FORMAL COHERENCE IN THE ART OF HUGH HOOD

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I

In this paper I propose to examine two aspects of Hugh Hood's work which I believe are essential to our understanding of it. That is, I intend to explore Hood's philosophical attitudes as they pertain to his art, and then to examine some of his artistic techniques as they fulfill his philosophical premises. It might be best to begin with a simple assertion: Hugh Hood is by inheritance, choice, and intellectual conviction a Roman Catholic Christian writer. To understand his work, it is necessary to understand his Catholicism — not only as it pertains to his views of morality, but also and chiefly as it affects his system of aesthetics. Hood's aesthetic views are founded upon a philosophical interpretation of his Catholic theology, and the result is an art which is a complete, coherent, and systematic way of looking at the universe. Hood makes his aesthetics clear in two essays, both of which are included in his collection of nonfiction, *The Governor's Bridge Is Closed.*

The first one was originally written for John Metcalf's anthology, *The Narrative Voice,* and is entitled "The Ontology of Super-Realism." In this essay Hood notes that when he began writing he found that he was a "moral realist," which sounds like a simpler term than it is. In explaining it, Hood begins by noting that certain decisions are necessary: "Art, after all, like every other human activity, implies a philosophical stance: either you think there is nothing to things that is not delivered in their appearance, or you think that immaterial forms exist in these things, conferring identity on them."[1] That is to say, Hood begins his art with a fundamental choice, a fundamental philosophical assumption. In speaking of this decision, Hood is reaching back to the two opposed positions posited by the world's most famous philosophers, Plato and Aristotle. Plato assumed that, because matter changed its form and shape, reality could only be something which was immaterial, and thus he fell upon his concept of the *ideas.* His student, Aristotle, agreed — but only up to a point. Aristotle agreed that reality was immaterial, but whereas Plato postulated a reality which is merely fulfilled by the material forms which we see about us — leading us to think, therefore, and perhaps rightly, that the Platonic system is just a bunch of

[1]Hugh Hood, "The Ontology of Super-Realism," in *The Governor's Bridge is Closed* (Ottawa: Oberon Press, 1973), p. 131.

ideas floating around in the atmosphere waiting to be fulfilled — Aristotle felt that the immaterial reality was contained in the things themselves. It was really a matter of starting points. Are the ideas *up there,* floating about in the essence of themselves? Or are they in the things down here? Aristotle thought that the immaterial reality was contained in the things themselves, right here, down here, and so, clearly, does Hugh Hood. Hood in fact cites with approval the statement of the American poet, William Carlos Williams, "No ideas but in things."[2]

Hood is therefore a follower of Aristotle and *his* follower, St. Thomas Aquinas. Hood argues, however, that the perceptive agent of this immaterial reality is the imagination. Here he admits that his aesthetic owes something to his Ph.D. thesis in which he argues, he says, that the Romantic imagination as it was held by Wordsworth and Coleridge was "fundamentally a revision of the theory of abstraction as it was taught by Aristotle and the medieval philosophers."[3] Thus, Hood argues, when Wordsworth looked at the grass and the flowers and saw the splendour and glory there, he was seeing the immaterial spirit in them that Aristotle saw in all changeable things — in fact was seeing the great creative spirit which St. Thomas Aquinas saw as God. As a consequence, Hood says, he himself is intensely interested in the *insides* of things, and, indeed, he cites with pride the statement of a friend that "Hood is a man to whom nothing is trivial."[4] Of course not. Therefore, in the stories "Socks" and "Boots," which Hood published in Metcalf's anthology alongside his essay, we find Hood looking for the individual and universal significance in these things which people put on their feet. Socks and boots are important to the individuals who are part of mankind, and therefore their socks and boots are of universal significance. For Hood, everything counts.

That, perhaps, is at one end of Hood's concern. You might take it as his starting point, or his Wordsworthian look at the immensity of small things. But Hood goes on to explain the foundations of his Christianity more fully in another essay, "The Absolute Infant." Again Hood notes that the matter of a choice is paramount: "It is the task of the conscious mind to choose between . . . positions or to resolve them."[5] Again he deals with the problem of reality and, after a brief discussion of the Pre-Socratic philosophers, concludes once more that Aristotle has solved the problem. It was left to Aristotle, he says, ". . . to show how the principle of permanence, the form, could be united to radically impermanent matter. Aristotle's philosophy, which always insists that form and matter be united in things, is precisely a formal materialism, a critical realism, hylomorphism (*hyle* = matter, *morphe* = form)."[6] But it was left, Hood says, to Judaism to see also that this spirit was alive and active, to perceive that this spirit was coherent and singular, and to call this spirit God. Thus, Hood says: "The Aristotelian notion of the unmoved mover, the absolute being who initiates the life of all lesser beings, needs to be interpreted and given historical and social presence. And this apprehension of God as *living* and speaking to us, this realization that God

[2]*Ibid.*, p. 130. [3]*Ibid.*, p. 130.
[4]Hugh Hood, "The Absolute Infant," in *The Governor's Bridge is Closed,* p. 144.
[5]*Ibid.*, p. 137. [6]*Ibid.*, p. 139.

will deal with us as persons, which is the essence of Jewish religious beliefs, is the perfect completion of Greek intellectual experience. Or rather, each completes the other."[7] To this recognition of the universal creative spirit, Christianity brings incarnation: "If the lived direct perception of God's will was given first to the Jews, and the supreme metaphysical insight into the nature of being and becoming first perceived by the Greeks, their perfect union, their essential polar relationship, was first stated in the Christian mystery of the incarnation."[8] A bit later, he adds: "Here the necessities of existence are fulfilled and resolved: body and soul, appearance and reality, permanence and change, being and becoming, time and eternity become one."[9]

Consequently, for Hood reality is spiritual and material, coherent, and to be perceived through a Christian imagination. But it should not be forgotten that the initial position in his argument — and indeed, at least two of its subsequent positions — demands a *choice*. Thus, although it is perhaps unfair to load a man with labels without his permission, we must conclude that Hood is a Christian Existentialist. We must never forget, however, that the agent of perception is the imagination; and, since literature is also the business of the imagination, we might do well to look at some of Hood's work as it pertains to his stated philosophical positions. To do this I have chosen — almost at random — to look rather closely at Hood's story "The Village Inside" from his collection of Montreal stories, *Around the Mountain*.[10]

II

Hood begins the story casually enough. He starts by talking about geography — about the geography of the Montreal island. He talks about names and distances, and then notes that he does a lot of bicycling around the island. The tone is casual and lazy. It's a summertime excursion, and he is simply telling the reader what he sees on his outing. He makes very few judgements, contenting himself with an adjective here and there. He finds himself in Ville St-Laurent, looking up at the airplanes which are descending to land at Dorval. Then, really in the midst of a number of other descriptive details, he notices an old farmhouse on the extreme edge of a shopping-centre parking lot. He looks at it carefully for a while, talks about it casually, and then mentions: "For some reason my curiosity about the people in that house became intense, and spotting a hamburger shack two blocks south I went and had a coffee, and made the inquiries which elicited this story." Then he tells the story of Victor Latourelle, the old man who had inherited the farm from his father, how his children grew up to want different things in life, and how his eldest daughter tried and tried to get her father to sell the land to a developer, and, when the old man proved obstinate, tried to get him committed to an institution as an insane and/or

[7] *Ibid.*, p. 140. [8] *Ibid.*, p. 141. [9] *Ibid.*, p. 141.
[10] Hugh Hood, "The Village Inside," in *Around the Mountain* (Toronto: Peter Martin Associates, 1967), pp. 113-26.

senile old man. She does not succeed in that, but she does succeed in getting him to sell most of the land for a shopping centre, keeping for himself only the house on the corner of the parking lot, where he waits, and the developers wait for him, to die. At the end of the story, Victor is looking out at the parking lot and seeing his father and his uncle out there working in a cornfield. Hood concludes: "Hallucinatory no doubt, but you can't really blame him."

A possible interpretation of this story would be to conclude that it is a story of how the present swallows up the past, and the critic might even conclude — wrongly, as it happens — that Hood is lamenting the process. If he were an anthologist, the critic might well include the story in a book of Canadian stories dealing with historical themes; and, if he were being very erudite indeed, the critic might even note that in this story time is obviously space. But I think that the critic, in dealing with the story in the manner just indicated, would be missing the story. That is, he might think that he saw the point of the story — and for some critics that is usually sufficient — but he would miss the story *qua* story. And certainly he would miss a great deal of what Hugh Hood has to offer us. My position is that a story is a great deal more than its point. One might say, in fact, that the point of a story is the least important thing about it. A story is an experience of the imagination — an experience in which the reader's and the writer's imagination join — and consequently it is the *quality* of the experience and how it is induced which are important to us as readers and critics and writers.

First of all, however, it should be noted that this particular story should be read in its context, which is the book *Around the Mountain*. In these stories Hood takes us through the seasons and around the neighborhoods of Montreal. It is perhaps Hood's centennial project. Taken as a whole book, in fact, *Around the Mountain* is a work of intensely regional character. One ex-resident of Montreal told me that it is "perfectly accurate," and I am willing to believe her. We ought to note as well, I believe, that the mountain of the book's title is topped by a huge cross. Secondly, I think it should be noted that Hood has said — to me, as it happens — that these stories owe a great deal to the *Hunting Sketches* of the early nineteenth-century Russian writer, Ivan Turgenev. This debt is clear, I think, in the use of the author himself as a narrative character and in the easy, apparently unjudging, tone.

But the essential point I wish to make about almost all of Hood's short stories and this one in particular is that Hood's work is characterized by the *formal* use of the previously defined imagination. In this case, and in many others, the form of the imaginative enquiry owes a great deal to the art of painting. In saying this, I am stepping out on a thin limb — but only in the sense that I know very little about painting, while Hood, clearly, knows a great deal. In one of his essays in *The Governor's Bridge is Closed,* Hood tells us that he once had hopes of becoming an arts-commentator for the CBC.[11] His first novel, *White Figure, White Ground,* has a painter as its chief protagonist and a painter's quest as its chief subject. In talking about his story "Getting to Williamstown," Hood has openly paid tribute to the work of the American painter, Edward Hopper.[12] In his most recent novel, *The*

[11]Hugh Hood, "Enough or Too Much," in *The Governor's Bridge is Closed,* p. 35.
[12]"The Ontology of Super-Realism" p. 130.

Swing in the Garden, the narrator is an art-historian. Hood has even noted that he was so interested in painters that he went to the trouble to marry one. Consequently, when I found myself the other day listening to a lecture by an art-historian friend of mine, I was not very surprised to discover that I was thinking of Hugh Hood's writing. The lecture concerned the work of the seventeenth-century French painter, Claude Lorrain, who was resident in Rome when he did a work entitled "The Embarkation of St. Ursula." My art-historian friend made the point — with a slide of the painting projected on the wall — that Claude Lorrain's technique is to take the viewer's eye over a familiar, even conventional, landscape to a point of light where the imagination takes over. That, I think, would serve as a description of a good part of Hugh Hood's work as well. It is in fact one of the major points of his first novel. Indeed, I think it is fair enough to compare a short story to a painting. Both are concerned with comparatively brief moments. Both, if they are good, suggest and imply a good deal which lies outside their physical boundaries.

In the case of Hood, certain painterly techniques are fairly evident. For example, in "The Village Inside," Hood's bicycle ride is very important. It is the central line which takes the reader through the landscape to the point of imagination — that is, to the point where the reader joins Hood in the imaginative enquiry into the story. Moreover, Hood uses the central line in the way a good painter might: he makes it a unique and personal statement. He gives it a certain light, easy tone — and that is the Hugh Hood I know, I think — and he even tells a few jokes along the way. But the point is that the bicycle ride takes quite a while. The printed version of the story is about twelve pages long, and Hood takes almost seven of those pages to create what could be called the foreground. That is, he is preparing the familiar landscape to lead us to the point of imagination. Along the way Hood makes a few quiet points. For example, although much of the beginning of the story is given over to a geographical travelogue, Hood makes up a little refrain for a folk song, which goes:

> In summer on this island
> God's sweet sun smiles
> From Sainte-Anne to the Point
> 'Tis thirty-five miles.

That little reference to God is slipped quietly into our subconsciousness, quite without our realizing it. That is, we *know* it, but we don't remember learning it. It is a subtle touch of craft. Nor do we in fact consciously recognize how much we have learned about time and space in this story. We do not recognize it because Hood is using such homely terms to convey the idea. He describes distances, for example, in terms of how far he can go on his bicycle between lunch and dinner-time and, in doing so, lets us enter the story in our own familiar terms. The importance of this might not seem clear at first, but, after all is said and done, one of the chief intentions of the story is to indicate the mutual identity of time and space. This, in fact, is one of Hood's favourite concerns.

Then Hood casually mentions death. He tells us that the route he has chosen is the quickest one, "unless you were fool-hardy enough to bicycle along one of the main highways, the Metropolitan or Number Two, or Cote de Liesse, which would be courting instant death." The death theme is picked up a few moments later in a self-mocking anecdote:

> Coming north from the Metropolitan, you ride first of all along a characterless strip of land — to your right a modern burial park without any headstones. I once went to a funeral there, stepped out of a limousine onto a flat recessed plaque of debased design, and remarked to the widow without thinking that it was the kind of place where you didn't know who you might be walking on. I really didn't mean to upset her.

Next he talks about the industrial buildings and the buildings of *le College de Saint-Laurent,* then more buildings and a fine old house, and then the planes coming in every minute to land at Dorval. Through seven or eight pages of perfectly accurate descriptions of real places, Hood is leading us up to his story. But of course he's doing more. He is preparing our imaginations for the leap. We've been learning a great deal, without realizing it, about time and space and our age and the nineteenth century and the entire French-Catholic culture of this one-time village. Moreover, the sheer mass of the information has thrown a certain weight toward the focal point of the story.

Hood now closes upon that point, speculating and pondering:

> There must have been outlying farms stippled around the village a few hundred yards apart. On one amazing corner, now, this year, you come past a mile of blacktop — the shopping centre can scarcely be seen in the distance because of the glare — and suddenly you see a hundred-and-forty-year-old wooden farmhouse standing on a fifty-by-fifty plot of land, on the extreme corner of the titanic parking lot, ready to fall off the edge into history. It's a magnificent house. It seems incomparably more lonely in its present situation, under the perpetual jets, than it could have in 1867 when the night lights of other farms could scarcely be distinguished.
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> The front door faces south, away from the prevailing winds; there is no garage nor any room to park a car on the property, no TV aerial. A pump stands at the back of the house, black-green, unused perhaps for fifty years. I know there's electricity because one room — never more than one — is lit at night.
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> I often bicycled past this place in the early August evenings, drawn to the site to admire the way the soft grained sheen of the walls took the light just after sunset. Once, I recall, there was a sensational display of sunset colour of gray and rose tones that you might perhaps see in nature once in ten years, but which you'd be crazy to put in a painting — nobody would believe it. As I stood across the street from the farmhouse, the colours reflected on its western wall began to

> deepen; night was coming on and overhead immense airplane after airplane drew down over me, roaring, landing-gear already out, lights at wingtips. There was a stiff breeze blowing from the north down the highway. Rose tones darkened and were merged in deep blue; all at once it was night. In the house the single light came on, downstairs in what was probably the living room. For some reason my curiosity about the people in the house became intense, and spotting a hamburger shack two blocks south I went and had a coffee, and made the inquiries which elicited this story.

It is worth noting, I believe, how Hood modulates from the discovery of the house — almost in the middle of a paragraph — to the beginning of Latourelle's story. We see the house in a general sense, and Hood tells us that it is about "to fall off the edge into history." Then he moves closer. We see the pump, which is "black-green, unused perhaps for fifty years," and we are reminded while all this is going on of the jets coming into Dorval and of Hood's bicycle rides — one kind of journey going over an historical point and another coming into it. Then we come closer and see what excites Hood's eye: the play of light on an object, the resultant tones, and a sense of texture. He was often drawn to the site, he says, "to admire the way the soft grained sheen of the walls took the light just after sunset." Hood has taken us on his bicycle ride, then, to a point in space which is a point in time. Now he must modulate into a story which must engage his imagination, and ours. He does so by way of one of those nice little ambiguities which English syntax allows. He says that after his curiosity was aroused, he went to a hamburger shack and made inquiries "which elicited this story." We are being gently, subtly, and momentarily misled. We think that perhaps he was told this story in the hamburger shack. Perhaps he was — at least in an outline form. But if one looks at the passage carefully, it is fairly clear that Hood is using the ambiguity of the syntax to suggest also that the inquiries "elicited" the story *from him.*

When he steps into the story, he does so very casually, using those general facts which anyone might imagine:

> Victor Latourelle, a farmer born in the nineties, had always lived in the house. When he was born, this was full, deep countryside, no highways, no cars, for all practical purposes no city, no Oratory, no university tower, at nights nothing in the sky but the moon and stars. On the back river, serious and unpolluted fishing and hunting. The Latourelle family owned seventy acres, blissfully ignorant of the potential value of the land; they got their living from it; that was all. They had always done so, or so it must have seemed because at that time the house was already close to seventy years old.

Notice, however, how the passage uses the foreground of the story. The heart of the paragraph invokes comparisons in our mind; we see the farm as it was then after seeing how it is now. Hood, however, is not one to romanticize the past, even in his punctuation. Consider the sentence in

which Hood implicitly takes the point of view of the ancient Latourelles:

> The Latourelle family owned seventy acres, blissfully ignorant of the potential value of the land; they got their living from it; that was all.

By separating the three parts of the sentence with semicolons, Hood keeps the sentence on a level. He does not emphasize one point to the detriment of the others; all are equal. It is this kind of brush-technique which many critics most often overlook. But it should be pointed out that the effect of a story is often controlled as much by the rhythm of the sentences — which is in turn controlled by the punctuation — as it is by the events of the story.

Hood is not a writer who will make our leap into the imagination a shock. The next paragraph modulates further into fiction. It opens, "Victor Latourelle must have crept across stubbly fields . . . ," and then moves further into Latourelle's mind (and deeper into fiction) in the last two sentences of the paragraph: "At twenty he was left untouched by the *crise de conscription;* he didn't recognize its existence. He helped work the farm and lived as he'd always done, and nobody bothered him." Then themes are joined from foreground and story: "Some crazy biplane, alone in the sky, may have impelled him to point it out and laugh," and quite before we have realized it, we are in a story.

We see the progress of the industrial, urban age. "Here an occasional rudimentary gasoline pump, there (very distant) a minor industrial installation." But, more importantly, we are introduced to M. Latourelle's family: two sons and a daughter, Victorine. It is in her that we shall see abstract history made personal and immediate. She "was always his favourite, and after modern life began to touch the Latourelle farm, to some degree his cross." The sons move to the city, and, in 1947, Victorine marries one Andre Savard, who "came to live on the place, ostensibly to assist in its operation." Hood is indicating to us what *he* thinks of Savard, of course, by the use of that adverb — and making us believe, at the same time, that the story is somehow separate from Hood himself. In a year or two, Andre and Victorine "began to agitate for the sale of the land." By 1965, Hood tells us, the land has appreciated in value to the point that it could easily "enrich the family, and more particularly Victorine and her husband, Andre Savard." In short, values have changed.

But M. Latourelle resists selling his land, and Hood, continuing his presence in the story, tells us that Latourelle "had no false romantic ideas about the place, no semi-mystical commitment to the land such as we read about in novels. . . . He simply didn't want to be the one to take the final step." History, of course — whether it is political, social, or family history — does not move in the great dramatic steps of hindsight. It moves a little bit at a time. So Hood has M. Latourelle give in to Victorine's cajoling after ten years and sell off a ten-acre strip — well realizing that he has just reduced his farm to a size too small for successful agrarian economy. But, although the deal is fair enough when he makes it (Hood has no villains in this story; the developers deal fairly with M. Latourelle), the property appreciates in value rapidly — to the point that Victorine begins to look back on the deal as a

terrible mistake. She feels that time is passing *her* by too. Here we have the first dialogue in the story. It's as if Hood has just released the story from his control. Victorine speaks: "Next time, *Pepere,* let us do the bargaining." M. Latourelle ignores her advice. He is willing to give in to the inevitable progress of the city — but only at the same rate that he is forced to give in to his advancing years. To him of course the farm represents the past, while to Victorine it represents the present and the future. His values are rural; hers are urban and financial. He eventually sells off an L-shaped thirty acres for what is a very handsome figure, but "not quite what Victorine would have asked. She consulted her husband at length, and her brothers' families, and they vowed that the next and last deal would be handled by the younger generation, no longer quite so young." Then, Hood notes, "the affair turned nasty, as it sometimes does." Because M. Latourelle sees his *life* as that of the land, he knows that to sell it is to die — in effect. So he resists the last step. Victorine, with different values, sees her life slipping away, and tries to work around her father by asking the city council to expropriate his land. But the city council acts with absolute propriety and refuses. Then Victorine "took the extreme step of trying to have her father certified as incompetent by a psychiatrist, with the aim of committing him to an institution." But it doesn't work. (Again society is more ethical than we sometimes think it is, and again Hood avoids easy villains.)

Now we are ready for the dramatic moment of the story, and it is a moment which is — as it is so often in real life and so rarely in a story — very quiet:

> After Victorine started to invite psychiatrists to the house, poor M. Latourelle caved in emotionally. "Have I deserved this?"
>
> "What, Papa?"
>
> "I'm saner than you, Victorine."
>
> "Then sell!"
>
> He broke down at her insistence, and an arrangement was quickly made which gave the remainder of the property, except for the fifty-foot square the house actually stood on, to the development corporation.

Then we are ready for the end of the story. We see Victor Latourelle looking out at the parking lot, imagining that he sees his father out there working in their truck garden and his Uncle Antoine in a distant cornfield.

The effect of the story is not simply that of the dramatic moment — that least of all. The effect of the story is the result of Hood's formal use of the imagination. Our eye has been carried through a contemporary landscape to a *relic,* and through that *relic* into the past, and for Hood that means that the past is not lost at all. To perceive it through the imagination and through imaginative art is to see that the past is part of the present, that there is not a break but a continuation. He is, indeed, very careful throughout the story *not* to denigrate the present. There is no need to. For Hood, the coherence of the universe is the coherence of time. If the facts go, the spirit remains.

connecting all. Here I cannot resist quoting one of my favourite pasages in Hood's work. It is from the first story in *Around the Mountain*, the hockey story on the theme of human pride entitled "The Sportive Center of Saint Vincent de Paul." Hood is thinking about the local hockey team he plays on and muses:

> . . . I'm playing with Seymour who was wanted by the Ranger chain, and he's playing with Gary Paxton who had fifteen goals in the WHL last year . . . And Paxton was playing with Hebenton and Burns who once upon a time played with Andy Bathgate and Johnny Bucyk. I feel as though I belonged to the club in a small way, and it's relations like these that give society its meaning. Me and Andy![13]

So for Hood everything and everybody has a place in the grand scheme of things. It is not entirely the *things* which are real, but the *scheme*, and this scheme of things is perceived through the use of the imagination. It is, in fact, the writer's art which leads the reader's eye through these things and allows the eye to perceive the everlasting coherence.

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[13]Hugh Hood, "The Sportive Center of Saint Vincent de Paul," in *Around the Mountain*, pp. 11-12.