FIELD OF VISION

Hugh Hood and the Tradition of Wordsworth

Anthony John Harding

ROMANTICISM, ITS CRITICS have suggested, was locked in a futile struggle against time. The elusive beauty which was sought by a Wordsworth or a Keats mocked the steady running of the hour, and could be described only as it disappeared from view, as we can perceive a subatomic particle only by the track it leaves on the screen of an electroscope. The realistic novelist — so the argument often ran — could not stay for such phantoms of sublimity, but must make time the very essence of his or her work, paying no attention to Romantic notions of the eternal moment, the moment out of time. Romantic poets, it was argued, wrote about the evanescent, the unrealizable; the novelist wrote about life as it is lived.

Fortunately for Canadian writing, Hugh Hood in *The New Age* has rejected this dichotomy between "dreamy" Romanticism and "down-to-earth" realism. By making his narrator a self-confessed Wordsworthian, and a reader of Coleridge and Blake, Hood has claimed for himself and his readers the tradition of the central English Romantic poets, and embarked upon a major revisionary reading of Romanticism. The aim of this essay is to determine how far the three parts of *The New Age* so far published (*The Swing in the Garden*, *A New Athens*, and *Reservoir Ravine*)[1] have enlarged our understanding of Romanticism, and established a place for it in Canadian cultural life.

Most modern critics of Romanticism agree that the Romantic feeling towards time is not altogether one of outright fear or distrust, but rather the sense that time is the matrix, the essentially creative and beneficent medium in which our perceptions are formed.[2] In terms of Christian mythology, it is the rapture of Adam and Eve at learning that God will bring final good even out of so potentially tragic an event as the Fall and the loss of Eden, contrasted with their earlier despair at that loss:

> O goodness infinite, goodness immense!
> That all this good of evil shall produce,
> And evil turn to good. . . .[3]

Instead of Eden and the Shechinah, we have human history and the light of common day — and the substitution is not altogether something to grieve at. Time, seen in this manner, permits humanity to participate in the redemptive process foreseen by the archangel Michael — particularly through the creative powers of the artist, the poet, the historian.

In an interview with Robert Fulford broadcast in 1974, Hood suggested that the moral universe of Canadians is essentially postlapsarian, as that of Americans is Edenic:

> I think there is Canadianness, and I really do think there is a Canadian style. I think sometimes it's a more blameworthy, a more After-the-Fall moral style. The Americans are all questing after Eden, and I think every American would like to be in Eden.... we're so conscious of the Fall in Canada. We always seem to accept the limit in the possible because we know we're in a fallen state. That's the kind of thing I'm interested in.[4]

For just this reason Matthew Goderich, Hood's chief narrator, is at pains to stress the humanness of what he is doing, its time- and history-conditioned quality. Works of art, in the words of Matthew's father, are "an extension of our agency" (*Swing*, p. 119), they will have the marks of the workshop on them, the grainy vitality of a Cézanne, as their claim to authenticity, their signature: *artificer humanus fecit*. Goderich's career as an art historian begins in his study of stone houses in Ontario's Loyalist County, rather than in the university lectures on the (for him) remote Watteau and Rubens, accessible only in photographic reproductions. News of the discovery of the cave paintings at Lascaux almost stuns him with the revelation that art is more than thirty thousand years old, coeval with humanity itself. The brilliant Maura Boston, Matthew's friend at Victoria College, deeply versed in *Fearful Symmetry*, sees all art as revelation, all literature as theology — but Matt's comment on Maura's vision is "there's an essential piece of the structure missing" (*Athens*, p. 36). We are surely invited to guess that what is missing from this complete, unified vision is our own postlapsarian incompleteness.

Goderich's Romanticism, then, is not of the apocalyptic kind, the Romanticism that T. E. Hulme unjustly called "spilt religion," but the Romanticism that looks before and after, that is as entranced by the processes of becoming as by the mysteries of being. This Romanticism is not impatient for sudden revelations of absolute truth and beauty, but uncovers its values progressively, through patient study of time and its structures. Memory is essential to it, but not the unselective, purely linear memory of the chronicler: it is not the sequence of events that matters to it, but the correspondences, connections and transformations lurking within the events, history's cunning corridors. Wordsworth's "The days gone by / Return upon me almost from the dawn / Of life"[5] can in this sense be applied to all human history, as well as to the story of one life, for to the Romantic

memory is not a mere chronicler of sense-impressions but a power that continually supplies and shapes the materials of our individual and national consciousness. Without the knowledge that this shaping memory can give we are lost, literally un-conscious. What Roger Shattuck remarks of Wordsworth — "To notice was for him an act of imagination: forming an image so strong and integral it transformed the world" — is, at key points in the narrative, true of Matthew Goderich. Yet *The New Age* is not a portrait of a man born out of his time and place, nostalgically yearning for Grasmere and the lost Wordsworthian wholeness. Hood's point is precisely that Canadians, like other moderns, have inherited the Romantic-Wordsworthian task of reunifying a dislocated world. To borrow Shattuck's terms once more, *The New Age* is "the portrait of a consciousness resolved to assimilate its surroundings as a fully conscious expression of the universe, as the locus of a whole life" (Shattuck's version of Wordsworth's achievement in *The Prelude*).[6] Canadian dislocation and *anomie* constitute a particular, perhaps exemplary case of the post-Enlightenment dilemma.[7]

PERHAPS NO OTHER new-created country is so much a product of history's quirks and U-turns as Canada, which is why Hood's novel sequence can claim to be *about* Canada in a fuller sense than most previous Canadian works. Decisions taken elsewhere — in Paris, London, Washington — have had so significant an impact on Canada's development that some have been tempted to dismiss all talk of Canadian nationhood as empty rhetoric. The truest Canadian style, it would then follow, would be some form of Dadaism, Hans Arp's response to the fate of his native Alsace, which was claimed alternately by France and by Germany as the chances of war pushed it first in one direction, then in the other. Hood takes the different route of acknowledging the exterior determinants on Canada's development, while arguing that they still do not altogether invalidate the sense of possibilities, of alternative futures, that has characterized the Canadian psyche in some of its manifestations.

He achieves this by revitalizing the favourite Romantic analogy between the personal development of the individual and the historical development of the state.[8] While giving full play to his narrator's sense of his own inner life, Hood shows at the same time Goderich's acute awareness of the determinants placed upon him by his political and economic environment — by Toronto, by North Rosedale, the CPR, Canadian Catholicism. Goderich is no mere cipher in some sociological blue book, however: the point is that *he* can see, *he* can know.

> We want to tell what we have seen, and more than that we assign values in the course of our narrative. Being is Being Born, moving through the seed to the womb to the go-cart to the coffin, always human, always free though always constrained,

> always entering into new knowledge, retelling it, testifying to its truth, guaranteeing it. (*Ravine*, p. 203)

Wordsworth's "something evermore about to be" seems present to the narrator's mind here, and so too does something like Heidegger's concept of "the human existent," *Dasein*, of which John Macquarrie remarks "*Dasein* is never complete in its being. To exist is always to be on the way . . . constituted by possibilities rather than properties."[9]

If one image conveys this Romantic understanding of being-in-time more than any other it is that of the path, track or (sometimes) labyrinth; in particular, the strange trick that paths have of returning us to the place we started from. As individuals, we like to think we travel in straight lines: history tells us we travel in circles, or in spirals. When James Joyce left Dublin in 1902 he was travelling towards Ireland, not away from it. The white arms of roads leading Stephen Dedalus towards Europe are the white arms of Eileen in the first chapter of the *Portrait*. Like Wordsworth at Tintern, we are perpetually recrossing our own paths, and all we see is *déjà vu*.

There is nothing intrinsically reassuring about this: the experience can be restorative, as at Tintern, or oppressive, involving more "sad perplexity" than "cheerful faith." Its value depends upon the imaginative intelligence that is brought to it — without that, it is no more illuminating than Alice's baffling inability to find a path away from the house that doesn't immediately return her to the house again. "We assign values in the course of our narrative." Matt Goderich sometimes benefits from the telescoping of time, as when he stands before the Master of Alkmaar's seven panels in the Rijksmuseum and discovers knowledge he didn't know he had, knowledge that had been lying in wait until this moment of its fulfilment. And sometimes the experience is mystifying and troubling, as when he glimpses his schoolroom of forty years ago on a late afternoon walk, and his importunate demand for reassurance and Wordsworthian restoration is met only by a sense of "perpetual loss, paralysis of will" (*Ravine*, p. 219).

After banishment from Eden, however, the Wordsworthian knows that the only sane course is to accept the substitution of earth itself for the lost paradise, or still more radically, to make earth itself one's Eden:

> whither shall I turn,
> By road or pathway, or through trackless field,
> Up hill or down, or shall some floating thing
> Upon the river point me out my course?
> (*Prelude* 1, ll. 27-30)

Imagination brings together the crossings of the paths where meaning waits, aligns the corridors of history so that meaning comes down to us, sometimes

bewilderingly, sometimes with the force of illumination. There is no choice but to do it this way: there are no more Mount Sinais to climb.

Matt's infant dreams are blended, not with the voice of Derwent, but with the traffic of the CPR line that borders his parents' back yard. Where another writer would see opportunities for parody, Hood keeps our attention on the object as it really is. The CPR line running through North Rosedale is first of all an irreducible fact, neither holy nor unholy but one that is woven into the texture of many thousands of lives, as indeed was — and is — the River Derwent.

Later, Matt visits Tintern and finds that many more paths meet there now than even Wordsworth could have envisaged. The episode beautifully illustrates Hood's understanding of the spiral or cyclical nature of Wordsworthian time. Matt Goderich, drawn by Wordsworth's account of what happened to him as he recrossed his own path near Tintern, visits the spot — like many others before him and since — and tries to retrace the very footsteps of Wordsworth and his sister.

> We decided that the earlier travellers had ascended the hillside southeast of the abbey buildings, so we looked around and sighted the elegant small bridge that crosses the river a couple of hundred yards north of the abbey. We wandered across the bridge, admiring the serene flow of the river as we stood above it looking down from the bridge. Then we followed a track along the east bank, climbing at quite a steep angle into woods. In a few minutes we'd gotten into thick greenery and were on high ground, on a hillside which rises maybe 700 feet. Most of the way we were in cover, on a straight, evenly graded walkway.
>
> In ten minutes we stopped, turned and looked down upon the ruined abbey, supposing we had found our way to the exact prospect that the poet had gazed down upon just as he began to conceive his poem, 160 years before. We could see sportive hedgerows. After taking in the beauty of the prospect we began to wonder about the walkway which had led us up here, a path of some sort, mighty wide, man-made perhaps.
>
> The damn thing was an abandoned rail-line. (*Athens*, p. 49)

Then in an even more time-warping moment, Matt and Edie, in the sepulchral emptiness of an unused railway tunnel, feel the same *frisson* as Wordsworth felt as he descended into the grave-like dungeon at Cockermouth Castle. (A further richness of meaning is added by the fact that it was at Goodrich Castle, a few miles north of Tintern, that Wordsworth spoke to the little girl described in "We Are Seven." There is, it seems, a Goderich-Goodrich connection, in which the main link is the notion of the continuity of the human enterprise, the indivisibility of living and dead.) When railways were new, Wordsworth loathed them, but to those who come after him an unused railway is already an antiquity, part of the landscape, more truly an antiquity, in a sense, than Tintern Abbey itself, which is constantly renewed by Wordsworth's poem. The abandoned railway line, with its empty, sepulchral tunnel, becomes Hood's image of existence-in-time-past

(not, he is at pains to emphasize, of non-existence), uncreated, virtually, because now untravelled, but still continuous with Matt's present path. What has once existed cannot cease to exist: "History traces the footpaths of the Divine Being" (*Athens*, p. 11). Hood rejects in this image the dark belief visited upon Forster's Mrs. Moore, in the Marabar Caves: "Everything exists, nothing has value." In the continual refashioning of our world by the paths we take, we *bestow* value, and the artist more than anyone has the power of doing this.

So Wordsworth, again, roaming the hills in "the blessed hours / Of early love," and coming upon the spot where once a murderer had hung in chains on the gibbet — the spot from which Wordsworth himself as a boy, conscious of this horrible association, had fled in terror — now finds even this dark remembrance of fear and panic enhances the "radiance" of the place for him, because that fear, and the subsequent visionary sight on the bleak moorland, is part of him: his memory and imagination have fed upon the experience, uncovered its particular meaning. The power which shaped Wordsworth the man has brought good out of what had once been evil (*Prelude* XII, ll. 225-271).

WRITERS ON THE PICTURESQUE, such as William Gilpin, would often rank beauty spots in order of aesthetic value, much as the *Guide Michelin* ranks restaurants: this view is nearly perfect, that is imperfect but worthwhile, a third is quite uninteresting. Wordsworth, scorning this cultivation of the eye at the expense of other human faculties, democratized geography. Not the "objective beauty" of the spot, but its interweaving with a human life, is the source of its value, its visionary meaning.

There is no trickery in this, no literary hocus-pocus. Some readers of Wordsworth have felt that, if anything, he explains too much, is over-particular. Keats, in his jibe about Wordsworth's "Matthew, with a bough of wilding in his hand," means to suggest that Wordsworth deliberately chooses images that are prosaic, devoid of literary association, images that resonate only within a particular experiental context. For Wordsworth, it is not "fields of Arcady," or even "fields," but: "A single Field which I have looked upon." Particularity, the opposite of Johnson's "just representations of general nature," is the very fabric of Wordsworthian Romanticism; without it you cannot "see into the life of things," a notion which in Hood's view is closely related to the Thomistic, and Joycean, understanding of the *quidditas* or "whatness" of a thing.

> I have . . . written some stories about a kind of experience close to that of the artist: metaphysical thought. . . . It is the seeing-into-things, the capacity for meditative abstraction, that interests me about philosophy, the arts and religious practice. I love most in painting an art which exhibits the transcendental element dwelling

> in living things. I think of this as true *super-realism.* And I think of Vermeer, or among American artists of Edward Hopper, whose paintings of ordinary places, seaside cottages, a roadside snack bar and gasoline station, have touched some level of my own imagination which I can only express in fictional images.... The kind of knowing which Wordsworth called "reason in its most exalted mood" and which Coleridge exalted as creative artistic imagination, *does the same thing* as that power which Saint Thomas Aquinas thought of as the active intellect.[10]

The pivotal instance of vision, seeing-into-things, in *The New Age* as we now have it is probably the moment at the opening of *A New Athens* when Goderich, walking along Highway 29 north of "Stoverville," crosses a strange embankment, a pair of close parallel paths leading off into the far distance spatially, but temporally leading Matt right back into his own past. "This place intersected with that time.... I knew where I'd been, where I was now, what funeral ground I'd impinged upon" (*Athens*, p. 18). But this moment of vision is not an incommunicable, evanescent, purely private experience. The meeting of road and of those parallel tracks is for Goderich the opening of a tunnel in time, "that strange junction where an object turns into a subject, where classification and science leave off and imagination and history begin" (*Athens*, p. 18). Imagination *and* history; because Wordsworthian imagination, if "egotistical," is not solipsistic, it does not behave as though its awareness of the present moment came from nowhere and led nowhere. What does it mean to say that something "belongs to history"? The railroad that intersected with Highway 49, and whose "funeral" Matt Goderich now recalls, is of far more than merely incidental interest, the insignificant fact that accidentally triggers a nostalgic association. Like Tintern Abbey itself, it was the expression of the aspirations of a community, their political and economic structure and resources, and even in its demise, in 1952, it continued to affect human lives by the traces it left, both literal and figurative. In "noticing" the railroad, as Wordsworth "noticed" his field, Goderich both uncovers and bestows its significant form.

Wordsworth and Coleridge never made the error of rejecting the historical reality of a thing in favour of its idealized form. Coleridge, according to one of his more insightful nineteenth-century critics, "denounced as equally heretical the attempts to exclude either the 'ideal' or the historical element of Christianity."[11] Christianity's progressive development of spiritual significance out of historical actuality, one might add, was the Romantics' model for the understanding of human history at all its levels. Wordsworth's rejection of Cambridge, and his admiration for the democratic beliefs of the French republicans, resulted — as he well knew — from his love for the egalitarian community he had known intimately during his boyhood in Hawkshead. Hood is at his most Wordsworthian when using one of Matt's apparently commonplace boyhood recollections to reconstruct an entire town or segment of Ontario society, complete with its class

snobbery, its preferred ways of trading, investing, building, all the underpinnings of what a sociologist would call its "value-system." But where the sociologist eliminates the personal in order to draw general conclusions about socioeconomic conditions, the novelist reunites personal and imaginative life with political life. Hood's dominant motif of the road, railroad, and navigable river enables him to traverse this false boundary with ease. Nothing is more clearly a product of economic forces than a railroad or highway; and nothing is more immediately a part of everyday life. (The St. Lawrence Seaway and the CPR are admittedly frequent motifs in Canadian writing, but that is only to say that they are ripe for demythologizing.) The manifold causes that bring Matt and Edie together in 1952 at the last run of the Stoverville, Westport and Lake Superior Rail Road are traced out by Matt in *A New Athens* not from egotism, but from his entirely credible desire to comprehend the cultural and political powers that have shaped his life. Yet Hood avoids historical determinism, knowing that history and the historical imagination create the concepts by which they illuminate, they do not disinter them from the granitic mausoleum of some historical *datum*: "we assign values in the course of our narrative."

In the third novel of the sequence, we learn that a similar preoccupation with value as conditioned by time had gripped Andrew Goderich, Matt's father, even on his wedding day in 1925, as he replayed in his mind a conversation with his German colleague Aaronsohn: "Valuation seemed to imply the necessity of concepts. . . . To be valuable will be to exist as issuing in concept; to evaluate will be to form concepts" (*Ravine*, p. 136). Through Aaronsohn and Andrew Goderich, then, what was in 1925 "advanced" European thought filters down to the young Matt, but more as a series of questions than a set of answers. Although Andrew Goderich later describes himself as an axiologist, he leaves it to his son to make his own discoveries about value, usually *a posteriori*, and sometimes, he admits, embarrassingly late in the day. If Goderich *père* is a Coleridge or an Emerson, asking all the right questions, Goderich *fils* is the Wordsworth or Thoreau who lives and experiences some of the right answers.

THE TRADITION OF WORDSWORTH is, then, one of the determinants of *The New Age*; but criticism of the kind I have attempted has to beware of mistaking the process for the product. To be preoccupied with becoming at the expense of being, with history and process at the expense of imagination and *quidditas*, can be fearfully destructive, as Hood knows. An early story of Hood's, written, I think, to exorcise this past-obsessed, regressive tendency in his Romanticism, centres on Arthur Merlin, a Prufrock-like, past-obsessed, ghost-ridden man, his name evidently ironic since he is short on both courage and

wisdom. At the story's climax, Merlin addresses the woman he loves in what for him are words of sincere praise: "everything that you do is fixed by the tradition, and that's what makes you a beauty. Your inheritance."[12] She is understandably repelled by this morbid inability to see her as existing in time present, a desirable, sexually alive woman. The danger in doing what I have tried to do in this paper — relate Hood's work to the Romantic tradition which it draws upon — is the danger Arthur Merlin falls prey to, that of confounding the product in the process, the perception of the thing-as-it-is in the perception of the thing-as-it-has-come-into-being. Any criticism that addresses itself to the exploration of a "tradition," must beware of saying to any writer "everything that you do is fixed by the tradition," a self-evident absurdity. Our sense of the Wordsworth tradition is considerably widened by *The New Age*, but in reading it what we experience is a refreshing return to the living source, not a minimal endgame largely predetermined by some other players' initial moves. Hood's Romantic inheritance cannot help but enrich his work, especially for any reader who accepts his belief that we are still in the middle of the Romantic movement, but the thing-as-it-is, the three parts of *The New Age* as they now stand, is no late-blossoming flower on a transplanted tree. It displaces Grasmere and Derwent, as Wordsworth displaced Elysium and the pit of Erebus; in localizing and particularizing Canadian understanding in Canadian geography and Canadian experience, it simultaneously reveals the locality, the humanity, and the contemporary relevance of the Romantic enterprise itself.

NOTES

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[2] The most vigorous opponent of this orthodox or "canonical" way of reading Wordsworth is Harold Bloom: see his remarks on the "Intimations" Ode in *The Anxiety of Influence* (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1973), pp. 9-10.

[3] John Milton, *Poetical Works*, ed. Douglas Bush (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1966, rpt. 1970), p. 455; *Paradise Lost*, Book XII, ll. 469-71.

[4] Robert Fulford, "An Interview with Hugh Hood," *Tamarack Review*, 66 (1975), 66-67.

[5] William Wordsworth, *The Prelude or Growth of a Poet's Mind*, ed. Ernest de Selincourt, second edition, rev. Helen Darbishire (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1959), 1850 text, Book XII, ll. 277-79. All further references to *The Prelude*, 1850 text, are given in text by book and line number.

[6] Roger Shattuck, "This Must Be the Place: From Wordsworth to Proust," in David Thorburn and Geoffrey Hartman, eds., *Romanticism: Vistas, Instances, Continuities* (Ithaca and London: Cornell Univ. Press, 1973), pp. 185, 196.

[7] Hood has argued that Canadians have yet to resolve for themselves "the doctrinal and philosophical battles of the Enlightenment": see his essay "Moral Imagina-

tion: Canadian Thing," in William Kilbourn, ed., *Canada: A Guide to the Peaceable Kingdom* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1970), p. 33.

[8] Thomas Arnold, for example, in his essay "On the Social Progress of States," speaks of "a natural period in history, marking the transition of every country from what I may call a state of childhood to manhood" (*The Miscellaneous Works* (London: B. Fellowes, 1845), p. 81). The related notion of the childhood and maturity of the *human race* became almost a commonplace of criticism after J. G. von Herder expounded it in *Vom Geist der Ebräischen Poesie*: "Es ist längst bemerkt, dass das menschliche Geschlecht in seinen Zeitaltern und Revolutionen den Abwechslungen unsres Menschenlebens nachzugehen scheint; (wenigstens dichtet sichs der Mensch also) und wie die Empfindungs- Sprach- und Sehart eines Kindes nicht die Art des erwachsnen Mannes ist; wer wollte von Nationen im Kindheitszustande der Welt unsre erfahrne Geläufigkeit und Flüchtigkeit in Bildern, den Eckel und die Feinheit unsres abgebrauchten Herzens fodern?" (*Sämmtliche Werke*, 33 vols. (Berlin: Weidmannsche Buchhandlung, 1877-1913), XII (1880), 8-9).

[9] John Macquarrie, *Martin Heidegger* (Richmond, Va.: John Knox Press, 1968), pp. 12-13.

[10] Hugh Hood, "Sober Colouring: The Ontology of Super-Realism," *Canadian Literature*, 49 (Summer 1971), pp. 30-31.

[11] F. J. A. Hort, "Coleridge," in W. G. Clark, ed., *Cambridge Essays* (London: J. W. Parker and Son, 1856), p. 328.

[12] "Fallings from us, Vanishings," in *Flying a Red Kite* (Toronto: Ryerson, 1962), p. 16.

CHIAROSCURO

Judith Harway

As sun slips lower, I can see
the road-gate and the purple hills across
the county line. But not our pastures,
not the River Dearing: all the mossy
bottomland gives in to darkness first.

Shifting lines of light and shadow dust
the plain with possibility. I work the pump,
I stare into the dusk, imagining
broad fields of corn and sugar beet. The cows
jostle and drain the half-filled trough.

With this handle, I plait ropes of water
binding them to me. I've always understood
that cows see auras, nameless colours, blurry
borders for the world. I want to bend and drink
dark water with them, feel my muzzle steam,