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The Aquinas Lecture, 1981

Rhyme and Reason St. Thomas and Modes of Discourse
Under the Auspices of the Wisconsin-Alpha Chapter of Phi Sigma Tau

By Ralph McInerny

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To My Father

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Prefatory

The Wisconsin-Alpha Chapter of Phi Sigma Tau, the National Honor Society for Philosophy at Marquette University, each year invites a scholar to deliver a lecture in honor of St. Thomas Aquinas.

The 1981 Aquinas Lecture *Rhyme and Reason: St. Thomas and Modes of Discourse* was delivered in the Todd Wehr Chemistry Building on Sunday, February 22, 1981, by Ralph M. McInerny, the Michael P. Grace Professor of Medieval Studies at the University of Notre Dame, Notre Dame, Indiana.

After completing his undergraduate studies at St. Paul Seminary, Dr. McInerny earned a M.A. at the University of Minnesota and a Ph.L. and a Ph.D. at Université Laval. After a year at the Creighton University, he began his teaching career at Notre Dame in 1955 where he became Professor of Philosophy in 1969. Since 1978 he has been the Michael P. Grace Professor of Medieval Studies at Notre Dame as well as Director of both the Jacques Maritain Center and the Me-

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dieval Institute. After having served as Associate Editor for ten years, he became Editor of *The New Scholasticism* in 1976.

Since 1967 Dr. McInerny has published fourteen novels and has delighted mystery fans with his Father Dowling stories. In Philosophy his books include: *The Logic of Analogy: An Interpretation of St. Thomas* (1961), *From the Beginnings of Philosophy to Plotinus* (1963), *Thomism in an Age of Renewal* (1966), *Studies in Analogy* (1968), *Philosophy from St. Augustine to Ockham* (1970), and *St. Thomas Aquinas* (1977). His published articles in books and journals number over fifty.

Dr. McInerny received an Honorary Doctor of Letters Degree from St. Benedict College in 1978. He served as President of the American Catholic Philosophical Association in 1971-2 and is a member of over a dozen medieval, philosophical, and literary associations.

To Professor McInerny's distinguished list of publications, Phi Sigma Tau is pleased to add: *Rhyme and Reason: St. Thomas and Modes of Discourse*.

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Rhyme and Reason
St. Thomas and Modes of Discourse

Prologue

I think it was Collingwood who remarked that the oldest extant historical document refers wistfully to the good old days, gone alas like our youth too soon. So too, already in the Fourth Century B.C., Plato spoke of an ancient quarrel between poetry and philosophy. If it is an old one, it is also, to say the least, an odd quarrel. By any account, Plato is one of the most poetic philosophers, not only because of the literary achievement the dialogues are universally recognized as being, but also because of the myths he fashioned to carry the burden of his most cherished tenets.

Furthermore, Socrates, the main character in so many of the dialogues, is represented awaiting execution in his cell, writing poetry, something he does in response to a divine call. Likewise, Boethius, at the opening of *The Consolation of Philosophy*, unjustly condemned to death, has given

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himself over to the poetic muses. These questionable ladies are driven from the cell by Dame Philosophy who sternly advises Boethius to seek comfort in more substantial stuff, namely philosophy. Yet Dame Philosophy often expresses herself in verse as she administers the needed therapy. Whatever the opposition between philosophy and poetry is meant to be, it clearly is not an easy one to characterize.

The issue is not clarified by noticing the supposed antiquity of the quarrel and consulting Plato's predecessors. One of the most noteworthy things about Greek philosophy is that it went on for generations before it began to express itself in prose. It did not go from bad to verse but perhaps the other way around. The fragments of the Pre-Socratic philosophers that have come down to use are, by and large, in poetic form. It is true that we find Heraclitus criticizing the views of the theological poets, but it is the doctrine, not the poetry, that is his target. So too with Plato the quarrel turns on the false and demeaning things the poets have said of the gods, a charge which raises questions about the

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way in which a poem means and the manner in which it may be said to be true or false.

However obscure the quarrel can seem, it is perennially renewed. Philosophers often dismiss arguments, positions, pieces of discourse, as poetic, as pretty but imprecise, perhaps even meaningless. The poet functions as a sort of frothing dithyrambic foil for the philosopher. "Bards tell many a lie," Aristotle quotes, and it is unmistakable that he takes his own efforts to be a corrective not only of those predecessors he recognizes as philosophers but also of theological poetry and myth as well. My distinguished predecessor in this lecture series, Professor Victor M. Hamm, had many important and illuminating things to say on this topic. If I presume to take it up anew in this place it is with the sense of depending upon and adding to what he had to say. John of Salisbury quotes Bernard of Chartres to the effect that we are dwarfs who stand on the shoulders of giants and thus see farther than they did. I prefer T. S. Eliot's variation on this in "Tradition and the Individ-

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ual Talent." Eliot imagines a critic asking why we should read the old writers since we know so much more than they did. "Yes," he replies, "and they are what we know."

What I propose to do in this lecture is, first, to examine the ancient quarrel in its ancient setting, with particular reference to Aristotle. Next I will turn to an examination of what St. Thomas can teach us on this matter. I end with some suggestions about the style of philosophy that are meant to be of significance for its substance as well.

1.
An Ancient Quarrel

It is well known that Aristotle had a way of beginning his treatises with an account of what his predecessors had to say about the questions he intends to address. It is equally well known that Aristotle considers what he has to say as marking a significant advance over his predecessors' doctrine. That is, there is a contrast suggested between adequate and inadequate philosophy. But what would be the con-

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trast between philosophy and non-philosophy? What criteria enable us to identify discourse as philosophical discourse?

One contrast very prominent in both Plato and Aristotle is that between the philosopher and the Sophist. To philosophize is to be in pursuit of wisdom and ultimately of such knowledge of the divine as is possible for mortal man. For the Greeks, philosophy was not a career but a vocation, a way of life. The tribe of Sophists was the target both of Plato's rhetorical invective and of Aristotle's more dispassionate analysis of their arguments. Although their approaches to the Sophist differed, Plato and Aristotle agreed in thinking that the trouble with the Sophist was in large part a moral one. Doing it for money is symptomatic of something far worse. The Sophist was only pretending to do something; he was mimicking or parodying something of whose importance neither Plato nor Aristotle had the slightest doubt. The Sophist was pretending to be wise. Really to be wise is to love wisdom, to seek it all the days of one's life and for itself alone. Unlike Lady Anne

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Gregory, of whom Yeats wrote that "only God could love you for yourself alone and not your yellow hair," Lady Wisdom is the terminal object of desire. Seeking wisdom is the whole point of life; it is in that that human perfection and happiness consist. The term "philosophy" conveys the sense and purpose of life, the fundamental ordination of the human person to a felicific and aretaic goal.

Notice that the charge against the Sophist is not that he said what is not true. A conceptual mistake, an error in thought, is not, just as such, a moral fault. The charge against the Sophist is not simply that what he says is false, though that too is involved; rather and more profoundly the charge is that the Sophist knows this and does not care. The difference is that between saying something false and deceiving, telling a lie. By contrast, the philosopher, in seeking wisdom, is held to moral rectitude and, again in different ways, both Plato and Aristotle insist on the connection between moral and intellectual virtue. Here then is a first sense of non-philosophy: Sophistry.

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Neither Plato nor Aristotle would contrast philosophy with either mathematics or natural science. These and other disciplines and arts are necessary for the being or well-being of wisdom. The order of learning that St. Thomas gleaned from various passages of Aristotle went like this: first one should learn logic, then mathematics, then natural philosophy, then moral philosophy and finally what we have come to call metaphysics. 2 A not wholly dissimilar paideia can be described in the *Republic*. The regimen of the philosopher was intellectual and moral; it embraced a plurality of practises and disciplines teleologically ordered to such knowledge as men could attain of the divine. And the appropriate expression of that culminating knowledge was contemplation.

What then, aside from Sophistry, is excluded? In the *Poetics* we are told (1451b1) that poetry is more philosophical and serious than history. Surely this suggests that both history and poetry can be contrasted with philosophy. The reason for the ranking is that poetry deals with universals and history with particu-

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lars. The contrast seems to be between type and individual. If philosophy and poetry differ, how can the difference be characterized? Sometimes it seems to disappear altogether. "And a man who is puzzled and wonders thinks himself ignorant (whence even the lover of myth is in a sense a lover of wisdom, for the myth is composed of wonders)." (*Metaphysics*, 982b18) What we might expect to find here is that philosophy and poetry in their different ways provide accounts which dissolve wonder. But this is not what the passage says. The myth is not said to assuage wonder but to be composed of wonders. The *philosophos* begins with wonder and replaces it with an account; the *philomythos* loves an accumulation of wonders. This is most suggestive. The *terminus ad quem* of the lover of myth is the *terminus a quo* of the lover of wisdom. Nonetheless, we should remember that philosophy is fulfilled in contemplative awe.

If we turn now to a passage in which Aristotle criticizes Plato, another element is added. "But further all things cannot come from the forms in any of the usual

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senses of 'from.' And to say that they are patterns and the other things share in them is to use empty words and poetical metaphors." (999a19 ff.) In Book Beta of the *Metaphysics*, Aristotle lists among the problems or aporiai of the science he is seeking this: Are the principles of perishable and imperishable things the same? Notice the way in which he refers to some of his predecessors.

The school of Hesiod and all the theologians thought only of what was plausible to themselves, and had no regard to us. For, asserting the first principles to be gods and born of gods, they say that the things which did not taste of nectar and ambrosia became mortal; and clearly they are using words which are familiar to themselves, yet what they have said about the very application of these causes is above our comprehension. For if the gods taste of nectar and ambrosia for their pleasure, these are in no wise the causes of their existence; and if they taste them to maintain their existence, how can gods who need food be eternal? But into the subtleties of the mythologists it is not worth our while to inquire seriously; those, however, who use the language of proof we must cross-examine . . . (1000a9 ff.)

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Theological poets, who speak mythically, are contrasted with philosophers who speak apodictically. The matter remains subtle, however, since Aristotle goes on to quote some *verses* of Empedocles whom he does not number among the theological poets.

We now have an adverbial characterization of the discourse of the philosopher and we can identify the non-philosopher as one who does not speak apodictically. Can we replace these negations? The non-philosopher is the poet and his language is metaphorical. Here we have an Aristotelian expression of the ancient quarrel of which Plato spoke. You might rightly wonder being philosophers all how I managed to move so easily between myth and metaphor, conflating the two as I have done. The theological poets are said to express themselves mythically and the mark of poetic expression is metaphor. That is how I make the connection.

If we were to consult the *Index Aristotelicus* of Bonitz for occurrences of *mythos*, we would find ourselves referred mainly to the *Poetics*. The term is translated as plot and this is a new and quasi-

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technical use of it. 3 The plot is the logic of the events depicted on the tragic stage, the *σύστασις τῶν πραγμάτων*,⁴ and it is a subtle blend of show and tell. Myth in the sense of plot is not verbal; it is only when Aristotle speaks of diction, the speeches of the characters, that the problem of metaphor is raised. The plot, the *mythos*, is a *logos* (1460a27-8), the intelligible structure of the events. If the term "myth" is used in a new way in the *Poetics*, the old meaning is also there, as when Aristotle says that the tragic poet takes the old *mythoi* and imposes a *mythos* on them. (1451b24) Why is it important to note this?

We have seen Aristotle refer to the theological poets as precursors of philosophy and give us an adverbial expression of their difference from the philosopher. What the adverb modifies is an accounting, discoursing. Is there a counterpart, in this stage antecedent to philosophy, to the logic of action which is the tragic plot and to the metaphor which is a feature of its diction? The tragedy cannot be equated with what is said; rather there is an enact-

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ment, an imitation of *praxis* (1450a3-4), which includes among other things speeches employing metaphor. That is precisely the difference between narrative poetry and dramatic imitation. We have been taught to think that there is something ritualistic and dramatic which preceded the accounts of the theological poets. Gilbert Murray's suggestion that tragedy has its ultimate origin in the *Molpe*, which includes a mimesis, a dramatic imitation, as well as the telling of a tale, provides us what we want. 5 The *Molpe* can be considered a ritualistic song-and-dance performance. Thus, myths in the usual sense involve a doing as well as a saying, and that is also true of myth in the technical sense of the *Poetics*.

The upshot of these considerations is that the myth which preceded philosophy and in some sense is superseded by it, while its language is characterized as metaphorical, is not to be identified with the myth and metaphor which are achievements of a conscious kind and which are contemporaneous with philosophy. This means that the one contrast will not wholly

do for the other; the distinction between philosophy and preceding myths is not the same as the distinction between philosophy and poetry.

A word about antecedent myths. Schelling has taught us to classify views on myth under three headings: (1) myths taken as first steps towards a scientific explanation; (2) myths taken as deliberate allegories which must be interpreted to get at their literal truth; (3) myths taken to have their own truth which is irreducible to that of science. One of the fascinating things about Aristotle is that we can see him embracing at different times each of these three views on myth. Passages we have already looked at, where philosophy is seen as a replacement of myth, exemplify the first view. The second view is present when he entertains the view that history is cyclic. In the past philosophy flourished and myths are a popular expression of austere philosophical truth.⁷ Given that, when philosophy has fallen into disuse and only the myths remain, we can probe them for the literal truths they encode. Finally, in the *Poetics*,⁸

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