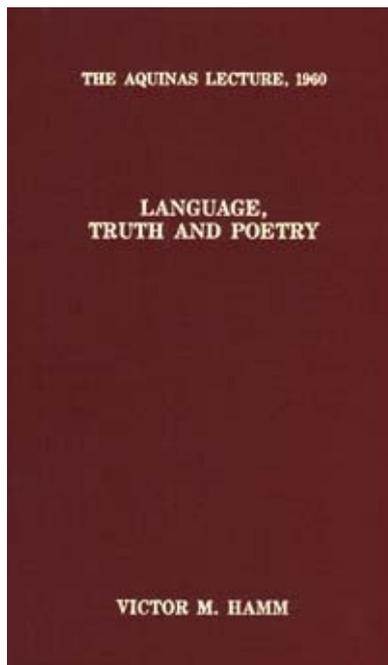


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The Aquinas Lecture, 1960

**LANGUAGE, TRUTH
AND
POETRY**

Under the Auspices of the Aristotelian Society
of Marquette University

by
VICTOR M. HAMM, Ph.D.

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Prefatory

The Aristotelian Society of Marquette University each year invites a scholar to deliver a lecture in honor of St. Thomas Aquinas. Customarily delivered on a Sunday close to March 7, the feast day of the society's patron saint, the lectures are called the Aquinas lectures.

In 1960 the Aquinas lecture "Language, Truth and Poetry" was delivered on March 6 in the Peter A. Brooks Memorial Union of Marquette University by Dr. Victor M. Hamm, professor of English, Marquette University.

Dr. Hamm was born in Milwaukee, Wisconsin on February 21, 1904. He received his A.B. degree from Marquette in 1926 and his M.A. degree in 1928. In 1929 he received a second M.A. degree from Harvard University followed by the awarding of the Ph.D. degree from Harvard in 1932.

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During 1932 and 1933 Dr. Hamm travelled through England, France, and Italy as a Sheldon Travelling Scholar from Harvard. Following his return he accepted a position as instructor in English at St. Louis University and remained there until 1934. From 1934 to 1937 he was assistant professor of English at the College of Mount St. Joseph, Cincinnati, Ohio.

In 1937 he returned to Marquette as associate professor of English and in 1945 was promoted to professor. Dr. Hamm was named visiting professor at the University of Freiburg, Germany in 1952, and in 1957 he held the same position at the University of Wisconsin.

His published books and monographs include a translation with an introduction to *Pico Della Mirandola: Of Being and Unity* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1942); *The Pattern of Criticism* (Milwaukee: Bruce, 1951); and *The College Book of English Literature*, a joint effort with J. E. Tobin and William Hines (New York: American Book Co., 1949).

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Another monograph, *Taste and the Audio-Visual Arts*, was published by the Marquette University Press on February 1, 1960.

In addition, Dr. Hamm has contributed articles to *Thought*, *The New Scholasticism*, *PMLA*, *Philological Quarterly*, *Journal of Aesthetics*, and *Comparative Literature*.

To his writings the Aristotelian Society has the pleasure of adding *Language, Truth and Poetry*.

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Language, Truth and Poetry

Much has been written about the nature of language and the nature of poetry, the relation of language to poetry, and of poetry to truth. With the pullulation of philosophies and theories of language and of poetry which have marked our day we have landed in what looks like a real mare's nest of opinion and speculation. Never, apparently, was confusion worse confounded. Never was it more difficult to find one's way about in the maze of ideologies and theories. Bibliographies accumulate; controversies rage. One seems to be standing on one of the uncompleted tiers of the Tower of Babel after the confusion of tongues. This may, indeed, be only the illusion of the ignoramus lost in

the maze of learning, but it is a real predicament for the ignoramus just the same. I am that ignoramus, and if Socrates was right in his conviction that his only claim to superiority above other men lay in his consciousness of the fact that he knew nothing, that proud assertion of intellectual humility might be my consolation. But Socrates was too humble—or too proud! We can, after all, know something in our human way of knowing, which is tentative and shadowy, but not, I think, illusory. If we have not the intellects of angels, neither are we condemned to the dark subrational gropings of the beast. If knowledge is difficult, it is not impossible.

With these preliminaries disposed of, I shall try to examine the state of affairs as I see it in the area my title suggests, paying particular attention to two extreme views of the problem of language, truth, and poetry, and attempting a third view which may, I hope, commend itself more to our sense of reality.

I

We are still living intellectually—despite recent developments away from its crude original form—in the atmosphere of positivism, for perhaps the reigning school of philosophy in Great Britain and the United States is that of Logical Positivism deriving from the Cambridge School of Analysis and the Vienna Circle.¹ These philosophers are particularly concerned with language; in fact, they conceive of philosophy as nothing more than logical analysis, *i.e.*, as a clarification of the language of everyday. Let us look briefly at Professor A. J. Ayer's *Language, Truth,*

¹ Cf. Gustav Bergmann, *The Metaphysics of Logical Positivism*, (New York: Longmans, Green, 1954); John A. Dineen, “The Course of Logical Positivism,” in *The Modern Schoolman*, XXXIV (1957), 1-21. For the “recent developments” alluded to in my text, cf. A. J. Ayer, W. C. Kneale, *et al.*, *The Revolution in Philosophy* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1956), and Father Francis C. Wade's review of this book in *The New Scholasticism*, XXXII (1958), 121-23.

and Logic, from the title of which book I have taken the cue for my present lecture. This book, first published at London in 1936, has, says Gustav Bergmann in his examination of the school, attained almost the status of a text-book.² A sampling of Professor Ayer's positions as expressed in key statements throughout this little volume will indicate what the logical positivist thinks of language, and what hope for truth and for poetry exists on this foundation.³

Ayer's view of philosophy as mere linguistic analysis leads him to deny to propositions any validity other than tautology or empirical verifiability. Thus:

To say that a proposition is true is just to assert it, and to say that it is false is just to assert its contradictory. And this indicates that the terms 'true' and 'false' connote nothing, but function in the

²*Op. cit.*, p. 35.

³ My references are to the revised edition of Ayer's book (London: Victor Gollancz, 1949).

sentence simply as marks of assertion and denial. ... The traditional conception of truth as a 'real quality' or a 'real relation' is due ... to a failure to analyse sentences correctly.⁴

Fundamental ethical concepts are more pseudoconcepts. ... Sentences which simply express moral judgments do not say anything.⁵

Aesthetic terms are used in exactly the same way as ethical terms. Such aesthetic words as 'beautiful' and 'hideous' are employed, as ethical words are employed, not to make statements of fact, but simply to express certain feelings and evoke a certain response. ... The critic, by calling attention to certain features of the work under review, and expressing his own feelings about them, endeavours to make us share his attitude towards the work as a whole.⁶

4Ibid., pp. 88-89.

5Ibid., pp. 107-108.

6Ibid., pp. 113-114.

All metaphysical utterances are meaningless.⁷ And so on.

I am not going to enter on a critique of Professor Ayer or of the Logical Positivism he represents. Even if I were equal to this task, it would transcend the area of the present lecture. I am interested here only in what becomes of poetry on the premises of this school of linguistic analysis. Let me say, however, that the mind that can construct the system of Logical Positivism cannot itself be limited by the tenets of that philosophy, for in order to establish limits one must transcend those very limits. The propositions of Logical Positivism are therefore themselves metaphysical: they assert the reality of language, if nothing else.

It is instructive to note that in Ayer's book from which I have been quoting there is only a single reference to the

Ibid., cf. Chapter I: "The Elimination of Meta-physics."

poet; he is described as “the man who uses language emotively.”⁸ The man who uses language scientifically, according to Ayer, “is primarily concerned with the expression of true propositions,” the poet, on the other hand, “with the creation of a work of art.” But “a work of art” is comprised of propositions all of which are “literally false.” On the terms of this school, therefore, poetry as a cognitive transaction becomes impossible, all that remains of it being, as the early I. A. Richards put it, “emotive utterance” and “pseudostatement.”⁹ What has happened in this aesthetic is that “poetry has simply fallen out of it, and it has become one stimulus among many which can produce desirable results”¹⁰—like a drink of bourbon,

⁸*Ibid.*, pp. 44-45.

⁹*Principles of Literary Criticism* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1924), pp. 261 ff.

¹⁰ D. G. James, *Scepticism and Poetry* (London: G. Allen & Unwin, 1937), p. 57. James further points out (p. 71) that Richards “has failed to see that the ‘world-picture of science’ is an

for example, or the feel of velvet. Hence critics with any conviction of the value of poetry as cognitive expression have opposed this view with might and main. John Crowe Ransom, for example, has pointed out that if emotional response is all that a poem is able to produce, then the labor of the poet in putting the poem into a particular shape of linguistic organization is vain.¹¹ And Mr. Allen Tate more conclusively attacks the positivist position in

imaginative construction, evolved with a view to the formulation of generalizations of strictest fact. He therefore takes it seriously for an account of the nature of existence. In his psychology, materialistic associationism accordingly becomes inevitable, the mind becomes for him the nervous system, and it is indifferent to him whether or not we call awareness a mental or a neural event.”

¹¹*The New Criticism* (New York: New Directions, 1941), pp. 32 ff. Cf. also: Stanley E. Hyman, *The Armed Vision: A Study in the Methods of Modern Literary Criticism* (New York: A. A. Knopf, 1948), Chap. 9; Wm. K. Wimsatt, Jr., and Cleanth Brooks, *Literary Criticism: A Short History* (New York: A. A. Knopf, 1957), Chaps. 27 and 28.

his essay “Literature as Knowledge,” in which he draws the just conclusion that “since the language of poetry can be shown to be not strictly relevant to object-situations as these are presented by the positivist techniques, poetry becomes either nonsense or hortatory rhetoric.”¹² The world of positivism, he says, “is a world without minds to know the world.”¹³ And, taking his cue from the later Richards, who himself had repudiated the positivist position, he elaborates the latter's description of poetry as “the completest mode of utterance,” as follows:

The mode of completeness that it [poetry] achieves in the great works of the imagination is not the order of experimental completeness aimed at by the positivist sciences, whose responsibility is directed toward the verification of limited techniques. The completeness

¹² “Literature as Knowledge,” in *The Man of Letters in the Modern World* (New York: Meridian Books, 1955), p. 50.

¹³*Ibid.*, p. 62.

of science is an abstraction covering an ideal of cooperation among specialized methods. No one can have an experience of sciences, or of a single science. For the completeness of *Hamlet* is not of the experimental order, but of the experienced order; it is, in short, of the mythical order.¹⁴

And this brings me to the other chief contemporary approach to language and poetry, the way of myth, to which I shall give more extended consideration, since it is a much more fruitful and widely exploited approach to our subject.

II.

If the Logical Positivists have tried to turn language into a kind of algebra, with nothing but univocal denotations adhering to the word-signs, the “Mythologists”—to call them that—actually assimilate language to myth, and myth to poetry. Thus a recent writer representing this attitude:

¹⁴*Ibid.*, pp. 62-3.

We can, I suggest, find means in the study of media as languages, and languages as myths. ... Languages old and new, as macromyths, have their relation to words and word-making that characterizes the fullest scope of myth.¹⁵

So also Paul Valéry: “Myth is the name for everything that exists and subsists only on the basis of language.”¹⁶ Language is myth. Myth is poetry. “The word ‘myth,’ writes Richard Chase, summing up a whole book on the subject, “means story: a myth is a tale, a narrative, or a poem; myth is literature and must be considered as an aesthetic creation of the human imagination.”¹⁷ This is all quite different from

¹⁵ Marshall McLuhan, “Myth and Mass Media, in *Daedalus: Journal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences*, LXXXVIII (1959), pp. 348, 340.

¹⁶ “On Myths and Mythology” in *Paul Valéry: Selected Writings* (New York: New Directions, 1950), p. 199.

¹⁷*The Quest for Myth* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1949), p. 73. This is in many respects a brilliant book, covering

Logical Positivism, as we shall see more clearly in a moment.

It is worth noting the historical fact that both the foundations of modern positivism and the reaction to it belong to the same century, the eighteenth. David Hume and Jeremy Bentham dehydrated language and reduced the mind, which is the organ of language, to a calculating machine. These were the forerunners of our Logical Positivists. But even before

the history of attitudes toward and theories of myth from Plato to the present. Its deeper thesis is apparent from the following excerpts: "The tensions aroused and the reconciliations affected between the religious desire for an omnipotent deity and the general human preference for powerful anthropomorphic and theriomorphic beings are universally stamped on mythology." (p. 84). "I suggest that myth dramatizes in poetic form the disharmonies, the deep neurotic disturbances which may be occasioned by this clash of inward and outward forces, and that by reconciling the opposing forces, by making them interact coercively toward a common end, myth performs a profoundly beneficial and life-giving act." (p. 85).

they had begun to write (indeed, before Bentham himself was born), the Italian Giambattista Vico, whose *Scienza Nuova* (1725) had to wait until our day to assert its influence and win its proper acclaim, elaborated the theory of myth as a kind of poetic language, the only language of which man was capable in the primitive stage of his development. Vico had been thinking of the past; for him the primitive age was over and done. But his theory was soon to be applied to poetry here and now. Later in the same century the German J. G. Herder “boldly derived language from the mythic process and made the special character of poetry reside in the fact that poetry preserves the dynamic quality of myth.”¹⁸ Herder was the true

¹⁸ Wimsatt and Brooks, *op. cit.*, p. 700. Man, according to Herder (*Über den Ursprung der Sprache*), invented language “from the tones of living nature, and made them signs of his growing reason.” The origins of poetry and language are for Herder the same. Cf. also R. Welleck, *A History of Modern Criticism*