NIETZSCHE'S PHILOSPHY OF MYTH

CLAUDE MANGION

Abstract: The status of myth and the possibilities that it contributes to the revival of culture is one that occupied Nietzsche's attention throughout his intellectual career. Although there has been a renewal of interest in myth in the last century, a renewal generated by the work of anthropologists, mythical thinking had been dismissed as 'fantasy' or equated with an earlier from of social evolution.
Against the current of his time, with its emphasis on Enlightenment values, Nietzsche understands the power of myth as a unifying force within society. As a counterweight to the fragmentation of society, Nietzsche suggested that new myths were needed. In this respect, this paper makes the claim that the so-called doctrines of the eternal recurrence of the Ubermensch should be read as examples of mythical thinking.
Within the framework of Nietzsche's thought, myth functioned as the standard for measuring the 'health' of society, so that while myths could be described as illusions, these myths, as opposed to religious and positivistic views, served the purpose of generating life-affirming attitudes.

Introduction

For quite some time, as a result of Enlightenment progressive views, myths were disparaged as superstitious and as something that needed to be overcome so as to give way to a 'rationalised' society. In this century, however, within the academic world there seems to have been a revival of interest in the discourse of myth. This is evidenced by the broad range of writers from different disciplines who have theorised about myth from various dimensions. Some notable figures include Kenneth Burke (literature), Mircea Eliade (religion), Paul Ricoeur (philosophy) and Claude Levi-Strauss (anthropology). Roland Barthes called one of his texts on French culture *Mythologies* and this has served to popularise the terminology of myth with the public at large.

However, while Barthes uses the word 'mythology' in an innovative way, in this paper I want to deal with myth in its more traditional sense of narrative. Nietzsche's theory of myth deals with the social value of myth, re-locating it within the sphere of his philosophy. Nietzsche's work can be divided into two areas: on the one hand, he can be considered as a critic concerned with the analysis of concepts which he found to be the source of philosophical problems. In this strand of his work, we find the analysis of the concept of the self, of reason, of the will, of consciousness and of culture among others. This portion of his work finds sympathy with analytic philosophers. On the other hand, the work of the philosopher, according to Nietzsche, is not only that of critical investigation, but of creative productivity. In this role, the philosopher is an artistic creator of myths, and as a mythographer, Nietzsche offered his own myths to counter those which dominated modernity.

The cultural malaise of modernity

The prevalent myth of modernity which concerned Nietzsche was related to science. It was believed that science was the ultimate tool which could find the answers to all the questions humanity posed: it had, by the nineteenth century, achieved a status which placed it at the pinnacle of knowledge. Although, at one point in his writings, in the so-called positivist phase of *The Joyous Science*, Nietzsche seems to praise the work of science on account of its rigour and the hard work which is demanded of the scientist, he never believed that science could either find the answers to the fundamental questions of humanity or provide the basis for the rejuvenation of culture. It was this view of science that Nietzsche considered mythical: the sense of the term is clearly pejorative.

Despite the mythical belief in science modern culture was proudly anti-mythical, considering itself as having progressed by liberating itself from the classical age. It is therefore the world of modernity which is the object of Nietzsche's critique. Modern Enlightened culture had lost the power to produce myths: it lost the mythical potential which was inherent among the Greeks. The value of myth was that of bringing together a people: with myth, a culture had a common foundation from which it could draw the strength to overcome the limitations and fragmentation produced by the branches of knowledge.

The negative evaluation of myth by modernity is correlated by Nietzsche to modernity's over-valorisation of reason. However, it should be pointed out that Nietzsche is not caught in the performative contradiction of condemning reason with rational means. Rather, it is modernity's obsession with the rational at the expense of the instinctive that is central to his critique.

The question regarding the loss of the instinctive in humanity and the emphasis on reason is elaborated upon in Nietzsche's critique of history. The mythical had been replaced in modernity by the historical. The obsession with historical fact was considered by Nietzsche a sign of the malaise rampant in modernity. In effect, historiography had become an application of the rational to the study of the past. This in turn led to the de-valorisation of myth: reason could not only explain myths but explain them away. The transcendental elements of myth with their insights and truths were contextualised to particular historical situations.

Nietzsche's critique of historiography is developed in the essay 'On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life'. As the title indicates, the essay deals with the way the past could be used to promote the greater well-being of humanity. In the 19th century, the study of history focused on remembering and collecting facts which were deemed objectively true: in this way, it qualified as a 'science'. But it is as a science which produces knowledge of the past that history loses its power to move individuals to understand the present and to strive for a better future.

Nietzsche's central contrast is between knowledge and life: the study of the past as a form of knowledge concerned with the collection of data is opposed to the study of the past as a tool for promoting life. Knowing the past as a number of facts is a sign that history is dominating life, rather than being at the service of it. Nietzsche unquestioningly adopts life as the basis of his theorising: it is the starting point from which his critique of history is conducted.

Using the criteria of life and whatever helps the creative forces of humanity, Nietzsche (1983:62) argues that at times it is necessary to forget what is useless to the fulfilment of this goal: remembering the inessential '*is harmful and ultimately fatal to the living thing, whether this living thing be a man or a people or a culture.*' Achieving the right balance between what

should be remembered and what should be forgotten is the aim which the Nietzschean historian sets himself.

The ideal historian for Nietzsche is the monumental historian who uses the past as a study of those whose lives are worthy of imitation: the past serves as a model which will encourage and motivate others to surpass themselves. The greatness of others is a stimulant for the generation of greatness in us. Clearly, it is not with the past as factual truth but as an inspiration that is of interest to Nietzsche. This inspiration draws upon the great men of the past: the historian ensures that the dialogue between these men continues across time. By ensuring this continued dialogue, the monumental historian engages in the task of producing great men: 'the goal of humanity cannot lie in its end but only in its highest exemplars.'(Nietzsche 1983:113)

Opposed to the monumental study of history, Nietzsche posits two other types of study: these are the antiquarian and the critical study of history. The antiquarian historian studies the past as an object of reverence which is, in a sense, 'dead' as it has nothing to say to the present. The critical historian studies the past to condemn the present: discontented with what he finds around him, as a kind of compensation, the critical historian relishes judging the past.

Myth and Greek culture

Given Nietzsche's pejorative view of historiography as practised in the 19th century, why does he consider the return to myth to be an issue of vital importance? There is no question that Nietzsche's view of myth was influenced by his admiration for the Greeks. In his early work, *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche elaborates his account of the value of tragic myth and of its subsequent decline in classical Greece. The function of these myths was that of providing a common foundation for the Greeks: the foundation made possible their cultural achievements and greatness. It is the unity of the classical era which is valorised and opposed to the fragmentation of the modern era.

Tragic myths, according to Nietzsche, provided the backdrop for classical Greek culture. Tragedy was a combination of myth and music, with these two elements working together to produce a harmonious partnership between the narrative and the emotional. Moving towards his own destruction, the tragic hero faces those forces beyond his control, transcending himself in the insight which his situation brings about. The interplay of the singing chorus and the tragic hero had an uplifting effect on the Greeks. It gave them an intimation of grandeur, of the sublime. Far removed from the mundane reality of everyday existence, the beautiful illusion of tragedy gave its viewers the strength to live. Tragic myth was the counter-weight to pessimism, and the negation of life.

The decline of tragic consciousness in the Greeks commenced with Euripedes. Instead of accepting misfortune as the basis of tragedy, he re-wrote drama replacing the tragic hero with ordinary citizens: the theatre became a natural setting which the spectators could identify with. The conflicts between the characters on stage were resolved rationally. Guided by the logical impulse Euripedes strove to remove the metaphysical underpinnings of tragic myth. However, despite the criticism, Euripedes is, for Nietzsche, merely a dummy figure. In fact, Euripedes' approach to the theatre represents the introduction of Socratic rationalism on stage in particular and onto Greek culture in general.

Reason is valorised as that distinctive human faculty which can discover the laws that govern the natural and social world. As a result nature would be controlled and a just society

would be created. The entrance of reason coincides with the exit of myth: the post-Socratic philosophers attempted to rationalise the world leaving no room for the tragic in human life. According to Nietzsche, what was instinctive, healthy and creative in life was repressed. And it was this instinct that was the source for the creation of myths. Myth was the product of the irrational, Dionysian forces in the Greeks.

The Revival of Myth

In order to counter the negative effects of modern culture, Nietzsche argued for the need to re-examine classical Greek values, and in particular the Greek tragedy. The tragic sense of life would be overcome by justifying life as desirable in spite of its dark moments. While Schopenhauer opted for a pessimistic world-view, declaring life to be meaningless and not worth living, Nietzsche accuses him of confusing the part with the whole, in other words, the bad experiences of life with the totality of life.

Following the Greek model, Nietzsche suggested that the necessary condition for the regeneration of mythic consciousness is the combination of music with myth. The music Nietzsche associates with tragedy is that of the dithyramb as its effect is that of producing a feeling of intoxication. This is important because it breaks down the individuality of the different members of the community: each person merges with the other, leaving aside personal differences and idiosyncrasies. A society is fragmented when there is no common bond between its members. Myth enables this common bond to be created: it is the expression of the needs of a community. The problem with modern society was that it had reduced myths to the status of fairy tales: they were merely stories narrated by women and children. With their transcendental potential lost, myths had lost their force as a cultural foundation.

The negation of myth is correlated to the misuse of language. Language is in a precarious condition when it has been reduced to the transmission of concepts. The revival of myth necessitates that language is restored to its original purpose, namely the communication of feelings, with which humanity can understand itself. Because this purpose is no longer being fulfilled, Nietzsche claims that genuine communication is not really taking place.

Given Nietzsche's equation of the concept with the theoretical man, it is clear that mythical communication could never make use of concepts. Rather myth uses the language of images to communicate a world view: 'myth communicates an idea of the world, but as a succession of events, actions and sufferings.'(Nietzsche 1983:223). Nietzsche is aware of the seductive effect of language: words - even if used for poetic expression - can displace the direction of the communication from the mythical to the theoretical. Accustomed to privileging concepts, the individual attempting to express himself poetically could defeat himself by yielding to the tyranny of the concept. This danger leads Nietzsche to add that mythical communication, as it is performed on stage, should not be spoken but sung. The music played expresses a particular emotion that enables a bonding between the audience and the actors to take place. Given the audience-actor identification at the emotional level, the physical actions enacted on stage become intelligible as expressions of the inner life of the actors.

Mythical communication touches the inner life of humanity because of its poetic genesis. It involves using language at a pre-conceptual level: 'it is itself still poetry, image and feeling'(Nietzsche 1983:237). In this way, Nietzsche is able to maintain that mythical communication expresses the needs and feelings of a people: myth gives them an identity that is the precondition for the production of art. 'Yet every culture that has lost myth has lost, by the

same token, its natural healthy creativity. Only a horizon ringed about with myths can unify a culture.'(Nietzsche 1967a:136)

Through its neglect of myth, modern society has produced a fragmented culture. Fragmentation can take place at two levels: individual and social. The individual is alienated from himself and from others: he is divided into an inner and outer world where his being and his actions do not correspond. In an un-fragmented society, culture provides 'unanimity of life, thought, appearance and will.'(Nietzsche 1983:123). At the social level, fragmentation is also the lack of feeling between man and man, a result of the excessive dependence of modern man on theoretical reason. The value of myth is that it is a form of non-conceptual knowledge; because it functions at the level of the instinctive it draws an immediate response from individuals bringing them together. The culture which Nietzsche envisages involves a qualitative upgrading of society: its productions are not a mere ornament to life, but rather a transformation of it, 'a new and improved physis'.(Nietzsche 1983:123)

Language

The question as to whether these myths were true or not, was never raised. The reason for this apparent lack is that the power - innate in humankind - to produce myth is the same as that which produced art. The world of myth is a self-contained one, judged according to aesthetic - not logical - criteria. And the notion of aestheticism can be directly traced to Nietzsche's theory of language, where in his early writings he specifically describes the relation between words and things in aesthetic terminology.

The processes which make up language follow a path from mankind's perceptual experiences to the conceptualisation of those experiences. The power attributed to language is intended to show that language is not the passive matching of signs with things, but an actively creative process. The formative nature of language is the result of 'the power to discover and to make operative that which works and impresses, with respect to each thing, a power which Aristotle calls rhetoric.'(Nietzsche 1989b:21) The power of language consists precisely in selecting a particular characteristic of a thing out of a number of possible characteristics. The chosen characteristic will eventually become designated as a sign. The question Nietzsche is concerned with in his early writings is not that of denying the reality of things, but of showing that a definition does not give the essential nature of things. There is no access to an in-itself independent of linguistic mediation.

Language has as its starting point the interactive relationship between the two worlds of the subject and of the object. The subject perceives external things that stimulate his nervous system. Perception is an active process as it involves both the selection of a particular image and the transformation of that which is perceived as an image into a sound:'to begin with, a nerve stimulus is transferred into an image: first metaphor. The image, in turn, is imitated in a sound: second metaphor. And each time there is a complete overleaping of one sphere, right into the middle of an entirely new and different one.'(Nietzsche 1990a: 82)

Nietzsche adopts the Aristotelian definition of metaphor as transference, but uses it innovatively, broadening its application to account for the relationship between man and the world, rather than the traditional use of metaphor as the transference of meaning, fulfilling literary decorative functions. The importance of metaphor is such that man is defined as a metaphor producing animal: metaphoricity gives man his identity. 'The drive toward the formation of metaphors is the fundamental human drive, which one cannot for a single instant

dispense with in thought, for one would thereby dispense with man himself.'(Nietzsche 1990a:88-89)

The operative word in Nietzsche's argument is 'transference': between each of these individual realms there is absolutely no one to one kind of transference on the grounds that there is a qualitative difference between the nature of the 'soul', which produces the acoustic utterance and the nature of the object which the utterance is meant to represent. Indeed, Nietzsche (1990a: 23) asks, if we are to claim that language represents the world, 'should the material in which it is to be represented, above all, not be the same as that in which the soul works?' It is precisely because the characteristic of each of these realms is essentially dissimilar that the question of correspondence between language and the world is ruled out.

The fundamental basis upon which Nietzsche's theory of language depends is the negation of a widespread belief in a causal relation between man and the world. The Nietzschean critique is directed against the view that the objects of the external world are the cause of our perceptions: 'the further inference from the nerve stimulus to a cause outside of us is already the result of a false and unjustifiable application of the principle of sufficient reason.'(Nietzche 1990a: 81)

The example of Chladni's sound figures is frequently used by Nietzsche to highlight the point that the qualitative difference between subject and object justifies excluding the existence of a causal relation between the two different spheres: the Chladni model consisted of a wooden plank with sand on its surface and strings above the sand; although the sand patterns are produced by the vibrations of the string, this does not mean that a deaf person who saw the patterns would understand the essence of music.

Clearly then, the qualitative difference between the nature of man and the nature of the world does not permit of any kind of causality between these differing realms. Instead of causality, Nietzsche argues for transference: it is the process of transference from one realm to another which he calls metaphoric. Thus, the claim that language does not have a corresponding relationship to the world is formulated on the grounds that language is fundamentally metaphoric. Because literality denies the qualitatively different spheres of man and the world, 'it makes no sense to speak of a "proper meaning" which is carried over to something else only in special cases...what is usually called language is actually all figuration.'(Nietzsche 1989b: 25)

The next step in the process of producing a language constitutes the formation of general names, of concepts. In this case what is involved is an activity whereby the individuality of each experience is removed so as to accommodate the experiences into a class. The figurative origins of language is described by Culler 1981: 203 as 'the act of grouping distinct particulars under a common heading on the basis of perceived or imagined resemblance'.

Literal language is described by Nietzsche 1965:72 with reference to a fundamental principle: 'every concept arises from the equation of unequal things.' Nietzsche's assertion presupposes a radical nominalism such that each and every thing in the world is unique and individual; it is by negating what is particular that the condition of the possibility for the formation of the concept is met. The power of language is precisely that of operating a principle of identity: things which are postulated as identical are in fact merely similar. It is man who sees things as similar in a world where difference reigns.

The difference between the metaphor and the concept is that whereas the metaphoric drive is fundamental to man, the metaphor itself is a metaphor for a generalisation which includes within it the principle of identity operating at the origin of concepts: the concept is itself

an effect of the metaphoricity of language. To make something 'like' something else is the function of the metaphoric drive which we saw characterised even the processes of perception.

It is therefore necessary to clearly distinguish between both processes: the metaphoric drive is specifically responsible for transferences between the physiological (perceptual), acoustic (word) and the abstract (conceptual) realms. But it is also the process which produces equalities by omitting differences between things. This clarification is necessary so as to avoid any contradiction which might arise if we recall Nietzsche's claim that the concept is an effaced, worn out metaphor. The concept is in fact the product of the same drive which produces metaphor.

Although Nietzsche maintains that man is essentially a metaphor-producing animal, he further distinguishes between the kind of man who opts for the metaphoric and the kind of man who opts for the concept. The kind of language used serves to identify a type of individual. Thus, in the early Nietzsche, the language of concepts characterises the utilitarian type of man whose use of language is rationally directed towards practical ends. The emphasis on utility leads to the development of the rational, Alexandrian type. Opposed is the intuitive kind of man (whom Nietzsche equates with the poet and artist) living 'instinctively' because the language of metaphor has been posited as the defining characteristic of natural man. The poetic type is he who dislocates the instrumental links of ordinary language. It is, as Havelock 1943:55 points out, 'the use of language in the aesthetic rather than inventive in the utilitarian sense.' The metaphoricity of language is grounded in an 'illogical drive',(Nietzsche 1990b:153) the upshot being that the origins of language indicate a picture of man other than that commonly attributed to him. Instead of man as a rational being, Nietzsche presents a picture of man whose irrationality constitutes his very nature. Thus, the preference for a poetic kind of language coupled with a rejection of the language of concepts can be traced to Nietzsche's views on the nature of man.

The early study on the nature of language reveals the method which is usually associated with Nietzsche only in his later writings, namely genealogy. The discussion of the nature of language is in effect a study of its origins which, however, proves inseparable from its purpose. In equating the nature of language with its origins, the underlying presupposition of Nietzsche's thought is that origins play a crucial role in establishing the identity of the object in question. Obviously, the human element in the making of language plays a decisive role, not only for the trivial reason that humans are a necessary condition for their being any sophisticated system of signs, but for the further and important reason that man's relationship to the world can be understood or misunderstood (and thereby altered) on the basis of one's conclusions about the nature of language. This shows the vital importance of myths for Nietzsche: the myths created by a society has a direct bearing on the type of society one lives in.

Language and The Will-to-Power

While the critical writings of Nietzsche on language are a critique of the representational theory of language, in his affirmative writings, the concept of language is broadened so as to give it a more fundamental role in human experience. The development of concepts is interpreted as an expression of the will-to-power.

Before elaborating upon the will-to-power, it should be clear that Nietzsche is not referring to either a psychological concept, or a political concept. Rather, the will-to-power is best described in the terminology of 'forces' whose dynamism is responsible for all change in the world. In section 1067 of *The Will to Power*, Nietzsche.1968: 549-550 writes that the world is 'force throughout...a play of forces and waves of forces, at the same time one and many'.

The will-to-power is the closest Nietzsche arrives to a universal principle in that he uses it to explain all phenomena, organic and inorganic. By adopting an economy of methodological principles, Nietzsche argues that all of reality is constituted by the same basic force which then expresses itself in a variety of ways. In *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche writes that the material world should be understood as 'a more primitive form of the world of emotions, in which everything still lies locked in a mighty unity and then branches out and develops in the organic process...'(Nietzsche 1973:48)

The will-to-power is a field of forces which struggle or compete to overcome each other. When applied to moral philosophy, Nietzsche distinguishes between active forces as life-affirming and re-active forces as life-denying. Deleuze adds that quantitatively speaking all humans have the will-to-power, but qualitatively speaking Nietzsche favours the active forces manifested in certain individuals and opposed to the re-active forces of others. In the latter category, St. Paul, Wagner and Socrates fulfil this role, while Goethe and Dionysus are representative of the life-affirming will-to-power. (Deleuze 1983:50)

However, I am here concerned solely with the relationship between the will-to-power and language. The relationship between language and reality is such that language as an expression of the will-to-power constructs the reality best suited to a community. Part of the problem in understanding the will-to-power is that although it expresses itself linguistically in the way humanity conceptualises reality, it is beyond the categories of language. The categories of language have produced philosophical misinterpretations of reality. The categories of thought are linguistic categories projected onto reality. In the short early article entitled *On The Origin of Language* (1869-1870) with reference to the Kantian claim that the function of rationality is the analysis of concepts already existing in man, Nietzsche (1989a: 209) argues that these concepts are derived from the grammatical structure of language. 'Just think of subject and object; the concept of the judgement is abstracted from the grammatical sentence. The subject and the predicate developed into the categories of substance and accident.'

Likewise, language is responsible for the belief in causality. The error which the creation of a subject, of the doer 'behind' the deed consists of, is that of re-describing the same event twice: the event is described first as the cause and then as the effect, i.e., the event. But Nietzsche's analysis points out that the subject is an additional construction projected onto the event: to say of lightning that "it flashes" is to introduce an arbitrary and false dichotomy between a subject and an event: for Nietzsche the 'doing is everything', (Nietzsche 1967b:179). On this account lightning cannot do anything other than flash. When one talks of cause and effect, it is assumed that there are independent things, which have an effect upon each other: but it is language which misleads us into assuming that causes and effects are separable items. Nietzsche replaces this terminology by arguing that everything is interrelated to each other in a force field of wills, with this interrelationship as one where the various wills collide and conflict with each other.

At a fundamental level, the language which a community uses is an expression of the forces of life within it. For Nietzsche, life is the will-to-power: in other words, concepts and values are signs of the community's will-to-survive. However, the will-to-power does not only describe a community's will-to-survive, but includes the sense of an active determination to dominate reality. Survival alone is too passive, too reactive for Nietzsche: his concept of the will-to-power is intended to show the element of force used in the interaction with the environment. It is has been repeatedly shown throughout this paper that Nietzsche's overall

philosophical concern was with the value of life and the way life can be ameliorated for the benefit of the community. It is in this respect that myths have a positive function to play.

Language and Myth

Given that Nietzsche is ready to offer his own myths to counter those prevalent in the modern world, what then is the nature of myth. I am tentatively suggesting that the answer to this question can be found by examining the relationship between language and myth. Nietzsche is quite explicit on this relationship, arguing that the same 'power' in humanity which produces language is responsible for the production of both myth and art.

'The drive toward the formation of metaphors is the fundamental human drive, which one cannot for a single instant dispense with in thought, for one would thereby dispense with man himself. This drive is not truly vanquished and scarcely subdued by the fact that a regular and rigid new world is constructed as its prison from its own ephemeral products, the concepts. It seeks a new realm and another channel for its activity, and it finds this in myth and in art generally.'(Nietzsche 1990a:88-89)

Clearly, if language in the process of its own formation as a system for the communication of information, is inevitably linked to an eradication of uniqueness, there still remains the possibility for linguistic creativity. The rhetorical figures are ample evidence of linguistic usage which goes beyond the bounds of the ordinary communicative use of language as information.

However, given that myths are linguistic constructs, what is their appeal to Nietzsche? Their appeal lies precisely in what I am calling their disclosive power: myths are illusions which have the power to reveal alternative possibilities. This is why it is not important to judge myths on logical grounds: the question is not whether they are true or false, but whether they can reveal different modes of existence. This claim needs to be qualified as while all myths have the inherent potential for disclosure, not all myths are desirable. The non-desirable myths are, in Nietzsche's view, the life-denying ones of Christianity. Within the context of Nietzsche's philosophy myths provided the vital purpose of serving as models for the life affirming culture he had in mind, a culture which generated the creativity of the individual.

Given that these myths didn't exist, should one adopt the pagan myths of ancient Greece? This solution is unsatisfactory: while Nietzsche admired the Greeks, he knew that it was impossible and not even desirable to return to the mythology of the Classical age. What was needed instead was the creation of a new mythology that would serve the modern world.

The philosopher as mythographer.

While most of Nietzsche writings on myth are part of his sustained critiques of modernity, it is also possible to read in his works his elaborated views on myth. Some commentators have noted that it is possible to read two versions of myth by Nietzsche: in his early works, his discourse on myth is grounded in specific historical contexts, while the later Nietzsche focuses on the value of myth making, on the need to create myths. Despite this shift in emphasis the purpose of myth ultimately remains the same, namely that of offering a basis for culture and ultimately life.

With nihilism as the prevalent cultural malaise of the modern world, myths performed the serious function of countering its debilitating effects: they open the space for the disclosure of

possible worlds. The nihilistic view of life as value-less and meaning-less can be countered by the re-appraisal of the value of myth. Nietzsche himself - in his role as the philosopher-artist - offered the two myths of the eternal recurrence and of the Ubermensch.

Both of these myths have a particular place in the Nietzsche's philosophy. To understand them, it is fruitful to see them in relation to what they were opposing. The myth of the eternal recurrence is a rejection of the linear view of history whether in its religious or secular form. The religious view is expressed in the Christian myth of redemption, while the secular view is the Enlightenment myth of rational progress. Given that, according to Nietzsche, both Christianity and the Enlightenment were symptoms of the nihilism which had invaded modern society, his myths were a solution to this malaise.

The myth of eternal recurrence replaces these views insofar as it offers an ideal alternative: according to this myth, everything that has happened in the world - including one's life with the good and the bad - will happen again an infinite number of identical times. In this myth, there is no beginning and no end, just a cyclical repetition of the same. While some may shudder at the horror of this thought, its celebration or in Nietzschean terminology 'affirmation' is the sign of 'strong' individual, of someone who says 'yes' to life despite misfortune and suffering. As there is no goal or purpose to the universe one corollary of the myth of the eternal recurrence is the meaningless-ness of the universe. It is therefore man who must give it a meaning. And this meaning can be found in the second of Nietzsche's myths, namely that of the Ubermensch.

The myth of the Ubermensch can be read as an ideal type, as a standard towards which one can strive. While Nietzsche is necessarily un-specific about the characteristics of the Ubermensch, he is quite clear that the Ubermensch can be contrasted with the 'herd' man of modern society. Nietzsche shows nothing but contempt throughout his writings for the 'herd' who diligently and complacently ensure that nothing disrupts the security of the social order. The myth of the Ubermensch is ideal in that it offers a positive goal towards which everyone can strive: it allows for the unleashing of the human potential for greatness. And the unleashing of this creativity is the sign of the psychologically and physiologically healthy person who affirms life.

There have been other ideals which have served as standards for humanity: one of the most widespread was that of the ascetic ideal, where self-denial was considered a virtue. In the ascetic ideal the passions have been repeatedly blamed for leading individuals into dissolute lifestyles. For Nietzsche, however, it is not denial but regulation that is necessary: if anything can be said of the Ubermensch, it would broadly include the view of the individual as a holistic being with the passions working in harmony with the reason. In this respect, as has been pointed out by Danto, Nietzsche is in fact not saying anything new, but repeating an ancient pagan ideal where the passions are not repressed in the different forms of self-denial, but rather balanced with the rational.(Nietzsche 1965:199)

The two myths of the eternal recurrence and of the Ubermensch form a 'package' in Nietzsche's philosophy of life-affirmation. The myth of the eternal recurrence was considered by Nietzsche as the hardest to accept and was therefore the litmus test for the healthy type of individual who could love life in its totality. The individual who affirmed his life, loved his fate: Nietzsche '1979: 68 writes, 'My formula for the greatness of a human being is amore fati: that one wants nothing to be different, not forward, not backward, not in all eternity.

In this paper, I have argued that Nietzsche values myths on account of their disclosive power. It is a creative power in that it is the same as that which makes mankind linguistically

creative. How this creativity energy is used varies: it can be used to harness the vitality of mankind or towards its suppression. The disclosive power of myth is the condition for the possibility of reviving culture from its deteriorating condition. In this respect, Nietzsche can be read as a cultural theorist whose interest in myth was an integral part of his philosophy.

Bibliography

Culler, Jonathan (1981) *The Pursuit of Signs*. London and Henley: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Deleuze, Giles (1983) *Nietzsche and Philosophy*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Danto, Arthur (1965) *Nietzsche as Philosopher*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Hazelton, Roger. (1943) 'Nietzsche's Contribution to the Theory of Language'. Philosophical Review. 47-60.

Nietzsche, Friedrich (1967a) *The Birth of Tragedy*. NewYork: Random House.

Nietzsche, Friedrich (1967b) *The Genealogy of Morals*. New York: Random House.

Nietzsche, Friedrich (1968) *The Will to Power*. New York: Vintage Books.

Nietzsche, Friedrich (1973) *Beyond Good and Evil*. Penguin Books, Ltd: Middlesex.

Nietzsche, Friedrich (1979) *Ecce Homo*. Penguin Books Ltd: Middlesex.

Nietzsche, Friedrich (1983) *Untimely Meditations*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Nietzsche, Friedrich (1989a) 'On the Origin of Language'. New York: Oxford University Press.

Nietzsche, Friedrich (1989b) 'Description of Ancient Rhetoric'. New York: Oxford University Press.

Nietzsche, Friedrich (1990a) 'On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense'. New Jersey and London: Humanities Press International, Inc.

Nietzsche, Friedrich (1990b) 'Additional Notes and Plans'. New Jersey and London: Humanities Press International, Inc.

Stern, Joseph. (1979) *A Study of Nietzsche*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.