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The Relative and the Absolute in D. H. Lawrence's Work

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## D. H. Lawrence between the Relative and the Absolute: From Religion and Science to Art and Life

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### Résumé

The paper will first of all attempt to examine Lawrence's relationship to the concepts of the relative and the absolute in the context of the intellectual climate around the turn of the century. The focus here will be primarily on the two institutions that claimed to provide absolute answers, namely religion and science, and on Lawrence's response to and liberation from them. Following Lawrence's intellectual development as expressed through such non-fictional works as *Study of Thomas Hardy*, "The Crown," "On Being Religious" and ultimately *Apocalypse*, the paper will also explore the extent to which his thinking around this issue develops or changes over time. As a preliminary conclusion, it would seem that Lawrence throughout his life retains a fundamentally anarchic stance, rejecting the idea of the absolute as hostile to life, whose fundamental characteristic is precisely the opposite: dynamic, totalising, all-encompassing and ever-changing. Furthermore, while art is introduced as an expression of the only possible reconciliation between a continuous stream of vital impulses, like life itself art too is only "complete for the moment" (*STH* 59), i.e. a perpetual work in progress.

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### Entrées d'index

**Keywords:** science. religion. law. love. freedom

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aspects of his thinking, but the primary aim of the paper is to explore to what extent there is evidence of an evolution in the course of Lawrence's career.

- 2 Paradoxically, it might at times be difficult to draw a clear-cut line between such apparently binary opposites as the relative and the absolute. The basic thesis of this paper, however, is that Lawrence rejects the absolute, because it is hostile to life. Life, according to Lawrence, is ultimately a mystery and will always remain one. As such it is totalizing, all-encompassing and ever-changing. It might be argued that this essential quality represents an absolute dimension, but to Lawrence it represents precisely the kind of fluidity, or, in his own word, *flux*, that is the fundamental characteristic of life that man needs to embrace, in order to find meaning. And by virtue of being in flux, life is precisely not a search for the absolute.
- 3 Growing up at the turn of the twentieth century, the young Lawrence was very explicitly confronted with the question of the relative and the absolute. Indeed, it was an issue that was more or less forced upon him. At fifteen he left behind a century that had seen a major battle between two institutions that in different ways laid claims to an absolute authority, namely orthodox religion and science. The former represented the old answers or the old absolutes, the latter the new. Entering the new century, Lawrence was bound to try and come to terms with the challenges this represented, and as a result, he was caught in a crossfire between tradition and modernity. For the large majority of his contemporaries, the answer to this conundrum was felt to exist in a choice between one or the other of these two candidates, i.e. either religion or science, or in a position that attempted to manoeuvre between them and thus to produce a compatible unity consisting of elements from both. Lawrence, however, chose neither of these options.
- 4 As is reflected in the young Ursula Brangwen in *The Rainbow*, Lawrence rejected the religion of his childhood, and it was precisely its absolute, and thus static, quality that disqualified it as an explanatory key to the mystery of life. Organised and institutionalized religion, as Lawrence came to see it, was precisely a simplification and a reduction of the very mystery that religion was trying to grasp, express and represent in the first place. Through the institutions of its different confessions, Christianity had created a fatal and frozen catalogue of dogmas and rituals, consisting of black and white absolutes that served as nothing but a prison house for the dynamic freedom that was a prerequisite for true living. This disciplining and structuring of the individual, according to Lawrence, is precisely the problem of institutions.
- 5 However for a person who had grown up in a Nonconformist environment, the break with religion and its claim to absolute truth was a long and painful process. Also, it left a permanent legacy in his thinking in the form of, for instance, the elements of apocalypse and millennium that permeated his writings – a point that will be returned to at the end of this article. And it is primarily in the writings from the War onwards that he develops this vision of duality – or in Hegelian terms, the dialectic – that will become the matrix of his work for the rest of his life and through which the question of the absolute and the relative has to be considered.
- 6 Lawrence's first major work of non-fiction is *Study of Thomas Hardy*, which was started soon after the outbreak of the First World War in 1914. His point of departure at the beginning of the War and at the beginning of *Study* is a rather explicitly anarchic position: "And I would wish that many laws be unmade, and no more laws made. Let there be a parliament of men and women for the careful and gradual unmaking of laws" (14). And: "All that matters is that each human being shall *be* in his own fulness" (16).

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himself, his tale is told. Of anything that is complete there is no more tale to tell (20).

- 7 Love, then, is the means as well as the end of man's journey "into being," and as such might be regarded as an absolute, if it were not for the fact that love, too, is part of a continuous and ever-changing pulse of life, related, as in Shakespeare's dramas, to the pulse of the cosmos. And this is where Lawrence, finally, arrives at the topic of his essay, namely Thomas Hardy, and he underlines how Hardy's novels contain a "primal morality" (28) which dwarfs "the little, pathetic pattern of man's moral life and struggle" (29).

This [...] vast, unexplored morality of life itself, what we call the immorality of nature, surrounds us in its eternal incomprehensibility, and in its midst goes on the little human morality play, with its queer frame of morality and its mechanised movement; seriously, portentously, till some one of the protagonists chances to look out of the charmed circle, weary of the stage, to look into the wilderness raging round (29).

- 8 Absolutes are our futile attempts to control these forces, to build fences, to protect ourselves against Life; these absolutes are suggestive of our fear of living, and are futile, because sooner or later Life will break them down and bring us face to face with reality, regardless of our efforts to avoid it, and this is when we have the choice of trying to "come into being" or of opting out.

- 9 This is where Lawrence compares Hardy and Tolstoy to Shakespeare and Sophocles, and concludes that in the latter two it is the greater, cosmic forces that play with and frequently crush the individual; in Hardy and Tolstoy it is the "lesser, human morality, the mechanical system" that "punishes the protagonist" (29). And this is precisely the system that is setting up absolutes as a bulwark against the omnipotent and incomprehensible forces of nature, what Lawrence calls "the attack of the unknown morality" (30), which is nature, life, the cosmos. Essentially, Lawrence thus criticises Hardy and Tolstoy for creating characters who are cowardly, who lack the courage to live fully and honestly and in full acceptance of life's basic premises. Admittedly, Lawrence states that "the greater morality, is eternally unalterable and invincible" (30). This does not mean, however, that it is absolute or lays down absolute laws or rules, but rather that it is supreme and organically unpredictable. Therefore, Lawrence also prefers the term "the unknown." And again, man's journey is unique and individual: "Let every man take his own, and go his own way, regardless of system and state, when his hour comes" (38).

- 10 Having suggested at the beginning of the essay the importance of love, he then returns to it in chapter VI, focusing more specifically on the sexual act as the doorway into the unknown. Using the metaphor of a waterfall leaping off a cliff, he claims that "the act, called the sexual act, is not for the depositing of seed. It is for leaping into the unknown, as from a cliff's edge, like Sappho into the sea" (53). He consistently uses an organic and frequently erotic terminology characterised by the meeting of opposites: "Always the dual wave. [...] There, only there where the male seethes against the female, comes the transcendent flame and the filling of seeds" (53). And: "[...] except in infinity, everything of life is male and female, distinct" (55).

- 11 Still, Lawrence is also constantly concerned with another dimension, which he calls "consciousness" or "the flower" (55), or simply God, and man "must at last always call God the unutterable and the inexpressible, the unknowable, because it is his unrealised

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obtain perfect frictionless interaction, perfect as Nirvana. It is the reflex both of male and female from defect in their dual motion. Being reflex from the dual motion, consciousness contains the two in one, and is therefore in itself Absolute. And desire is the admitting of deficiency. And the embodiment of the object of desire reveals the original defect or the defaulture. So that the attributes of God will reveal that which man lacked and yearned for in his living. And these attributes are always, in their essence, Eternality, Infinity, Immutability. And [these] are the qualities man feels in woman, as a principle (58).

12 Is Lawrence then saying 1) that man's search for consciousness is a struggle for "the Absolute, the Eternal, Infinite, Unchanging"; 2) that it does not proceed via traditional religion (despite its profoundly religious characteristics); and 3) that it rather proceeds via woman?

13 At this point Lawrence draws in another element, namely art, and underlines the "fundamental, insuperable division, difference, between man's artistic effort and his religious effort," claiming –rather vaguely– that the "religious effort is to conceive, to symbolise that which the human soul, or the soul of the race, lacks, that which it is not, and which it requires, yearns for," and the artistic effort, which is "the effort of utterance, the supreme effort of expressing knowledge, that which has been for once, that which was enacted, where the two wills met and interacted and left their result, complete for the moment" (59).

14 This is by no means clear, and it only becomes marginally clearer with Lawrence's introduction of a parallel between the principle of the male and the female on the one hand, and that of Law and Love (i.e. the traditional distinction between the Old and the New Testaments) on the other. Again, he underlines a dialectical movement:

The two great conceptions, of Law and Knowledge or Love, are not diverse and accidental, but complementary. They are, in a way, contradictions each of the other. But they are complementary. They are the Fixed Absolute, the Geometric Absolute, and they are the radiant Absolute, the Unthinkable Absolute of pure, free motion. They are the perfect Stability, and they are the perfect Mobility. They are the fixed condition of our being, and they are the transcendent condition of knowledge in us. They are our Soul, and our Spirit. They are our Feelings, and our Mind. They are our Body and our Brain. They are Two-in-One. And everything that has ever been produced, has been produced by the combined activity of the two, in humanity, by the combined activity of soul and spirit. When the two are acting together, then Life is produced, the Life, or Utterance, Something, is *created*. And nothing is or can be created save by combined effort of the two principles, Law and Love (125).

15 This is where Lawrence introduces the Joachite idea of the Holy Ghost as the reconciling principle between Law and Love: "Now the aim of man remains to recognise and seek out the Holy Spirit, the Reconciler, the Originator, He who drives the twin principles of Law and Love across the ages" (126). And concluding the essay, he returns to the need for man and woman to be "reconciled within the Great Peace," out of which "shall come his supreme art":

There shall be the art which recognises his own and utters his own law; there shall be the art which recognises his own and also the law of the woman, his neighbour, utters the glad embrace and the struggle between them, and the submission of one; there shall be the art which knows the struggle between the two conflicting laws, and knows the final reconciliation, where both are equal, two-in-one, complete. This is the supreme art, which yet remains to be done. Some men have attempted it. and left us the results of efforts. But it remains to be fully done (128).

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in *Study of Thomas Hardy*, but at the centre of the discussion are the lion and the unicorn, together with the crown itself:

There are the two eternities fighting the fight of Creation, the light projecting itself into the darkness, the darkness enveloping herself within the embrace of light. And then there is the consummation of each in the other, the consummation of light in darkness and darkness in light, which is absolute: our bodies cast up like foam of two meeting waves, but foam which is absolute, complete, beyond the limitation of either infinity, consummate over both eternities. The direct opposites of the Beginning and the End, by their very directness, imply their own supreme relation. And this supreme relation is made absolute in the clash and the foam of the meeting waves. And the clash and the foam are the Crown, the Absolute (*RDP* 259).

- 18 We recognise the wave metaphor from *Study*, but the two eternities of the lion and the unicorn seem to represent, rather traditionally, the forces of darkness and light.<sup>1</sup> And at the moment of writing, Lawrence regards them both as having “gone mad, each with a crown tumbled on his bound-in head” (259). He then goes on, in an intense passage reminiscent of the “sceptered isle” passage from Shakespeare’s *King Richard II*, to describe the vision of a consummation between the two, or the state of the Holy Ghost:

This lovely body of foam, this iris between the two floods, this music between the cymbals, this truth between the surge of facts, this supreme reason between conflicting desires, this holy spirit between the opposite divinities, this is the Absolute made visible between the two Infinities, the Timelessness into which are assumed the two Eternities (261).

- 19 In this passage, the reader seems to be invited to envisage a reconciliation of opposites into something absolute, but the darkness of the War once again returns and undermines the apparent optimism, carrying the narrative into a downward spiral, from the absolute to the relative:

It is we who are carried past in the seethe of mortality. The flower is timeless and beyond condition. It is we who are swept on in the condition of time. So we shall be swept as long as time lasts. Death is part of the story. But we have being also in timelessness, we shall become again absolute, as we have been absolute, as we are absolute. We know that we are purely absolute. We know in the last issue we are absolved from all opposition. We know that in the process of life we are purely relative (263-4).

- 20 Thus, on the basis of Lawrence’s most important non-fiction from the War years, it is difficult to draw a clear-cut conclusion with regard to his ideas about the absolute and the relative; despite a profound scepticism towards the former, its concept appears to be engraved in his mind to such an extent that he tends to slip into traditional religious patterns of permanence and unchangeability, almost without noticing so himself, as in *Twilight in Italy*, where the Holy Ghost is suddenly seen as an absolute: “What is really Absolute is the mystic Reason which connects both Infinities, the Holy Ghost that relates both natures of God” (148).

- 21 Six years after the end of the War, however, in the essay “On Being Religious,” written in February 1924, there is a new confidence in his insistence that neither the universe as a whole nor our concept of God can provide us with a promise of an absolute and permanent dimension, “[b]ecause God doesn’t just sit still somewhere in

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ourselves, in an external dimension:

The Holy Ghost is within you. And it is a Ghost, forever a Ghost, never a Way or a Word. Jesus is a Way and a Word. God is the Goal. But the Holy Ghost is forever Ghostly, unrealizable. [...] The Holy Ghost is the dark hound of Heaven whose baying we ought to listen to, as he runs ahead into the unknown, tracking the mysterious everlasting departing of the Lord God, who is forever departing from us (191).

24 We have no choice but to accept our predicament, which is that we are caught in the current of Time, and that, like the Wandering Jew, we are doomed to everlasting restlessness.

25 Then, at the very end of his life, Lawrence makes a last effort to discuss his relationship to the religion of his youth, and despite being a dying man, he turns with vigour and energy to the phase of its history that predated what he regarded as its degeneration into a static and closed institution. For Lawrence, the last book in the Bible, the Book of Revelation, contains precisely elements of that contact with the cosmic truths that the Church later buried under heavy layers of dogma.

26 Similarly, Lawrence developed a profound skepticism towards science, which, like religion, claimed to possess a truth that was external to and above the individual. As with the church, Lawrence came to view science as an authority that threatened the freedom of the individual and that demanded his or her unquestioning obedience. In the chapter “The Lemon Gardens” in *Twilight in Italy*, in one of the passages added in his revision in 1915, he explains the role of science in the modern world by underlining its connection to the Christian legacy. Contrasting the North and the South, he criticises the North, with the Reformation’s rejection of the South, for embracing the world as consciousness, spirituality, perfection. What Lawrence is implying here is northern man’s fatal rejection of the body, of our life here, in the flesh; our true self, the one worth pursuing, came to be perceived as existing away from the body, in a separate, ideal existence, i.e. in an absolute dimension. He thus argues that “It was this religious belief which expressed itself in science. Science was the analysis of the outer self, the elementary substance of the self, the outer world. And the machine is the great reconstructed selfless power. Hence the active worship to which we were given at the end of the last century, the worship of mechanised force” (*TI* 121).

27 It is an even more radical and apocalyptic-sounding description of the scientific method as a road to destruction that is found in the “Industrial Magnate” chapter in *Women in Love*, where Gerald’s system, based on “pure mathematical principles” is seen as “the first great step in undoing, the first great phase of chaos, the substitution of the mechanical principle for the organic, the destruction of the organic purpose, the organic unity, and the subordination of every organic unit to the great mechanical purpose” (*WL* 231). Similarly, in his foreword to *Fantasia of the Unconscious* he had asserted: “Our science is a science of the dead world. Even biology never considers life, but only mechanistic functioning and apparatus of life” (*FU* 62).

28 Thus Lawrence identified, in science and in religion, institutions that might at some stage in their history have asked the right and relevant questions and honestly searched for truth, but which had both made the fatal mistake of establishing themselves as systems monopolizing the one and absolute truth they claimed to possess. Then what possible alternative exists?

29 Lawrence here finds himself, like the rest of his generation, facing the challenge of searching for meaning in a universe precisely without absolutes, i.e. that is itself

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lost” (A 59). This is also where he introduces the somewhat difficult distinction between the aristocrat and the democrat, and he claims –rather surprisingly, perhaps– that there are two kinds of Christianity: “The religion of the strong [i.e. the aristocrats] taught renunciation and love. And the religion of the weak [the democrats] taught *down with the strong and the powerful, and let the poor be glorified*” (65; original italics). According to Lawrence, it is the latter form that has come to dominate, and this form is expressed more than anything through the popular use of the Book of Revelation.

31 However, behind the surface of this democratic “inferiority complex,” it also contains, according to Lawrence, “some revelation of the true and positive Power-spirit” (73), that is a Jesus who is

the great Splendid One, almost identical with the Almighty in the visions of Ezekiel and Daniel. It is a vast Cosmic lord, standing among the seven eternal lamps of the archaic planets, sun and moon and five great stars around his feet (74).

32 Here, then, Lawrence sees the outline of a Jesus figure who is magnanimous, powerful, generous –who offers man a space in which to realise his potential: “the magnificent Mover of the Cosmos!” (75)– a figure beyond good and evil; a figure compatible with the literary universe in Shakespeare and Sophocles, as suggested in *Study*. But of course Christianity transferred man’s capacity for greatness and power to the beyond, to life after death, to “our tight little automatic ‘universe’” (76). And, not unexpectedly, he drops a reference to science right in the middle of this tirade against religion: “With us, all is personal. Landscape and the sky, these are to us the delicious background of our personal life, and no more. Even the universe of the scientist is little more than an extension of our personality, to us” (76).

33 Throughout *Apocalypse*, Lawrence keeps insisting on our loss of connection with life, power and greatness. He pours scorn on “petty little love of nature –Nature!!– compared to the ancient magnificent living with the cosmos” (76), and insists on the sun as “a great source of blood-vitality”: “But once we resist the sun, and say: It is a mere ball of gas! –then the very streaming vitality of sunshine turns into subtle disintegrative force in us, and undoes us” (77). And this “mere ball of gas,” of course, is precisely the phenomenon as seen from the reductive, static and absolute perspective of science.

34 Lawrence’s criticism, then, of Christianity –largely because of the legacy from John of Patmos– is that all religion “instead of being religion of *life*, here and now, became religion of postponed destiny, death, and reward *afterwards*, ‘if you are good’” (84). And this destiny, this coupling of death and afterlife reward are all crammed into a great apocalyptic vision of the end of the world, or rather one giant and inescapable prison where time ceases to exist, in a state of either absolute happiness or absolute misery.

35 Here, in the last months of his life –after the War years, after the leadership novels and *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*– Lawrence continues to hammer home his message with great energy: that Christianity’s idea of a goal, a spiritual final destination, is precisely the illusion we need to discard. And it is not only Christianity’s idea. It is also that of Greek philosophy: “With the coming of Socrates and ‘the spirit,’ the cosmos died. For two thousand years man has been living in a dead or dying cosmos, hoping for a heaven hereafter” (96). One may agree or disagree with Lawrence here, but the fact remains

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unconditionally embrace the powers of the cosmos or life in its majestic totality. And here, in his final months, he does it with greater energy and conviction than he did in *Study* fifteen years earlier. He is fed up with “the late Jewish world of angels like policemen and postmen” (120), “this maniacal anti-life” (122); he wants something bigger, grander, more aristocratic.

36 Lawrence’s fundamental relativity is further underlined by his insistence on the need to return to a cyclical conception of time, simply because the linear conception is an absolute straitjacket, which has “crippled our consciousness cruelly” (97). For Lawrence, the cyclical view of history is thus yet another liberating concept, and yet another attack on the smallness of vision and the celebration of the weak, of which he regarded John of Patmos as a prominent representative.

37 Similarly, in chapter XVI, Lawrence connects the cyclical view with the concept of the dragon or the serpent, with its Nietzschean revaluation of values and the idea of forces beyond good and evil. Again, he seeks to break out of the narrow confinement of traditional religion, which reduces both man and woman to impotent creatures in “the horrid grip of the evil-smelling old Logos!” (127). He even claims that “the very ancient world was entirely religious and godless” (130) –in itself an interesting distinction, which he explains with the assertion that man’s “naked contact with the cosmos” (130) made the idea of a god as an external and absolute entity unnecessary or even inconceivable. The introduction of a god as an intrusion between man and the cosmos, in other words, is a decadent indication of a fall, and a loss of man’s existence as an unfettered being. And with the introduction of God came priesthoods, institutions, morals and dogmas, all of them prerequisites for life-opposing absolutes. Thus, Lawrence dismisses “[m]oral religion,” that is the commandments –and the recipe-based religion of the Jews, as “comparatively modern” (141).

38 As part of this envious and vengeful religion of the Jews and the Christians, Lawrence also includes another of its absolutes, namely the eschatological vision of the apocalypse –the literal end of the world. Again, from a Nietzschean, aristocratic perspective, he regards it as an expression of weakness and meanness: “[...] it is the Christianity of the middling masses,” and “we must confess, it is hideous” (144), this urge of the weak to destroy that which they cannot obtain for themselves, because they lack the fullness of vision that the true aristocrat possesses.

39 However, is not this an example of Lawrence’s own inconsistency? Is not the idea of the end of the world precisely the most prominent feature of Lawrence’s entire work? Is it not almost obsessively present in all his writings from the War on, and does he not, even as late as in the opening paragraph of *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*, claim that “[t]he cataclysm has happened”? Still, there is a major difference: whereas the apocalypse, in Jewish and Christian terms, is a final and absolute event, which provides a conclusion not just to mankind but to the planet and the entire universe, Lawrence’s vision of life continues to profess a faith in man as well as his connection with the cosmos. Despite his frequently grim pessimism on about the world and his view of the War as the end of civilisation, the 1920s were after all a quest for new beginnings. Thus the same opening paragraph from *Lady Chatterley* continues with the words that although “we are among the ruins, we start to build new little habitats, to have new little hopes,” and in the last paragraphs of *Apocalypse*, the dying Lawrence states a credo generous and powerful enough to go beyond the distinction between the relative and the absolute:

What man most passionately wants is his living wholeness and his living unison,  
not his own isolate salvation of his “soul.” Man wants his physical fulfilment first

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41 The above discussion has focused on Lawrence's non-fiction, that is, on the texts in which he more or less explicitly discussed his own struggle with the question of the relative and the absolute. Non-fiction, however, is not strictly speaking perceived as art, and Lawrence was first and foremost an artist. In *Study* he had already said something about the function of art in the context of the relative and the absolute, and in the above-mentioned foreword to *Fantasia*, he also gives his famous warning to the reader that his so-called "pollyanalytics" should be "deduced from the novels and poems, not the reverse," because the latter "come unwatched out of one's pen" (65). It is appropriate, therefore, to conclude this essay by underlining that art or human creativity, for Lawrence, is capable of performing the role that religion and science over the centuries have proved themselves incapable of filling. Only art, i.e. true art, possesses the openness, the open-endedness and the freedom-seeking generosity towards life that will never corrupt into cage-like systems of thought and threaten to lock up the human soul. Art is concerned with the here and now, and thus with the relative rather than the absolute, and as such it is –like life itself– a proud and never-ending venture into the unknown.

42 In this connection, it may also be worth mentioning that this has a certain bearing on Lawrence's political orientation, including his so-called leadership ideas. While it cannot be denied that the novels and other writings of the early 1920s represent a rather explicit flirtation with totalitarian ideas, which might well be associated with an element of absolutism, it is a strikingly redeeming feature of the final years that his art –represented first of all by *Lady Chatterley's Lover*– carries him out of this backwater. Because the indisputable premise of art is an indefinite process of development and change, and through the realisation that a work of art is consequently always a work in progress, there is logic in his rejection of his leadership ideas. And even if his last novel is a celebration of the sexual act as an entrance to the mystery of life, which was also an essential ingredient in his fictional as well as non-fictional writing during the War years, there is every reason to assume that had Lawrence been granted a longer life, he would have continued his quest, always inconclusively, and always adamant that life was for ever leading in new and unexpected directions.

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which here stood for the flesh, the senses, in their perennial war with the spirit. Light and dark were the lion and the unicorn fighting for the crown, symbol of the consummated true self. The iris, or rainbow, also symbolized this true self, which could be created only after the individual had fulfilled the possibilities of the warring extremes of his own nature, the suffering that came from the dark side and the joy that came from the light.” (Moore 1980, 300). And Graham Hough says: “Complete consummation in the flesh for the moment annihilates spirit and transcends all duality. And at the same moment a new movement begins, towards the opposite pole, to be completed by a complete consummation in the spirit. And it is only when man has had full experience of both that he can become himself or reach God.” And he adds that the force that creates unity in duality – somehow the synthesis – “Lawrence gives many names – the crown, the rainbow, the rose. He even calls it the Holy Ghost” (Hough 1975, 229).

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### *Articles du même auteur*

**Time in *The Rainbow* and *Women in Love*: From Organic Flow to Mechanical Jam** [Texte intégral]

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