

# UNDER THE VOLCANO

## *The Myth of the Hero*

George Rhys Garnett

**I**N CHAPTER SEVEN OF *Under the Volcano*, Laruelle challenges the basic validity of the Consul's quest. The Consul first defends himself by stating that:

'You are interfering with my great battle . . . Against death . . . My battle for the survival of the human consciousness.'

"[I]t never occurred to me," wrote Lowry, in a letter published several years after *Under the Volcano*, "that consciousness itself could be of any aid, quite the contrary, and let alone a goal. . . ."

For a moment, the Consul is able to see this goal — the integration of unconscious contents into consciousness. Yet Laruelle, although essentially advising abandonment of this struggle, nevertheless points to what is lacking in the Consul's method of conducting his "great battle." It is, argues Laruelle, "precisely your inability to see . . . the things so important to us despised sober people, on which the balance of any human situation depends . . . that turns them into instruments of the disaster you have created yourself."

The Consul has indeed lost — or failed to find — "balance," and puts fatally at risk consciousness of any sort. The case Laruelle puts is for *normalcy*, a condition that is the equivalent of defeat for the Consul (as demonstrated by Laruelle himself, living in a state of permanent exile from his creative-destructive self). "But had they ever led a normal happy life," the Consul has asked himself, has it "ever been possible for them?" Laruelle's argument is not likely to convince one who in the darkness of the shadow has glimpsed a "brightness" infinitely more alluring than the pusillanimous compromise of Laruelle's normalcy.

'And you forget' [Laruelle adds] 'what you exclude from this, shall we say, feeling of omniscience. And at night, I imagine, or between drink and drink, which is a sort of night, what you have excluded, as if it resented that exclusion, returns — 'I'll say it returns', the Consul said, listening at this point. . . .

What you have excluded, as if it resented that exclusion, returns — but what Laruelle fails to understand is that he is suggesting only an alternative and inferior form of exclusion. What the Consul would have to exclude from an attempt at "normal" life with Yvonne would *also* "as if it resented that exclusion" return.

Laruelle's escape-route from conflict is inferior because it holds out no hope for growth — growth towards individuation — of the personality, merely the sealing off (in a dubiously secure persona) of what are for the Consul the sources of potential growth. The fascination and terror of the Farolito is that it may offer not only death but also rebirth for "the human consciousness."

"'Facilis est descensus Averno,'" argues Laruelle, "'it's too easy.'" "'You deny the greatness of my battle? Even if I win. And I shall certainly win if I want to,' the Consul added. . . ." A real danger to the Consul is revealed here in this too glib and vainglorious assertion. The danger — described by Jung as "inflation" — is the Consul's presumptuous if intermittent belief that he can at any point control *by an act of will* those fundamental sources of human motivation and behaviour of which he has obtained such confused and uncertain yet vital knowledge. The danger is emphasized by a quotation that springs into his mind as he makes this statement:

*'Je crois que le vautour est doux à Prométhée et que les Ixion se plaisent en Enfers.'*

"'I love hell,'" he declares later, "'I can't wait to get back there. . ..'" But between Prometheus and Ixion there appears to be a crucial distinction in achievement.

Prometheus stole fire from the gods and gave it to man; Ixion attempted to seduce the goddess Hera, Jove's wife, but was outwitted by Jove who "shaped a cloud into a false Hera with whom Ixion, being too far gone in drink to notice the deception, duly took his pleasure." He was scourged and bound "to a fiery wheel which rolled without cease through the sky."<sup>1</sup> Both were punished for their presumptuousness, but whereas Prometheus' terrible punishment did not discredit that symbolic advance in *consciousness* for man that he achieved, Ixion's was a consequence both of presumptuousness and incapacity. He presumed to *know* the anima in her highest form, yet lacked the wisdom and alertness not to be deceived by the false anima that Jove created for him.

The Consul claims, in effect, to have Promethean ambitions ("My battle for the survival of human consciousness"). C. G. Jung provides his interpretation of the significance of the Prometheus myth — of the achievement of this "hero" and of his punishment:

every step towards greater consciousness is a kind of Promethean guilt: through knowledge, the gods are as it were robbed of their fire, that is, something that was the property of the unconscious powers is torn out of its natural context and subordinated to the whims of the conscious mind. The man who has usurped the new knowledge suffers, however, a transformation or enlargement of consciousness, which no longer resembles that of his fellow men . . . but in doing so has alienated himself from humanity. The pain of this loneliness is the vengeance of the gods, for never again can he return to mankind. He is, as the myth says, chained to the lonely cliffs of the Caucasus, forsaken of God and man.<sup>2</sup>

Elsewhere, he adds: "The crucifixion evidently betokens a state of agonizing bondage and suspension, fit punishment for one foolhardy enough to venture like a Prometheus into the orbit of the opposing principle."<sup>3</sup>

Here, clearly enough, the punishment fits the crime; and both crime and punishment are undoubtedly heroic in stature. The Consul may, by implication, claim such heroic stature for *his* "battle." But is this claim entirely convincing? In some respects, he is perhaps closer to Ixion:

The Consul was gazing upward dreamily at the Ferris wheel . . . tonight it would be lit up . . . the *wheel of the law* rolling. . . .

He, like Ixion, is drunkenly *un-heroic* when he penetrates *his* "false" anima, the Maria/Yvonne of the Farolito; and he too, like Ixion, is — albeit briefly — whirled helplessly round on the giant wheel of the "Infernal Machine" at the Quauahuac Carnival.

In a curious passage, he appears to become aware of this possibility — that his "battle" may be both presumptuous and futile (the passage is curious, because it is unclear whether it is spoken by Laruelle, by the Consul, or is a combination of both, merging within the Consul's mind) :

'To say nothing of what you lose, lose, lose, are losing, man. You fool, you stupid fool . . . You've even been insulated from the responsibility of genuine suffering . . . Even the suffering you do endure is largely un-necessary. Actually spurious. It lacks the very basis you require of it for its tragic nature. You deceive yourself. . . .'

He then sees a sign being nailed to a tree: "*Le gusta este jardin. . . .*" It is a sign which recurrently reproaches his neglect of the garden of the self, and sounds an ominous warning of his final incapacity to wrest the knowledge that he confusedly seeks from "the gods" who, whether he succeeds or fails, will exact their vengeance for the attempt. But how should he respond to this suggestion that his "suffering" is both self-indulgent and self-destructive? That the Consul's quest may well be presumptuous is a warning he ought to heed; and that it is being undertaken with unbalanced and flawed equipment he must — for survival's sake — recognize. Yet these signs and suggestions may be acting as do those voices and illusions which attempt to convince the Grail-seeking knight of his unworthiness or of the futility of his quest. And if he is, still, potentially *either* Ixion or Prometheus, only one consequence is at this stage certain — he has invited and will suffer the vengeance of the "gods."

Prometheus, although "crucified" in punishment, first returned with the gift of fire for mankind. But what of a would-be thief of fire who is consumed by the prize that he seeks? Is his whole endeavour thereby rendered worthless, shown to be both "spurious" and futile? If so, it would be difficult to explain why, and how, such myths still persist and still fascinate. "Man started from an unconscious state," wrote Jung, "and has ever strived for greater consciousness. The develop-

ment of consciousness is the burden, the suffering, and the blessing of mankind," and: "Every advance in culture is, psychologically, an extension of consciousness," and the role of the individual, the "hero," is to cut "a new path through hitherto untrodden territory. . . ." Additionally, he states that: "The goal is important only as an idea: the essential thing is the *opus* which leads to the goal: *that* is the goal of a lifetime."<sup>4</sup>

It is arguable, therefore, that the question of whether or not the Consul's heroic-tragic pretensions are justifiable need not be answered only in terms of his success or failure in achieving a "goal" that he is, indeed, never able to identify (yet which is imposed most vividly in his dream-vision of "the mighty mountain Himavat"). It can be answered also in terms of the *nature* and *quality* of his "opus." In these respects, perhaps, he can be shown to be triumphant — not in his "fall," but in the nature and persistence of his quest, in the "extension of consciousness" *towards* enabling "Modern man . . . to know how he is to reconcile himself with his own nature — how he is to love the enemy in his own heart and call the wolf his brother."<sup>5</sup>

"The myth of the hero," wrote Jung, ". . . is first and foremost a self-representation of the longing of the unconscious, of its unquenched and unquenchable desire for the light of consciousness."<sup>6</sup> *Under the Volcano* embodies such a myth, and the Consul is such a hero. But, as I have already indicated in contrasting Ixion and Prometheus, there are many such heroes, many stages, many paths. Joseph Campbell demonstrates this in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. The full cycle, as outlined by Campbell, takes the hero through three main stages: (1) separation or departure; (2) trials and victories of initiation; (3) return and reintegration. However, as he points out, many tales isolate or concentrate on "one or two of the typical elements of the full cycle."<sup>7</sup>

THESE THREE MAIN STAGES CAN, broadly, be traced through Lowry's fiction: *Ultramarine* can be seen to correspond to the "separation or departure," *Under the Volcano* to "the Stage of the Trials," and "The Forest Path to the Spring," however ambiguously, to "return and re-integration." Campbell describes the process in more detail:

The mythological hero, setting forth from his commonday hut or castle, is lured, carried away, or else voluntarily proceeds, to the threshold of adventure. There he encounters a shadow presence that guards the passage. The hero may defeat or conciliate this power and go alive into the kingdom of the dark. . . .

If, as can be argued, Dana Hilliot has proceeded thus far, it is clearly by means of (at best) conciliation rather than "defeat" of "this power" that he is able to go

down with Nikolai into the "firebright" darkness of the stokehold, at the novel's end. Campbell continues:

The hero may . . . go alive into the kingdom of the dark (brother-battle, dragon-battle . . .) or be slain by the opponent and descend in death (dismemberment, crucifixion). Beyond the threshold . . . the hero journeys through a world of unfamiliar yet strangely intimate forces, some of which severely threaten him (tests), some of which give magical aids (helpers) . . .

The Consul's very situation is being described here — the nature of the world through which he now travels, throughout his final hours of the Day of the Dead, and of those forces which now threaten, terrify (in the ruined garden of Chapter Five, in Jacques' house, most powerfully and overwhelmingly at the Farolito in the final chapter), now offer aid, advice, comfort — or escape (the old woman from Tarasco, Señora Gregorio, Laruelle, Dr. Vigil, Cervantes, the old fiddler).

When he arrives at the nadir of the mythological round [writes Campbell], he undergoes a supreme ordeal and gains his reward. The triumph may be represented as the hero's sexual union with the goddess-mother of the world (sacred marriage), his recognition by the father-creator (father atonement), his own divinization (apotheosis), or again — if the powers have remained unfriendly to him — his theft of the boon he came to gain (bride-theft, fire-theft); *intrinsically it is an expansion of consciousness* and therewith of being (illumination, transfiguration, freedom). The final work is that of the return. [My italics.]

The "Road of Trials" may therefore include "The Meeting with the Goddess" (*Magna Mater*); or the bliss of infancy regained" — a stage reached, at least, by the Consul in the darkness of Señora Gregorio's womb-and-tomb-like cantina — and it may also include a meeting with "Woman as the Temptress," the realization and the agony of Oedipus" — the Consul's devastating penetration of Maria in the innermost recesses of the Farolito, after which no "Atonement with the Father" can take place — as Sanabria's sternly implacable hostility so strongly emphasizes — perhaps because the Consul does not so much perceive and possess the anima, in this embrace, as succumb, surrender to her, surrender to his ignorance and terror of her, and is thereby possessed by her.

Even if the hero survives such tests and eventually "re-emerges from the kingdom of the dead (return, resurrection)" with the "boon" that could restore the world, he may be seriously damaged by his experiences and may, in any case, be so changed by them that he cannot reintegrate adequately into the "commonday" world.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, the very nature of his gift — as something "unknown," forbidden, which threatens (and if accepted necessitates) *change* — may cause it to be ignored, misunderstood, mistreated, in the world of surface consciousness to which it has been brought.

Thus the continuous struggle of the protagonist in "The Forest Path to the Spring" — who at certain points believes himself to be living in the near-paradisal

aftermath of just such a struggle as Dana may find himself forced to confront, and as the Consul engages in and is overwhelmed by — emphasizes that, in psychological terms, the “battle” is never definitively won; or, alternatively, that retreat or escape from the “battle” (to a “Blessed Isle,” a “Land Without Fear”) can never be entirely secure.

“‘You are interfering with my great battle . . . for the survival of the human consciousness,’” the Consul tells Laruelle, who, in turn appears to suggest that this battle is essentially “spurious” and “lacks” the very “basis” required of it “for its tragic nature.” Insofar as the Consul fails to distinguish “spurious” from “genuine” elements in his “battle,” he weakens that basis; insofar as he seeks escape from rather than confrontation with symbols of transformation, as in his desire to create and remain within *his* “Land Without Evil” and without conflict — the white city of “Tlaxcala” envisioned in Chapter Ten — he reverts to a relatively preliminary stage that Campbell names the “Refusal of the Call.” In this condition, to use Campbell’s words, “All he can do is create problems for himself and await the gradual approach of his disintegration”; or, as Jung puts it: “If the demand for self-knowledge is willed by fate and is refused, this negative attitude may end in real death . . . he is caught in a blind alley from which only self-knowledge can extricate him. If he refuses this then no other is open to him. Usually he is not conscious of his situation, either, and the more unconscious he is the more he is at the mercy of unforeseen dangers. . . .”<sup>10</sup>

“[T]he essential thing is the *opus* which leads to the goal”; Lowry’s achievement in *Under the Volcano* is in the *opus* which explores and so vividly records *this* modern version of the myth of the hero. Yet the Consul fails, falls — and Laruelle survives, to live on his half-life of compromise and exile from his own creative-destructive inner-self. What then does *Under the Volcano* achieve? Is it merely a cautionary tale, fatalistic in implication, and offering only the alternatives embodied in Laruelle’s self-denying “normalcy” or the Consul’s ultimately self-destructive and compulsive rejection of “normalcy”?

If, as Jung asserts, “The hero’s main feat is to *overcome* the monster of darkness: it is the long-hoped-for and expected triumph of consciousness over the unconscious”<sup>11</sup> [my italics], what value can we discover in a “hero” who so spectacularly fails in this main task?

As I have already noted, a particular version of the myth may “isolate or concentrate on one or two of the typical elements of the full tale”; *Under the Volcano* concentrates upon the second main stage in Campbell’s cycle. The Consul, part deliberately, or wilfully, part compulsively, has essentially achieved the first stage — “a separation from the world,” and moves, during the twelve hours of the novel’s main action, definitely into — though not out of — the second: “a penetration to some source of power,” the stage of trials, and of crucial encounters with symbols of this source of power. And, as I have suggested, it is arguable that what

“The Forest Path to the Spring” deals with, essentially, is the condition of one who has returned or *retreated* from this second stage.

The value of *Under the Volcano* does not depend on the success of its hero in carrying the myth through its full cycle, but in *revitalizing* the myth in its crucial central stage. I quoted Jung as stating that “Every advance in culture, is psychologically an extension of consciousness,” the role of the individual being to cut “a new path through hitherto untrodden territory.” Paradoxically, this “new” path may be a very old path; the path pursued by the Consul has, in a sense, been trodden before — by those medieval alchemists whose parables and formulae Jung demonstrates to be, at best, profound explorations of the process of individuation; and by writers such as Melville, Poe, Baudelaire, Goethe, to whom Lowry pays more than occasional tribute; and, in innumerable myths and legends, by “the hero with a thousand faces.”

The important achievement, Jung argues, is “not to *know* the truth, but to experience it.”<sup>12</sup> In this instance, “knowledge” appears to mean intellectual understanding, and “experience” to be equivalent to the *combination* of intellectual understanding with emotional — with the “feeling value” of the experience.<sup>13</sup> To read Campbell’s synopses of myths, to understand his analyses and categorizations of stages in the hero myth — this is a valuable process, but one that operates primarily at the level of acquiring “knowledge”; to read *Under the Volcano* and to absorb its imaginative revitalization of the aspects of the myth with which it is centrally concerned, this is to move very much further towards “experience.” And the value of this experience depends, crucially, upon the imaginative vitality and profundity with which the myth is explored. A playing with myth, as a kind of decorative embellishment to art, or as a more or less pretentious assertion of the universality and (therefore!) profundity of the theme that is treated, is likely to have the effect not of revitalizing the myth and its symbols, but of trivializing and thereby devaluing them (a process that is frequently at work in the “consciousness” of Dana Hilliot, and which can arguably be seen to operate, for example, in the drama of Jean Anouilh, and the fiction of John Fowles or John Barth).

Jung states:

Eternal truth needs a human language that alters with the spirit of the times. The primordial images undergo ceaseless transformation and yet remain ever the same, but only in a new form can they be understood anew.<sup>14</sup>

This statement contains the key to Lowry’s achievement in *Under the Volcano*. “Not for a moment,” declares Jung, “dare we succumb to the illusion that an archetype can be finally explained and disposed of. Even the best attempts at explanation are only more or less successful translations into another metaphorical language. (Indeed, language itself, is only an image.) *The most we can do is to dream the myth onwards* and give it a modern dress.”<sup>15</sup> In *Under the Volcano* Lowry attempted not to explain the myth (“knowledge”) but both to explore

and to reformulate it, and by doing so to enable the reader to *experience* it — indeed, to enable *himself* to experience it. This attempt, to “dream the myth onwards and give it a modern dress” is triumphantly successful.

In this sense, Lowry is the hero who wrests meaning from the chaos of his life. In *Under the Volcano* he brings back into “common-day life” a complex yet integrated symbol of the powers of consciousness to penetrate and discover vital meanings within the ever-threatening darkness of the unconscious. That this achievement gave meaning to a life otherwise characterized by a most painful and pathetic *inability* to come to terms with a (therefore) most hostile and destructive libido, is all too evident in his biography. That the achievement simultaneously exhausted his potential for any further sustained struggle towards conscious-unconscious integration, is similarly demonstrated both in the life and the work of his last ten years.<sup>16</sup>

What Lowry confronts us with in *Under the Volcano*, if we seriously attempt to enter its world and to “dream the myth onwards,” is what Jung regards as a crucial moral problem:

The shadow is a moral problem that challenges the whole ego-personality, for no one can become conscious of the shadow without considerable moral effort. To become conscious of it involves recognizing the dark aspects of the personality as *present* and *real*. This act is the essential condition for any kind of self-knowledge.<sup>17</sup>  
[My italics.]

“Knowledge” of this problem is of strictly limited value; “experience” is essential if the problem is to be regarded as “real” rather than (merely) theoretical or suppositional. In so far as such experience can be provided by art — specifically, by literature — it must be discovered for us, and by us, through the symbol — not, as Jung emphasizes, a symbol reduced to sign and “finally explained and disposed of,” but a symbol which finds “a human language” that has altered “with the spirit of the times,” a “new form” in which it can be “understood anew.” “Wholeness,” writes Jung, “is realized for a moment only — the moment that Faust was seeking all his life.”<sup>18</sup> The Consul fails to resolve the moral problem of the shadow, yet Lowry convinces us that his striving for “greater consciousness,” both in spite of and because of its all too human confusion and limitation, is potentially the “blessing,” as well as actually the “burden, the suffering . . . of mankind”;<sup>19</sup> and he does so by finding a “human language” that is able to symbolize not only “the dark aspects of the personality as present and real,” but also to realize convincingly and “for a moment only” in the Consul’s psyche such a moment as “Faust was seeking all his life,” the glimpse of the beauty and intensity of “Wholeness” so briefly and poignantly achieved in the Consul’s dream-vision of “the mighty mountain Himavat.”

Jung writes that “One does not become enlightened by imagining figures of light, but by making the darkness conscious.”<sup>20</sup> In an essay “On the Relation of



Analytical Psychology to Poetry," he explains how he believes the writer can contribute to this Promethean task:

The creative process, so far as we are able to follow it at all, consists in the unconscious activation of an archetypal image, and in elaborating and shaping this image into the finished work. By giving it shape, the artist translates it into the language of the present, and so makes it possible for us to find our way back to the deepest springs of life. Therein lies the social significance of art: it is constantly at work educating the spirit of the age, conjuring up the forms in which the age is most lacking. The unsatisfied yearning of the artist reaches back to the primordial image in the unconscious which is best fitted to compensate the inadequacy and one-sidedness of the present. The artist seizes on this image, and in raising it from deepest unconscious he brings it into relation with conscious values, thereby transforming it until it can be accepted by the minds of his contemporaries according to their powers.<sup>21</sup>

That Lowry is such an artist as Jung describes here could be established by the identification of archetypal images that become activated in his key works and, by a detailed examination of the elaboration and shaping of these images, their translation into "the language of the present." Such an examination would show *how* this artist, having seized upon these images — or, rather, having found these images thrust upon him — brings them "into relation with conscious values," how through language, the medium of his art, he makes visible to us the inner vitality of those forces that live in "darkness" and their "unquenched and unquenchable desire for the light of consciousness."<sup>22</sup>

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Robert Graves, *Greek Myths* (London: Penguin, 1966), Vol. I, p. 208.
- <sup>2</sup> *The Basic Writings of C. G. Jung*, ed. V. de Laszlo (New York, 1959), p. 137.
- <sup>3</sup> *Archetypes of the Collective Unconscious*. In *Collected Works* (1959), Vol. 9, Part I, p. 236.
- <sup>4</sup> *Psychological Reflections*, ed. Jolande Jacobi (London, 1971), pp. 308, 31, 305.
- <sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 92.
- <sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 303.
- <sup>7</sup> (New York, 1949), pp. 30, 36 ff, 246. See also Otto Rank: *The Myth of the Birth of the Hero*, ed. Philip Freud (New York, 1964).
- <sup>8</sup> Campbell, pp. 36-37.
- <sup>9</sup> Mircea Eliade, *The Quest* (Chicago, 1969), p. 105.
- <sup>10</sup> *Psychological Reflections*, p. 333.
- <sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 36.
- <sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 299.
- <sup>13</sup> "[A]ll consciousness is manifestly founded on unconsciousness, is rooted in it, and every night is extinguished in it . . . psychopathology knows with tolerable certainty what the unconscious can do to the conscious. . . . This knowledge is an essential

pre-requisite for any integration — that is to say, a content can only be integrated when its double aspect has become conscious and when it is grasped not merely intellectually but understood according to its feeling value. Intellect and feeling, however, are difficult to put into one harness — they conflict with one another by definition." *Psyche and Symbol*, ed. V. de Laszlo (New York, 1958), pp. 29, 30.

<sup>14</sup> *Psychological Reflections*, p. 50.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 45.

<sup>16</sup> Even Lowry's last major achievement, "The Forest Path to the Spring," can be seen as an attempt to reconcile a sense of defeat in this struggle, with an inability entirely to repress recurrent impulses to re-engage it.

<sup>17</sup> *Psychological Reflections*, p. 219.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 315.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 308.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 220.

<sup>21</sup> *The Spirit in Man, Art and Literature. Collected Works* (1966), Vol. 15, p. 82.

<sup>22</sup> *Psychological Reflections*, p. 303.

## TWO THINGS FOUGHT

*Cyril Dabydeen*

They held the day to a topsy-turvy  
They gathered dust and hurled it around  
With a passion; they gritted teeth and swirled  
Eyes with them — contempt for the world-watchers.

One called upon the rodent-underground  
To safeguard territory; the other hissed  
The reptile's sense of genesis —  
There was no retreat now.

They bruised each other in a frenzy.  
They let out blood and chipped bone.  
They grimaced and made the sun blink.  
In the darkness they pulverized each other —

Men on a horse came, men from a dream  
Spectral but real, overshadowing the pulp.  
A hoof stood over, a body leaned across.  
Life dragged along where reptile and rodent

Fought — in an amphitheatre, spectators' loss.