

**“A Reader’s Guide
to the Intersection of Time and Space”:
Urban Spatialization in Hugh Hood’s
*Around the Mountain***

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C RITICISM of Hugh Hood’s 1967 sketch cycle, *Around the Mountain: Scenes from Montréal Life*, has mostly concentrated on the author’s Romantic aesthetic strategies and has read the book as a religious and spiritual allegory deeply informed by Hood’s Catholicism and his admiration of the Romantics.¹ In particular, critics have noted Hood’s employment of Wordsworthian ‘spots of time’ at a number of points in the collection, and have remarked upon the fact that the first six stories represent an ascent up the mountain and then, after the narrator’s epiphanic moment at the top of the mountain in “Looking Down from Above” (103), the succeeding stories trace a descent down the mountain into what Susan Copoloff-Mechanic describes as “a fallen world, subject to time and decay” (59). Hood’s introduction to the 1994 edition, as well as his 1978 interview with Tim Struthers, works to ensure that the book is read in such a manner.² For example, in the introduction he writes:

I would propose that I had used the conventional methods of allegory known to Dante and accurately described by him, but pre-existing his time perhaps by centuries.... My book was meant to work along the lines of Christian allegory named by Dante in the letter to Can Grande della Scala. (19)

The insistence of Hood and his critics on the allegorical complexity of *Around the Mountain*, while perfectly valid and certainly understandable as a reaction to the book’s early reception as a piece of documentation rather than as a work of art,³ has the unfortunate effect of displacing our attention from the material conditions of the urban environment that the scenes document in such elaborate detail. This paper, then, will read *Around the*

Mountain as a response to a specific sociohistorical circumstance: the development of "a new and boundless urbanism, one which escapes the power of vision through its very dispersal" (Bukatman 122-23). *Around the Mountain* utilizes a number of strategies, which this paper will describe, to draw the reader's attention to alternative spatial practices and, thus, to render the dispersed urbanism of Montreal visible and comprehensible.

One of the remarkable aspects of *Around the Mountain* is its emphasis upon the palimpsestic nature of urban space. Scattered throughout the book are traces of past spatial practices, some that have been written over a number of times and some that have yet to be written over. The first site is a hook in the locker-room of the Laval Community Centre: "Boisvert, if that was his name, may long ago have died or moved away, but nobody will remove the name" above the hook (42). Other sites include the tavern that was previously a *caisse populaire*, a grocery store, and a warehouse (51), a disused movie theatre that now serves as a training school for the stage (72), the residential space south of Dorchester that was cleared to make way for the CBC Montreal headquarters (109-10), the old Montreal Royals baseball stadium (113), and the dock from which the Saguenay cruises used to depart (151). Similarly, while the traces have been erased, the narrator of "Looking Down from Above" imagines rue University before the city existed:

I thought how this slope must have been without concrete or asphalt or monolithic department store, wire fence, diggings in the road way, when deer ran on the mountain and silence began a hundred yards north of the river. (93)

These palimpsestic references are most concentrated in "The Village Inside." In describing Saint-Laurent the narrator observes,

Sometimes the overlay of city on remote village can be traced, building by building, along an old main street ... you can detect the ancient village inside the suburban growth, like an attenuated ghost, traceable by houses spotted along the street as you ride north ... the ghostly presence of the old town, which must have dozed peacefully in the August sun, remote from all urban troublings of the heart, at least until the mid-forties, to judge by the age of the buildings. (120-21)

Yet, as the narrator reminds us, these buildings had also once been new; in describing Victor Latourelle's childhood, the narrator imagines "the raw new collegiate buildings, ambitious and outsized, which we find there still" (124). Such traces of the past are of course inevitable, as Henri

Lefebvre points out: "Whatever is not invested in an appropriated space is stranded, and all that remain are useless signs and significations" (417). By drawing our attention to the "debris left by a retreating tide" (Lefebvre 417) of past spatial practices, *Around the Mountain* makes us aware of the ephemeral nature of human spatial practices, especially urbanization.⁴ Like the Latourelles,⁵ we often assume that our spatial practices are permanent, but such an assumption is troubled by the remains of the past that are scattered throughout the Montreal described by the text's narrators. The text's emphasis upon these traces makes us aware that, as Melvin Webber suggests, the city is "a social process operating in space" (89), not a static object. Furthermore, the emphasis upon the ruins of the past reminds us of the impermanence of our spatial practices, as the ruins of ancient civilizations on the north-western frontier of British India led a young Winston Churchill to meditate on the days when the British would no longer rule India.⁶

The representation of the city as a process is further emphasized by the text's attention in a number of stories to the margins of urban expansion, particularly in "The Sportive Centre of Saint Vincent de Paul," "Looking Down from Above," "The Village Inside," "A Green Child," and "The River Behind Things." "A Green Child" is set "at the extreme verge of the city" (129), and the main character, Thierry Desautels, is intrigued by the growth of the city: "The way the city grew and spread fascinated him. It sprouted like something alive. This month there were dozens of families living on crescents where last month there had been nothing" (137); he is (almost literally) enchanted by what the narrator of "The Village Inside" calls "the tidal-wave movement of an enormous city's advance in every direction" (122). This fascination is eroticized through its personification in the figure of the green woman. When Thierry exceeds the margins of urbanization he is unable to make sense of the spatial practices that he sees; the way that space is made meaningful in the city is not yet being practised here. The story takes place among the debris of an incoming tide; the "monstrous" ramps of the incomplete interchange are "at the moment an exercise in design without function, of the most alarming kind" (133). Without function, these ramps are useless signs and significations of future spatial practice; they have yet to be made meaningful, comprehensible. This is a space at the limits of signification. As the narrator of "The River Behind Things" suggests, space is only made meaningful through its use by humans: "The pleasure of the prospect depends upon the viewer and his sense of the appropriateness of the setting to certain forms of human action. Landscape has no special grace in itself" (160).

Yet for Thierry desire lies outside the signification of the city, in the body of the green woman who draws him "out of town, beyond the built-up areas" (137) into a space in which nothing makes sense. Here he enters into the Romantic discourse of the sublime, into a traumatic space in which he is overwhelmed by the absence of conventional, comfortable urban spatial practices. He feels "irrationally guilty" and panicky until he sees "the shopping centre and bus stop which he loved and needed" (136). He *can* make sense of those signs of the urban but his adventures beyond the margins are "too unusual and [significantly] revelatory" (136). By exceeding the space that is made significant by urban spatial practices, Thierry enters a space made significant by the Romantic discourses of the 'ghastly' and the 'peculiar' (138). In doing so, he is able to experience the "powerful emotions ... spiritual and religious awe ... [and] vastness and immensity" (Cuddon 929) that his normal spatial practice (taking the bus to and from work) does not allow.

Significantly, the "green child" is a woman. For by exceeding the determined and ordered space of the urban, Thierry enters *chora*, "an unordered space ... prior to the order and regulation such notions of space imply" (Lechte 100), a Platonic concept that, as Elizabeth Grosz argues, reproduces the Greek conception of woman as a "nameless, formless" incubator (50). *Chora* "is the space in which place is made possible, the chasm for the passage of faceless Forms into a spatialized reality, a dimensionless tunnel opening itself to spatialization, obliterating itself to make others possible and actual" (Grosz 51). It is the space that makes patriarchal spatialization possible, but in doing so, women are erased or, at the very least, marginalized. Thierry's encounter with the "green child" beyond the margins of the urban is an encounter with that which cannot be articulated or represented within the regulated and ordered space of the urban, for, as Teresa de Lauretis suggests in her brief reading of the founding tale of Zobeide in Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities*, "the city ... finally only inscribes woman's absence" (13).

The margins of the city, the point at which two different spatial practices are juxtaposed, are described on a number of occasions:

Lines of lights in darkness dotted the north side of the street; it grew open and cool and almost pastoral on that side, while to the south the lines of squat new brick buildings continued, a vaguely schizoid circumstance that had deeply impressed itself on Thierry's imagination. (130)

On your left there's nothing but dark space belonging to Saint-Michel de Laval, half-developed industrial park, I think ... There are

Dairy Queens closed for the winter, on our right, and used-car lots, small restaurants and raw new shopping centres all the way to Rivière des Prairies. (36)

There is always a margin to any urban space: "No matter how far east the buildings go there is space beyond" (133). Like the traces of the past, the "schizoid circumstance" that is the making visible of the contrast between the urban and what the urban is replacing foregrounds the production of the urban and thus challenges the city's status as always already existing, and therefore as permanent. It also, as is the case in "The River Behind Things," makes visible that which urbanization has destroyed or will destroy:

With this development the pastoral scene must inevitably be transformed. Already ribbon development, light industrial plants, distributing warehouses, shopping centres, real-estate development are creeping west and north along the service roads feeding the main highway. Some years from now the open land will be gone; this is inevitable and not to be deplored. What replaces the farms will in time acquire its own charm ... But the changes take some getting used to. (160)

Although the narrator welcomes urbanization, he is also aware of what is being lost. As a result, he is in a position "to give a kind of fossil-like existence to something that was in the process of being born and simultaneously passing away," as Hood describes his documentary urge in the introduction (18). The margins are the spaces in which that which is "being born and simultaneously passing away" is observable. They are spaces where it is possible to observe meaning being constructed. Furthermore, as Rob Shields comments, marginal spaces can provide an important site for critique and resistance:

Margins ... expose the relativity of the entrenched, universalising values of the centre, and expose the relativism of cultural identities which imply their shadow figures of every characteristic they have denied, rendered 'anomalous' or excluded. (277)

By making visible the process that produces and reproduces the urban, the text works to make the city, or more accurately the urban space, knowable. In doing so, it also represents a challenge to the unification of space that Guy Debord argues is the effect and condition of capitalist production, and which is "an extensive and intensive process of *banalization*" (165). The disjunction produced by the juxtaposition of different spatial practices at the margins disrupts the homogeneity that urbanism produces as its effect.

The most disruptive text in this regard is "The Village Inside," which represents *Around the Mountain's* most 'extensive and intensive' examination of the traces of past spatial practices and of the margins of the urban space. This story relates Victor Latourelle's effort to preserve his spatial practice from the urban expansion that surrounds him. The most remarkable passage of this story describes the juxtaposition of two quite different spatial practices:

[Victorian] houses like these, about ten of them set among gas stations and gravel yards, suggest the tidal-wave movement of an enormous city's advance in every direction, like debris surfacing from a sunken wreck ... It's an eerie sight, standing on rue Sainte-Croix, in front of the evident ghost of a nineteenth-century Québec village, to see overhead jet after jet slanting down and in towards the Dorval runways, almost without intervals between arrivals. You have the impression of one time superimposed on another, with both visibly present, something quite rare ... And nevertheless, oddity of oddities, these opposed patterns merge at one special point, in an extraordinarily graphic way ... 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. (122-23)

By creatively juxtaposing⁷ the rural and the urban, the text foregrounds that which must be destroyed in order for the urban to achieve the homogeneity which it demands and requires. It also delays the establishment of that homogeneity, that domestication of space that is the suburb. In particular, Victor Latourelle's refusal to wholly surrender to the capitalist logic of profit disrupts the commodification of space that David Harvey argues enables the consolidation of "space as universal, homogeneous, objective, and abstract" (177). Unlike his daughter, Victor refuses to participate in the process of "bring[ing] all space under the single measuring rod of money value" (Harvey 177), thus creating a sense of panic in his daughter, who describes the old farmhouse as "ridiculous and ugly ... an eyesore" (127). Other than the fact that she wishes to profit from the sale of the house, why would this old farmhouse appear to be an "eyesore"? One answer may be that it stands as a signifier of other spatial practices, whose meaning is constituted by the ability to sustain life rather than "money value." It asserts a history of past spatial practices and

social relations that urbanism works to efface. Writing at approximately the same time as Hood, Debord argues that

urbanism destroys cities⁸ and reestablishes a *pseudo-countryside* which lacks the natural relations of the old countryside ... The "new towns" of the technological pseudo-peasantry clearly inscribe on the landscape their rupture with the historical time on which they are built; their motto could be: "On this spot nothing will ever happen, and *nothing ever has.*" (177)

Victor Latourelle's farmhouse is a marker emphasizing historical continuity rather than rupture. It reminds all who notice it that something has happened, and thus that something new *could* happen. It is a reminder of the possibility of different spatial practices and social relations. As such, it reinserts human agency into the remorseless inevitability of urbanism.

In addition to focusing on the traces of past spatial practices and the margins of urbanization, the text's narrators utilize a number of other strategies in order to render the urban space comprehensible; in particular, they seek out high points from which they can gaze down upon the city and they employ the *dérive*, a subversive spatial strategy, and *détournement*, a subversive aesthetic strategy. A great deal of criticism of *Around the Mountain* focuses on the sixth story, "Looking Down from Above," suggesting that the placement of its final mountaintop vision⁹ at, as Hood himself observes, "the exact centre of the text" (11), is central to the allegorical readings of the text. As Tim Struthers argues, "The summit of human achievement, the climax in man's temporal search for transcendental perfection, for the Divine Vision, for the goodness of God, occurs at the close" of this story (116). By focusing on the text's relationship to the urban, it is possible to add another element to readings of this powerful, empowering moment, for as Michel de Certeau observes, the ascension to a point high above the city transforms one into a "voyeur-god":

To be lifted to the summit of the World Trade Center is to be lifted out of the city's grasp. One's body is no longer clasped by the streets that turn and return it according to an anonymous law.... His elevation transfigures him into a voyeur ... It transforms the bewitching world by which one was "possessed" into a text that lies before one's eyes. It allows one to read it, to be a solar Eye, looking down like a god ... [it] makes the complexity of the city readable, and immobilizes its opaque mobility in a transparent text. (92-93)

Such a perspective makes the city legible, and allows us to temporarily

evade being written by the urban narrative. The particularity of the view, then, is significant in that this desire for a transcendent moment, however ephemeral, can be read as a response to a specific sociohistorical problem: our inability to comprehend the urban spaces in which we live and by which we are contained and made meaningful.¹⁰ It can be read as an attempt to create a cognitive map of the city, thus "enabl[ing] a situational representation on the part of the individual subject to that vaster and properly unrepresentable totality which is the ensemble of society's structures as a whole" (Jameson 51).

Of course, the problem is that such a moment only represents a temporary evasion of the panoptical gaze of the city's power structures. As a result, other strategies are needed. The situationists,¹¹ a group of French artists and intellectuals including Guy Debord, employed two related strategies in the Paris of the 1950s, *dérive* and *détournement*, to create what Debord called "constructed situations" which would provide "an 'ambient milieu' for a 'game of events'; each would change its setting, and allow itself to be changed by it." By transforming their experience of the city from "a scrim of commodities and power" to "a field of 'psycho-geography,'" they would be able to "understand, and transform, 'the specific effects of the geographical environment, consciously organized or not, on the emotions and behavior of individuals'" (Marcus 164). The *dérive* is "a drift down city streets in search of signs of attraction or repulsion" (Marcus 168), and the *dérive* plays a crucial role in many of the stories in *Around the Mountain*. For example, in "The Village Inside" the narrator explores the back roads of the island of Montreal by bicycle, in the process stumbling onto Victor Latourelle's house; the narrator of "Looking Down from Above" walks to the top of the mountain; Thierry Desautels is only able to go beyond the margins of the city when he borrows his uncle's car (137); the narrator of "Le Grand Déménagement" aimlessly drifts through the city until he agrees to help Rabbi Pachsman move a sink, which is an act of *dérive* in that he acts spontaneously with no purpose of his own; and the narrator of "The River Behind Things" stumbles upon the pastoral scene along the river by aimlessly driving along Highway 37 (161). Also significant is the narrator's encounter with the gypsies in "Light Shining out of Darkness." As Tom tells him, "We have always been travellers, free, moving" (57). Similarly, *détournement* provides a means of transforming the artifacts of the city "into contexts of one's own devise" (Marcus 168). While wandering around the docks, the narrator of "Predictions of Ice" transforms the space into the setting of a spy or detective movie (153); he '*détourns*' a space of trade and work into

a space of adventure, of play, and in so doing he explores aspects of the city that he barely knew existed, or had only imagined. *Dérive* and *détournement* as they are employed in *Around the Mountain* allow the narrators to make the urban space comprehensible for themselves and for their readers. More significantly, they allow the narrators to stumble across palimpsestic sites and to go to the margins of the city, and occasionally beyond. They are the means by which the text is able to make visible the process of urbanization.

By delineating the limits of the totalizing narrative of urbanization, *Around the Mountain* works to make the city comprehensible to its inhabitants, and to 'disalienate' them. Fredric Jameson argues that the process of disalienation in the city "involves the practical reconquest of a sense of place and the construction or reconstruction of an articulated ensemble which can be retained in memory and which the individual subject can map and remap along the moments of mobile, alternative trajectories" (51). The wanderings of the narrators and their emphasis upon the traces of past spatial practices and the juxtaposition of spatial practices at the city's margins works to recuperate such a sense of place. Furthermore, by making visible the process of urbanization the text employs one of the strategies that Jameson identifies as a means of disalienation: the writing of "narratives which are *about* the processes of reproduction ... the whole technology of the production and reproduction of the simulacrum"¹² (37). *Around the Mountain* enacts "a different way of seeing, a different interpretive analytics" (Soja, "Heterotopologies" 15), through its initiation of Foucauldian heterotopological¹³ reading practices: a scrutinizing and questioning of "the implications and possibilities of the slips, exceptions, oddities lurking at the very limits of the system that defines for us what is thinkable, sayable, knowable" (Genocchio 43). It enacts a radical critique of urban spatialization by producing space "as transient, contestory, plagued by lapses and ruptured sites" (Genocchio 43), and thus anticipates much of the critical urban theory, and, more explicitly and self-consciously radical artistic texts, produced in the last few decades.¹⁴

While it may appear that the reading of *Around the Mountain* in which this essay has been engaged is necessarily in contradistinction to earlier critics' emphasis on the text's Romanticism, in conclusion I would suggest that, in fact, Romanticism provides the text's narrators with the language in which to describe the process that they can only dimly perceive. Lefebvre speculates that "the Romantic movement" may have been "shot through [with] — and hence actuated [by]" the "transitional moment that separated abstract spatiality [i.e. capitalist spatiality, the "space

of accumulation" (49)] from a more unmediated perception" of space (290). The book's final scene, a sublime vision of "a solitary black figure" in the mist with "the city inexistent" (165), like the evocation of the ghastly and the peculiar at the conclusion of "A Green Child," is an articulation of a transcendent, 'more unmediated' perception of space that the seemingly inevitable logic of urban expansionism, which the rest of the book carefully documents, is slowly destroying. It is at once an appeal to the power of the transcendent, to Nature, and a mourning of the continuing loss of that power due to the spatial practices of capitalism. The text's heterotopological focus, dense detail,¹⁵ and Romantic ideology and aesthetic strategy combine to produce what Hood describes in the introduction (written more than 25 years after the book's initial publication) as "a reader's guide to the intersection of time and space" (22).

NOTES

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¹ See, for example, the work of John Mills, Tim Struthers, Kent Thompson, Keith Garebian, and Susan Copoloff-Mechanic.

² The influence of the introduction upon readings of the book is surely accentuated by the fact that the introduction is much longer than any of the individual stories.

³ Peter Gzowski, for example, wrote: "[Hood] goes out and looks at things, and he writes down what he saw in them, and no fancy word-merchandising gets in the way" (70). Such a reading is in keeping with the book's function as a souvenir for the tourists visiting Montreal during Expo '67. In his introduction, Hood writes: "It was meant to appeal to tourists visiting the city during Expo summer, and to residents of Montréal who might wish to acquire a souvenir of those heady months more lasting than a T-shirt or stuffed animal bearing the embroidered legend 'Man and His World.' I wrote the book from mixed motives, one of them purely opportunistic" (9).

⁴ These spatial practices are, of course, marked by ethnicity and language, and unsurprisingly a number of *Around the Mountain's* sketches explore the demarcation of Montreal's spaces by language and ethnicity. "Around Theatres," for instance, describes the geographical segregation of Montreal's cultural life into English and French spaces (69-72). "One Way North and South," with its description of an *indépendantiste* riot in Parc Lafontaine most explicitly addresses the linguistic conflicts of the late 1960s.

⁵ "[The Latourelles] had always done so [that is, lived off their farm], or so it must have seemed because at that time the house was already close to seventy years old" (124).

⁶ He wrote: "These relics of an early civilisation, long since overthrown and forgotten, cannot fail to excite interest and awaken reflection ... and they also lead us to speculations of the future, till we wonder whether the traveller shall some day inspect, with unconcerned composure, the few scraps of stone and iron, which may indicate the British occupation of India" (95).

⁷ Edward Soja argues that in order to represent the simultaneities of geographies, which is rendered difficult by the sequential nature of language, "All that we can do is re-collect and creatively juxtapose, experimenting with assertions and insertions of the spatial against the prevailing grain of time" (*Postmodern 2*).

⁸ The narrator of "The Village Inside" writes: "the city has remorselessly enveloped the identity of one village after another" (119).

⁹ "The view becomes staggering as you go out farther, a wide wide vision of the northern half of the city, the country beyond, and the ridge of hills, the first upthrust of the Laurentians, thirty miles north. You have the sense of the world dropping away from you ... It looked from where I stood as if you could step in a single stride onto the edge of the runway, or into the next world" (102).

¹⁰ There is a similar scene at the conclusion of "The Sportive Centre of Saint Vincent de Paul," although it is not given as much allegorical weight: "Coming back into town, the approach slopes sharply down and there is a fine view of the river and the lights along the dark shore. You almost seem to swoop down like a plane, and the lights of the town rush to meet you and the dark water somehow draws your eyes" (46).

¹¹ They called themselves the Lettrists until 1957.

¹² Jameson is talking about different types of reproduction here, namely, video technology etc., but I think the idea is appropriate to this text.

¹³ Foucault's concept of the heterotopia is outlined in "Of Other Spaces" and *The Order of Things*.

¹⁴ See Genocchio (43) or Hebdige, for example.

¹⁵ Hood notes: "I'm continually mystified by its [the book's] insistence on the actual" (22).

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