

## THOMAS S. ELIOT AND ARISTOTLE

### *Rhapsody on a Windy Night*, 30-32

In Fall 1910, when T.S. Eliot left for Paris, he had not yet decided whether he would become a poet or a philosopher. In the final analysis, this was a secondary consideration: «the secret wish was to know the Absolute»<sup>1</sup>. Poetry and philosophy are not necessarily opposed. One of the most interesting experiences of his Parisian stay – a disappointing but, in the end, not a wasted period – was attendance at lectures given by Henri Bergson at the Collège de France from early January to 17 February 1911. The encounter with Bergson did not fail to leave its mark on Eliot's poetical production of the time. Bergson's influence is particularly evident in *Rhapsody on a Windy Night*: here the French philosopher's analysis of time and space provided Eliot with a fundamental tool for his programme of escape from a time-bound world. Memory seeks to dissolve the structure of objective time in its hourly progress, in order to go beyond the surface of reality. Bergson's patent influence on *Rhapsody in a Windy Night* has probably led many commentators to overlook another minor, but not negligible influence: that of Aristotle, whose philosophy Eliot had studied at Harvard with George H. Palmer and was to take up again in Oxford with Harold H. Joachim from 1914<sup>2</sup>.

The interaction of time and memory seems to bring to light the secret of things: a twisted branch upon the beach seems to reveal that death is the essence of life: «As if the world gave up / The secret of its skeleton, / Stiff and white». The following figure is even bleaker:

a broken spring in a factory yard,  
Rust that clings to the form that the strength has left  
Hard and curled and ready to snap. (*Rhapsody*, 30-32)

<sup>1</sup>) L. Gordon, *Eliot's Early Years*, Oxford, 19882, pp. 37-43.

<sup>2</sup>) On the deep impact of Aristotle in the Anglo-American culture at the beginning of the Twentieth century see J. Barnes, *Aristote dans la philosophie anglosaxonne*, «Revue philosophique de Louvain» 75 (1977), pp. 204-218.

Though not strictly Aristotelian, *strength* together with *form* points to a basic doctrine of his philosophy, namely Act and Potency. The Stagirite held that everything has its own potency, a sort of disposition to receive a given form; the Act is the actual attainment of this predisposition, which contributes to the full realization of the essence of the object. Starting from this doctrine, intended to justify the order and the rationality of the world, Eliot works out a radical change. The passage from potency to form is far from realizing its own nature; on the contrary, if the spring's essence consists in its resilience, the sense of existence seems to surface from the destiny to which the spring is doomed. From spring to rust: the passage from potency to act is not realization, but rather extinction. This is the essence of time and the real nature of man's condition. Beneath the apparent shroud of movement lies immobility. The tension between these two extremes would always obsess Eliot, as would be apparent in *East Coker* and *The Four Quartets* (here we detect a further Greek reference, to Heraclitus, whom Eliot had also studied at Harvard). In *Rhapsody in a Windy Night* we are not presented with the immobility of salvation, but with the immobility of desperation.

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