out, but in the form of the dialectic that Althusser states without developing here.¹⁶ For Marin, utopia becomes possible when the terms of the dialectic are allowed to run at full stretch, to let them go rather than rein them in, all of which brings him to the notion of neutralization as the crucial utopian feature. Neither contradiction, nor contrariness, nor even the resolution of the dialectic, but the neutralization of the terms in their release.

Except that in the Marin-driven reading of Althusser I have offered there remains what Marin would regard as impossible conjunction, that between myth and utopia. For Marin, the two are incompatible, myth barring the road to utopia and utopia seeing myth off the field. Althusser, it seems to me, opens a line of thought in which myth and utopia are less antagonists than necessary allies, precisely in Marin's terms. One final observation on a stretch of text on which I have already indulged myself: at the close of the note Althusser loops back to where he began, for it is not merely myth per se (although I have taken some warranted license in order to speak of myth for a while). Rather, he writes of the "story of creation" that may be read, however theologically in Althusser's case, not merely as the effort to deal in narrative form with the alienation of labor, but also as the *reprise* of natural alienation, its return and mending, as well as the not-yet conceived totality.

Conclusion

In this discursus on myth, spinning around Althusser's reading of the creation myths in Genesis, I have cut a path between the two parts of his work that he fiercely sought to keep separate. For the discussion of myth that we find in this long footnote is replete with the terminology and concepts of Hegel, the early Marx and theology itself, all of which Althusser would later excise as a militant scientific Marxist. Does this mean that religion and the possibilities for a Marxist philosophy thereof belong to a youthful enthusiasm that one puts away with maturity, the giving away of youthful speech and thought? No, for my argument has been not only that Althusser was too thorough in his expulsion of Hegel and the early Marx, especially on alienation and labor, but that it is possible to appropriate his conclusions regarding myth without endorsing

the means by which he got there. It seems to me that any materialist philosophy of religion that neglects myth is left halting. The function of myth in a materialist philosophy of religion? As the *reprise* of natural alienation, it provides precisely through the dialectical tension of the term itself space for the concept of utopia in Althusser's work. ■

Notes

1. Louis Althusser, *The Spectre of Hegel: Early Writings*, Trans. G.M. Goshgarian, (London: Verso, 1997), 168, n. 252.
2. Althusser, 168.
3. On this, see my forthcoming *Political Myth and the Bible*.
4. Althusser, 168.
5. Althusser, 168.
6. Jean Baudrillard, *The Mirror of Production*, Trans. Mark Poster, (New York: Telos Press, 1975).
7. Althusser, 65.
8. Althusser, 168.
9. Althusser, 168.
10. Althusser, 168.
11. Althusser, 168.
12. Althusser, 168.
13. Althusser, 168.
14. Althusser, 168.
15. Althusser, 168.
16. Louis Marin, *Utopics: Spatial Play*, Trans. Robert A. Vollrath, (London : Macmillan, 1984).