ABSTRACT. Education in the west has become a very knowing business in which students are encouraged to cultivate self-awareness and meta-cognitive skills in pursuit of a kind of perfection. The result is the evasion of contingency and of the consciousness of human finitude. The neo-liberalism that makes education a market good exacerbates this. These tendencies can be interpreted as a dimension of scepticism. This is to be dissolved partly by acknowledging that we are obscure to ourselves. Such an acknowledgement is fostered by the mythic dimension of experience, which also recommends a degree of humility to the citizens of democratic states.

KEY WORDS: abstract, chance, contingency, democracy, knowingness, myth, scepticism

‘Imagine abstract man, without the guidance of myth – abstract education, abstract morality, abstract justice, the abstract state . . .’

Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy* § 23

‘For me Wittgenstein discovers the threat or the temptation of scepticism in such a way that efforts to solve it continue its work of denial. The question is what the denial is of. Sometimes I say it is of finitude, sometimes of the human. These are hardly final responses.’

Stanley Cavell, *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome*, p. 23

THE GUIDANCE OF MYTH

In an infant school in one of the more deprived parts of the United Kingdom the Literacy Hour was in progress. The English language spells similar-sounding syllables in different ways: -*er* and -*ur* are a case in point, and children must learn how to spell the words containing these sounds. *Father*, but *blur*. *Further*, but a *herd* of cattle. *Murder*. Outside the windows, meanwhile, along the road that
passes the school, a rival scene competed for the children’s attention: a funeral. In front of the slowly-moving hearse walked a diminutive undertaker, carrying a stick, and wearing a tall black hat (“A wizard!” gasped the children). Behind the hearse a procession of fire-engines, their red paint and brass fittings almost painful to the eye. The funeral of a firefighter, then, or fireman as he used to be known. And behind the fire-engines moving more slowly than you have ever seen them move before, a procession of lesser vehicles. Teacher was quick to call the children away from the windows and a spectacle that struck her as morbid. Besides, the Literacy Hour has to be taught. *Stern, turn, burn.*

The point is not to criticize the teacher. She is no more than a person of her time, and her time and ours is not comfortable with the scene outside the windows. It is disturbing. It has an almost elemental force: it seems to come from an older world – that of Charles Dickens, perhaps. The children certainly respond to it, rapt in their attention and in the awed, barely-comprehending respect that the scene compels from them. You will observe the same absorption if you tell them the story of the Snow Queen (“... and she told Kay that if he could move the blocks of ice to spell the word ‘eternity’ she would give him the world, and a pair of skates”) or if you read to them a version of *Little Red Riding-Hood* that proceeds directly and without condescension, or tell them what happened to Odysseus on his long way home from Troy.

We need myth, Nietzsche thinks, because a culture that has ready recourse to myth will be less prone to what he calls Socraticism, that is the ruinous tendency to rationalize, to rely on reason over-much and in contexts where reason has little place. Even more than that, myth is at the heart of our sense of the tragic, and that in turn has the vital function of reminding us that not everything is in our power to achieve. Naturally we strive to progress, to build bulwarks against the unkindness of fate (our possessions, our *curriculum vitae*, even our relationships), but the sense of the tragic can rescue us from the dangerous supposition that we can make ourselves perfect. I make some remarks below on why this is particularly relevant to western cultures today.

The classical Greeks in particular thought that tragedy keeps alive our sense of the sheer contingency of things: of the propensity of chance to intervene in apparently well-ordered human affairs, of the ground on which we build our achievements to reveal itself as thin as paper, to open up before our feet often at the very point where it