

GRACE

The Novels of Hugh Hood

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If I were a poet, I would write about how things are full of the Holy Spirit, without reference to the Spirit, just to the illuminations in the things. Now I think of it, that's what I try to do in fiction, give the sense of how things are inflated like footballs by the indwelling Spirit.¹

IN THE NEARLY TWELVE YEARS following his first publication,² Hugh Hood has produced a body of fiction including some fifty short stories and, as of Spring, 1970, three novels. The range, vigour and richness of his writing grows with every publication. His latest novel, *A Game of Touch*³, confirms him as the steadiest viewer of ourselves, in Canada, now.

The ultimate concern of Hood's fiction is the presence of grace that the epigraph alludes to; it is as a chronicler of the Higher Things (to the exclusion, it is assumed, of the Here and Now) that he is generally viewed by the literary public. It is no accident that when his *White Figure, White Ground* came to be taught at my college, it appeared in a Religious Knowledge course taught by a psychologist rather than an English syllabus. There is some danger in interpreting the whole of a writer's work in terms of his deepest concern; it can lead to the obscuring of the means and the various strengths of those means by which a writer asserts his profoundest thoughts. To find in Wordsworth only the secularist mystic, and to overlook that delineation of the English landscape linking him with Constable and Turner is to miss out on some pleasurable readings. Hood's fiction is ulti-

mately "spiritual" and "religious" in its thrust; I wish neither to deny or undervalue that. In a decade that has seen such prose fiction as *Beautiful Losers*, *Place D'Armes*, *Cocksure* and *The Edible Woman*, Hood's fiction resembles MacLennan's in its sense of a larger backdrop against which everyday human activities, tragic and otherwise, are played. This larger vision accords to those activities a meaning and value beyond the quotidian. Perhaps I am just saying that Hood is not a post-modern in his sense of life — he sees it as grim, joyous, brutal, peaceful, but never as merely silly or absurd. His characters are haunted by the past, they are prone to fantasizing their way around reality, but they possess minds and bodies which struggle, at times successfully, to live really and presently. It is not that they or their creator are unaware of the Horror or the Void; it is that they do not often dwell there. Yet they are as real, their feelings and responses as true, their lives as representative of the tenor of their times as those of the deranged and fragmented who stalk the pages of the narratives mentioned.

It may be — the returns are not in yet — it may be that the entire post-modern element in our cultural experience is the truth about living in the present, and that life is surreal, delusional, macabre and absurd. Yet it is also possible that the post-modern fiction of the sort I have mentioned — the fiction born of Beckett and Burroughs rather than Joyce — has ignored too many of the facts of life to be in touch with most times in the lives of most people. To invoke Joyce as I have may appear perverse, but a little reflection upon the love lavished upon Poldy Bloom and the mythic resonance granted the Earwickers intimates that behind Joyce's formal experimentation lay that bedrock of humanist culture that has sustained the West since its beginnings. To be petty, perplexed and often frustrated is not to be contemptible, but human. The presence of a larger humanity enfolding with sympathy the figures who strut and struggle in the foreground is the mark of our century's greatest novelists, Joyce and Faulkner, however attractive it may be to mark in these writers only misery and despair.

If Hood's work belongs so obviously in the camp of the ancients, it is also the case that his fiction exhibits a grasp of the present, especially the Canadian present, matched by few other writers of his native land. My object in this article is to demonstrate that his sure purchase on the present, so evident in *A Game of Touch*, is wholly compatible with his ampler vision of a process of grace and redemption illuminating that present. Hood is an imaginative analyst of our society to no less a degree than the producers of satiric and nihilistic fiction, yet his rationality has not cut him off from sensing the limitations of the rational in

appreciating the world we live in. That linear narrative, straightforward description and concretely (rather than symbolically) conceived characters can still convey the tang of reality is the implicit message of the "traditional" form of his fiction.

As a means of establishing the particular virtues of *A Game of Touch*, let me make an arbitrary distinction between Hood's first two novels, *White Figure*, *White Ground* and *The Camera Always Lies*, which will be treated in reverse order. I am characterizing the latter as a novel of society, and the former as one of grace in order to make apparent the presence of both strains in his latest work.

THE CAMERA ALWAYS LIES is Hood's weakest and least understood work of fiction, yet any consideration of his knack of catching the world we live in must begin there. The novel's weakness lies in its characterization, which fails to support a theme more complex than the psychology of the characters. While the book is a detailed portrait of the post-Hollywood film industry, it functions also as a parable on the public cannibalism surrounding our gods, the celebrities. Alongside this are a series of reflections on the nature of contemporary art, a pre-occupation of Hood's fiction, and the subtle temptations to fakery that it offers to its successful practitioners. Clearly, this is not a Hollywood novel, whether in the realist mode of John O'Hara or the surrealist of Nathanael West, yet the book was generally reviewed in terms of its "predecessors" and as a result of such assumptions came out looking rather bungled. The narrow psyches of its characters are forced to channel too broad a stream of thought and feeling, but this is an error of the too purposeful writer rather than the unskilled. My own dissatisfactions with the novel will appear in detail a little later, but for the present let me convey its strengths. Its greatest is its sharply etched picture of a film industry which may not be a microcosm of our society, but which is assuredly one of the matrices of our collective mythologies, a mythical business whose realities are somehow ours.

The Camera Always Lies brings this society across to the reader by giving both a densely-detailed treatment of the nitty-gritty of its subject and an allusive probing of its inner drives which mesh with those of the larger society. The common reader will always find diversion in observing the way his neighbours earn their living. The occupational novels of Arthur Hailey attest that readers will endure any degree of stereotyped characterization and unreal psychologizing in

order to find out how airports and hotels function. Jobs are important to all of us, however frequently we are lectured on the obsolescence of the work ethic. They can offer the one period during the day when the reality principle is wholly and objectively present, when our own fantasies and gaps in feeling bump against an unyielding external reality. This is not the case, however, when the job involves the manufacture and marketing of the mythical, evocative yet ephemeral stuff that appeals to our appetites for power and security without really satisfying them.

The world of Hood's fiction is a job world, his writing an encyclopedia of trades and professions. Stockbrokers, psychologists, road repairmen, priests, painters, musicians, athletes, actors, academics, storekeepers, bankers, grocers, cameramen, campers, corsetières — this procession, this Whitman catalogue troops through his pages not in the guise of names with occupational titles attached, but as people seen and magnified through the technical details of their jobs. This Balzacian gift is one writers dismiss at their peril, since the world of their readers is largely determined by those occupational boundaries which the novel of sensibility — from Richardson to Cohen — largely ignores. *The Camera Always Lies* shows film people at work; the audience learns what it is to choreograph a musical number so as to underplay the star's dancing disabilities, how a costume designer compensates for short-waistedness in his subject, how an "indie" production is financed and promoted, and so on. These are not little technical excursions, but areas of living which fill in a character and advance a story line the same as interior monologues and symbolic happenings.

There is more to society than jobs, though, as two contrasting giants attest. *Middlemarch* gives us society with jobs — medical experimentation, the politics of the rural gentry, scholarly pursuits — and *Vanity Fair* does not. Thackeray's grim fathers, Sedley and Osborne, are both bankers, and the most we know of their trade is that Osborne's finances are solid enough to withstand the disturbance of Napoleon's return from Elba and his friend's are not. The vision of society in *Vanity Fair*, while not as real, is surely as true as that in *Middlemarch*. Thackeray shows how a society functions, how it handles the matter of who is in and who out, how it provides opportunities for the hungry to carve the sated. He achieves this not by depicting a world at work but through establishing a continuum in which the puppets may act out their representation.

The continuum consists of real elements — Waterloo, John Company's India, the Prince Regent — and those of the novelist's creation — *The Washerwoman of Finchley Common*, the Collector of Boggeley Wollah, the frontispiece of the Osborne family Bible. Thackeray's creations blend with God's to produce a sense

of society as men experience it, a small world, as we self-consciously mutter, where our paths intersect with those of others in ways initially improbable but in retrospect neatly determined.

So with the characters in *Camera*: their lives intersect in a credible fashion with those in other Hood stories. A character buys an Alex MacDonald (*White Figure, White Ground*) canvas, mention is made of the film editor Kitcheff ("The End of It," *Flying a Red Kite*), and Hood steps into the frame long enough for a character to praise *Around the Mountain*. Perhaps this is a sort of in-jokery, though it could as well be the first small step in the creation of a long sequence of interconnected works. But novels don't become portraits of society because they contain an allusion or two to figures appearing elsewhere; they succeed because they construct that continuum found in Thackeray. In *Camera*, the heroine Rose meets her rescuer Jean-Pierre because her producers are negotiating for his North American distribution rights, while her involvement with him follows an initial occupational encounter disguised as a social event. The ailing marriage of Rose and her husband Seth is shattered by the producers' normal/abnormal manner of promoting the film. Characters intersect through booking agencies, health spas and filming locations in the way people do through job connections in the real world.

There is more to a sense of society than this, as Thackeray saw. Somewhere, the scattered people with their scattered interests are pulled together by a social matrix that is more than a departures and arrivals lounge, but a context of mental habits and associations as well. Thus Thackeray's controlling image of the Fair and the common attribute shared by most every character — overpowering, raw appetite. Since, as I noted earlier, every job does not deal with the real, the figures in *Camera* share an involvement in the delusive and deceitful. The involvement isn't always intentional, yet the process by which Rose undertakes the suicide attempt that opens the book starts because her sense of reality has been dulled by a career devoted to burnishing her image. Repeatedly, the characters practise the grossest deceptions upon themselves and each other; let one acutely observed detail stand for the corruption of a society: "[The security guard] was supposed to keep the photographers in line, but did nothing except bum cigarettes off them."

As is fitting for a novel about films, the deepest symbolic probes into the inner drives of society are made through movies, one real, *King Kong*, the other planned by Jean-Pierre, *Feu James Dean*. In his hotel room, the late-movie addict ponders what he has just watched:

Images swam in his brain, of rape, murder, betrayal, of King Kong at the top of the tallest building in the world, swatting biplanes out of the air like flies. You want to marry the girl and settle down, but you can't because you're a guilty beast. This coupling of monster and innocent woman was a staple in the slick American cartoons, a comic theme or a grotesque one, not tragic. . . . Treat horror comically . . . that is what they do. King Kong, Count Dracula, Frankenstein's creation, the Addams cartoons, the Teen-Age Wolf Man, the Munsters, the sting drawn progressively with each step toward the trivial — the monster was really lovable and just like us.

The author, through his character, the sort of cerebral French film-maker given to meditations upon *King Kong*, reveals the outlines of his novel's myth, the escape of the girl Rose from the innocent — through its total ignorance of moral habits or considerations — monster of big-time filming.

The other movie, *Feu James Dean*, is one the 1970 reader either swears he has seen or is shocked that no one has yet filmed it. It tells of a quiet young Frenchman fascinated by America-as-power, the owner of a Chevrolet with an interior decorated with "Pictures of motorcycles and folk singers, the Beatles, racing cars, movie stars, shots of crimes with people lying dead on the streets, pictures of guns and of cowboys." In a familiar enough pattern of behaviour, he first charms and then strangles an American girl he meets. The cluster of images gathered by the two films, real and imaginary, is not another indictment of America or the movies or American movies, but a representation of a culture in the grip of strong feelings it cannot express realistically. Either paranoia and aggression are fantasized into the stylized hysteria and violence of the mass media and its charismatic superstars (*Feu James Dean*) or else it conceals through stereotype (at times comic, at times grisly) the primitive horror of feelings it cannot acknowledge in any other manner (*King Kong*). The movies are images of the post-modern or the technological society or whatever term may be current; they ally themselves with a number of thoughts and associations demonstrating the congruence of the novel's film-making society with the larger grouping supporting it. From the glimpse of the negligent doorman to the articulation of a culture's deepest imaginings, *Camera* gives both the inside and outside of its society, showing it as something more than a collection of people or a melange of mythic associations, showing it as a combination of both.

Yet the novel does not succeed; though this is not my greatest concern here, let me briefly outline my dissatisfaction. The problem with *Camera* is Rose Leclair, a heroine whose personality is too simple and observed too superficially to bear the weight of the social themes she embodies. A Becky Sharp puppet would have

done better, for it is in the handling of what people do rather than how they think that the novel excels. The tour-de-force opening the novel, Rose's attempted suicide, is a masterly presentation of a psycho-somatic organism in revolt against death. The intermingling of mind and body is handled with great skill, but it is somewhat of a disappointment for Rose to be revealed, not as some tortured movie queen in the manner of Monroe, but as a wholesome, healthy girl saved at the last moment by her basically sound mind-body. It is not that simple people are uninteresting, but that Rose is. References to a fairly ordinary girlhood and a fairly ordinary climb to stardom do not deepen her character, and in her the ordinary becomes the banal. While she is probably made so insensitive to the skulduggery around her in the first section for the purpose of showing the dream world stardom forces her to live in, the reader does become impatient with her stupidity. Yet Rose has to carry the story; she is not portrayed as Aimée in Waugh's *The Loved One*, a distanced figure who is the object of pity rather than sympathy. And there is not enough to Rose to carry her own story.

Finally, the morality of the novel becomes confused. The work has dealt, both in the implicit manner I have described and in explicit fashion as well,⁴ with the falsity of film and its world. Yet Rose is rescued by the French Director and flies off to Europe to marry and make beautiful films with him. One's first impulse is to see the book as the sort of Billy Wilder slick and cynical diversion analyzed with such acuity during the novel.⁵ But that kind of reaction tears the book apart, for its tone throughout has been one of concern and involvement and not the detached contempt of, say, *Kiss Me, Stupid*, a Wilder flick discussed in the novel. Perhaps, one reasons, the novel is out to show that there is no escaping the hollow values of the world Rose makes her living in, and that the best she can hope for is a cleaner version of the game she must play. Well, if this is so, then how ultimately boring and frustrating a story we have before us. Raw cynicism would have done better.

As I have pointed out, *Camera* is most interesting in its realization of a society in being. It falters when it attempts to get at the insides of the people composing that society. Hood's problem then was to create either a portrait of society-as-organism that did not require portraying individuals in depth, or else to try harder to present the characters fully. *Around the Mountain*, the second collection of short fiction and a very well-planned and interconnected collection at that, displayed his sure grasp of a landscape — man-made, natural, urban, rural — and his gift for blending these various views into subtle expressions of states of human feeling. As he put it, "I don't think the Romantic Movement failed,"⁶ and *Around*

the Mountain is as Romantic a view of Montreal as is Wordsworth's poem of Tintern Abbey. That is, the city defines and re-defines the author-observer, its majesty and vitality confirming and enlarging his own powers. With ease and assurance, Hood moves through quasi-journalistic vignettes of city life — "Le Grand Déménagement," "Starting Again in Sherbrooke Street" — to beautifully realized evocations of the reality beyond the landscape, as in "A Green Child" and "The River Behind Things."

IF *Around the Mountain* showed how the trick was done without in-depth characters (beyond the faceless narrator), the work preceding *Camera* — *White Figure*, *White Ground* — displayed the sureness with which Hood could depict a character and show the changes life put him through. What he had done in *White Figure* he did not choose to do in *Camera*, but a look at his first novel reveals the resonance he is able to give his characters. It should also demonstrate that the success of *A Game of Touch* is no fluke, but the confident use of talents — for capturing society, for showing individuals — displayed earlier in isolation but now combined within a single work.

White Figure is a novel about painting and the boundaries of art, abounding in demonstrations of painterly technique and intense meditations on the possibilities of catching life within a canvas. It offers also something close to a Canadian poetics, an examination of the stresses peculiar to artistic life here. Such a pre-occupation is perhaps to be expected from a novelist of English-and French-Canadian parentage, and the reader searching for the allegorization of the tension between the two strains in Canadian life could find it in this novel, though only after some violence had been done to the text.

For my story is first of all about a painter, an artist in the middle of the journey, enjoying a measure of comfort and reputation, who is on the verge of gaining fame in the great world. Alex MacDonald, a leading Montreal artist awaiting his first New York opening, travels with his wife to Nova Scotia both to paint in a light he has never experienced and to discover the past of his father, who left there as a young man. It is the virtue of *White Figure* to sustain the reader's interest not merely in Alex the painter, but to make his personal search credible also, so that a productive tension arises from the two poles of experience. Alex's two searches — for a mood in his painting he has never caught before and for the true reasons why his father left the family — are successful, but in a limited sense

only. He never discovers exactly why his father was rejected by his relatives, but he does come to some understanding of the hatreds and misunderstandings still festering in Barrington, Nova Scotia. This understanding reveals itself on a non-rational level in Alex's canvases. This breakthrough into understanding rather than analysis is conveyed in Chapter Four of the novel's second section, a novel in a nutshell where his struggle to accept his father and complete his canvas produces a single narrative thrust that gives us the whole man, painter and child.

This is Alex's first illumination in the novel, the first glimpse into the conflicts of the past and their resolution in the present. If this process is localized around the figure of his father, the other search, the search more directly concerned with his professional life, gets embodied in the two women in his life and the personal-painterly forces they represent. His wife Madeleine, of a distinguished French-Canadian family, represents the claims of society, the familiar, the assured, the possible, all of the bugaboos of the Romantic artist as our age has defined him. His cousin Ellen, a Barrington girl, represents solitude, the exotic, the unattainable. Hood displays a sharp sense of the ironies of social observation in locating the solid matron in a *soignée* Montreal female and the Lillith in a sheltered Nova Scotian virgin. From one point of view, the painter's final choice of wife and success in New York is a cop-out. It offers another instance of the Canadian penchant for taking the low road. Hood makes no attempt to soften or evade this possibility, but prefers to present the problem it offers directly to the reader.

One need not be devoted to the stereotype of the *poète maudit* to be disquieted by the choice of Madeleine. For all her chic and sensitivity, she is a scheming bitch who is extremely interested in making it both with and for her husband, and the two canvases he completes in the book are done either without her or in her despite.⁷ He is aware of her anxieties about the possible unprofitable nature of his painting and of her schemes with his dealer to prevent him from reaching too far in his work, yet remains with her and does so contentedly. "I'm no mystic; I'm a flesh man," he declares near the end of the novel, and this remark discloses his reasons for cleaving to his wife. The chapter on their love-making (Chapter 7 of the second section) is the most intensely written in the novel, not to work up a sizzling sex scene, though it is as "hot" as any piece of pornography, but to convey the power of the MacDonalds' sexual relationship. In a very direct fashion, the chapter conveys the satisfaction husband and wife give each other. It is more than a matter of four legs in a bed, though that is where it starts. It is a matter of being present. This presence is what marriage is about, and the existence of it compensates for Madeleine's fundamental lack of sympathy with the sort of new

work her husband is struggling to realize. He knows his wife and her drawbacks; he can live with that knowledge and handle the problems as they arise.

The alternative female is Ellen, a sea-girl associated with green, the "dark female shape" behind *Light Source* #1 and #2, the paintings occupying the time of the narrative. The first is the title-painting of the book, a white-on-white which attempts to reach beyond painting, beyond even perception, to the region where it all begins, wherever that may be. As Madeleine sensibly assures her husband, " 'You can't paint what's invisible. You can't paint what doesn't exist,' " and yet the oils in the painting possess greater brilliance and variety than ever before. Alex puts the dilemma squarely: " 'How can it be so good if it isn't true?' " How can it, indeed? Ellen has been with him since the inception of the painting, when the idea of it came upon him in the holy dread he experienced during his initial exposure to the white light and solitude of the seashore. The sexual encounter between Alex and his cousin is unplanned, clumsy and incomplete, far different from the assured sensuality of the married couple. The thought of sex between Alex and his young cousin is faintly off-colour, faintly incestuous; like that painting, it would be an attempt to reach through the senses what the senses cannot reach. In choosing wife over cousin Alex really chooses between the marital and the mystical, opting for the centre rather than the more exciting, more frustrating margin. But the painting has been completed, a proof that that while the painter can reach there, he is not out to dwell on the margin. The business of rejecting what you could have in favour of the richness you already possess is too complex to be termed a cop-out. It is instead a matter of learning from an experiment that did not come about through methodical planning, but which came nonetheless and is there to be admired and used: *Light Source* #1.

If this painting, with the feelings it absorbed and evoked, represents one portion of the illumination Alex receives in the course of the novel, *Light Source* #2 conveys the other side of this vision of light. Chapter 3 of the first section rings the changes on black and white as the MacDonalds first reach the Atlantic. In the course of this Alex asserts that " 'you have to have the double vision' ", that is, you need white to know black, and vice-versa: " 'God, but a really white man would be a frightening thing to see.' " By the end of the novel, he has executed a horror-filled, turbulent canvas which he presents — unviewed by the public — to Ellen. It is his way of showing her his black and white colours. He has painted into the magnificent abstraction of *Light Source* #2 the green associated with Ellen, completing a painting as good as he'll ever get but which is "the most aggressive violent turbulence of paint imaginable . . . discordant, jangled, riotous;

after a while it got on your nerves." The audience of Alex's aged aunts fails to spot "the comical hints of green" (always the double vision), but the total effect of the work is to get on to canvas the violent, brutal Alex who battered his father in his youth and in maturity came to see and absorb what he had done. It is no coincidence, as Madeleine points out, that he made love to her after crating the painting and shipping it to Ellen. He has had his exposure to the double vision in its extremest form — a schizoid split — and realized that there is no way to have both women and all they represent simultaneously in his life. All such attempts develop in him a split between artist and husband, painter and man which he will not endure, even if it for a moment widens the reach of his art. The choice he makes is to go on to the New York triumph and abandon the work which would restrict his drives to the lonely and unsatisfactory.

In considering *White Figure*, I have tried to display the dexterity with which Hood has intertwined the personality of a man with his artistic production, making the one as real as the other. Therefore, the grace, the understanding that falls upon Alex MacDonald is not a blinding revelation of the sort recalling a hypothetical Beethoven crying to a thrush, "Run through that again; it sounds like what ought to be the opening bars of my Sixth!" The grace is instead the illumination that occurs during a job, the grace commanding the artist to cross out *that* word, put in *that* note, go heavy on *that* brush stroke. And through this aesthetic grace Alex's personality is revealed, so intimate is the novel's sense of the identity between artist and man. For the human soul also learns through re-examining *that* incident, recalling *that* person, placing a new construction on *that* mood. This surefootedness amid the traps of the ambiguities of the human personality gives Hood's fiction the strength to show in a credible fashion how human beings experience crisis. The assumption behind the fiction is that the ordinary is fairly miraculous and the trick of the artist is to catch that miracle at its most visible — say, at the mid-point of a painter's career.

NO ONE WITHIN CAMERA RANGE is unaware that countries have their crises as well as do individuals, though the camera that informs us also dulls our perceptions. The camera watches confrontations and riots, parades and manifestoes, ignoring the very down-to-earth fashion in which our society's state of permanent crisis is blended into the fabric of our daily lives. The novel, an art form which more than any other celebrates the quotidian, is one device by which

society can see itself as it digests major issues in humdrum fashion. No more useful truth was taught writers of fiction than when Sir Walter Scott used the melodramatic plot of *The Heart of Midlothian* to show how in troubled times sons first lose, and then they slay their fathers. This may appear too heavy a metaphysical burden for the incident of the killing of Staunton-Robertson by his unknown outlaw son, but then Scott has been under-rated for better than a century. Miss Doris Lessing's *The Four-Gated City*, so wretchedly reviewed, offers an instance of the way in which a novel can still capture the meat-and-potatoes fashion in which our planet is being destroyed by a bored and violent civilization.

The title of *A Game of Touch* means what it says — touch football is a game played by all the male characters. But sex and politics are also games of touch, and the commonplaces of boys and girls together in their little sports throws into relief the conflicts threatening to destroy a society. Sports, as Hood knows, are excellent activities in which to locate men at work. The opening piece in *Around the Mountain*, "The Sportive Center of St. Vincent de Paul", give as much insight as one is likely to gain from years of reading anthropology into the importance of the male bond and the tenacity of the informal conventions by which men govern their affairs. *A Game of Touch* shows the way in which a series of unspoken assumptions shape the Higher Things, especially politics, and the way in which the laws of the tribe pass *sotto voce* from generation to generation. It also shows how an age of relentless publicity is dissolving those conditions and leaving very little to replace them beyond the vagaries of charisma.

To repeat, the sport is touch football, and the novel gets under way when Jake Price, newly-arrived in Montreal from Stoverville, Ontario (Hood's country of the mind near the Quebec border), casually joins a touch football game in a park. From this comes his acquaintance with Roger Talbot, a wealthy Quebec intellectual of English and French parentage; Marie-Ange Robinson, who first made her appearance in "Bicultural Angela" (*Around the Mountain*), and Duncan McCallum, Establishment-educated and now a house psychologist for a large corporation. Jake, the hard yet innocent outsider bewildered by the gentlemanly conventions of the crowd he has fallen in with, is an excellent observer of the folkways of the Montrealers. For the present, what happens to Jake is not as interesting as what happens to Roger, a Trudeau who neither can nor will succeed in the great world.

The first thing the reviewers will say of *A Game of Touch* is that nothing much happens, which is to say that the novel rearranges the insides of the characters without anything too dramatic happening to their outsides. Roger works out a

complex federal-provincial health services scheme, negotiates skilfully with his fellow Quebecers on behalf of Ottawa, is denounced as a *vendu*, and leaves Ottawa to return to the academy. Clearly no tale of derring-do, but a chronicle which accurately conveys the tone of Canadian politics.

What could be duller than a novel about taxation and the responsibility for it? Well, in a materialist society such as ours taxation forms the chief link between subject and government; it becomes the badge of citizenship. " 'Funds, not sex, are at the root of human motivation,' " Roger wryly observes, and this is the first ironic hint of the importance to the novel of economic questions. Debates over where the money is to go reveal the passions behind politics, as well as the strengths of various groups and alliances. It is the passion that matters, and not the pennies, and this the cerebral Roger comes to see, though too late in his career for his cold image to thaw. During a day of wearying negotiation, the "blinding insight" comes to him that:

these bloody money matters were symbols of great unconscious tides in the life of millions of people, who might never consciously consider tax percentages from one year's end to the next. Millions who were suffering from a bottomless, humiliating wound in the unspoken darkest reaches of their lives. People who had early learned to say things like, "*nous autres, on n'e' pas instruit-là,*" or perhaps *on n'e' fait que pour des petits pains chez nous.*" . . .

He realized that the words he thought in, "economic community," "taxing source," "administrative means," were a bloodless, denatured, foolish and heartless screen over his feelings. He saw suddenly that what people said about him, *TRAHISON DE ROGER TALBOT*, was partly true and deeply felt. I have no people, he realized, and I never will; instead I have the international economic community.

This moment of grace comes too late to shelter him from the drumfire of criticism coming from his native province, and his minister, relieved at finding a scapegoat, allows him to resign. Roger is a figure who has been with us since Ford's Tietjens tetralogy, the man born into a ruling elite whose integrity disqualifies him from exercising power in the devious fashion in which it must be wielded. Fortunately, Hood doesn't impose on his character the quasi-saintliness Ford lavished upon his hero, but in a very effective scene near the novel's conclusion brings home Roger's dignity, solidity and loneliness. As the novel has proceeded, Marie-Ange, the astute practitioner of bedroom biculturalism, switches her allegiance from Roger to Duncan, whom the narrative reveals to be locked in his Anglo world of jobs, connections and speedy promotions in the motherly embrace of the multi-national corporation. The final gathering of the triangle is

in Grandma's Antimacassar, a "swinging" place featuring campy decor, rotten music and a swingless clientele. Roger is appalled by the pseudo-sophistication and hard-sell rottenness of the place, Marie-Ange (who we can sense will go back to being Angela, the exec's wife from Stoverville who tried the French thing a few years back) and Duncan too intent on being young and with-it and like now baby to examine the scene they are a part of. Roger, in his forties, is dismissed with a few nasty remarks about youth and age and leaves, still his own man, but only his own man.

With a few adaptations, the story could have come from one of Peter Newman's political chronicles. The novel contains a genuine feel for Canadian politics, for the way the public business gets done and the vocabulary our rulers bring to the execution of their tasks. It is a fine thing to write a novel so true to the milieu from which it springs as this, but it is a finer thing to write a novel plain and simple. What gives *A Game of Touch* the requisite literary virtues is the manner in which the doings of Jake Price, the artist as a young layabout, reinforce the political theme and unify the public and the personal.

Very simply, Jake wants to live rent-free, as Roger notes. In fact, he does exactly this, staying in a studio flat atop a building Roger's family owns in a warehouse-light-industrial district empty at night. When the building goes up in flames as the result of a fire in the electroplating shop on the lower floors, and he barely escapes death, Jake realizes that "there was a catch to living . . . rent-free . . . nobody around to help you when you got into trouble." In other words, no one can safely opt out of the social contract, whether the contract be signified by taxes or rent. Jake's romantic vision of *la vie bohème* cannot be sustained, and he takes a job with Duncan's firm as a personnel evaluator. He brings no professional qualifications to the position beyond a great deal of common sense and an absence of illusions about himself. He becomes engaged to a sturdy French-Canadienne, not abandoning his art but realizing that earning a living comes before it.

Perhaps the saddest of the principal characters is Marie-Ange, so close to achieving maturity during his liaison with Roger but now thrown back into dreary games with Duncan. The novel is, after all, about the two most interesting subjects life offers, sex and money, and the choices facing Marie-Ange are best illustrated by the novel's treatment of her sexuality. With Roger, everything becomes sexually charged, with the activities of an entire day bathed in an eroticism consummated in bed at the end, but which differs in form rather than in tone from what has gone before (Ch. 13). Contrast with this the body-painting

of Chapter 16, in which her body is garishly decorated by Duncan and his drunken pals in a manner ultimately expressing a great deal of contempt for the flesh and for the female in particular. The act is sexual, but of such a nature as to deny any power and beauty to sex and turn it instead into a nasty little game. In the fashion of our time, the rhetoric of permissiveness and liberation conceals despair and hostility. It is Duncan that Marie-Ange marries, and all their determined swinging cannot hide the weaknesses they bring to their union.

A Game of Touch: Jake leaves his self-centred existence and joins a world populated largely by others. The game of Touch: a pastime played “for sport and for exercise, with the violence taken out of it.” Canada as a game of Touch: “a religious idea . . . man acting out the instinct to justice, without war.” Keeping in touch: Roger’s failure to do so diminishes his political effectiveness. Sex, the oldest game of touch: the contrast between Marie-Ange, once Roger’s woman and the Marie-Ange now the creature to be painted by Duncan in a parody of sex. Can you follow how the strands interweave, and how the personal and communal levels of the book fuse into a representation of a culture that is deadening and which must recover its tactility? Can you see how the theme of touching widens into a vision of a world touched by an opportunity for greatness, a people on the verge of breakthrough if only they would speak with honesty to each other and acknowledge their mutual needs?

In *Strength Down Centre*, his portrait of Jean Beliveau, Hood finds in his subject a communal hero who is more than an athlete. Beliveau receives gifts, advice and Miss-Lonelyhearts-type pleas for insight and comfort from his fans. “‘It isn’t simply that I’m a hockey player; people need to touch somebody.’” We live at a time when more and more people cannot do this in their personal lives, when religion no longer offers a sense of touch, and when inevitably the larger-than-life figures of sports, politics and entertainment come to fill this function. *Camera* was about the way we devour these figures, from Rose Leclair to Marilyn Monroe to the Kennedys. *A Game of Touch* is also about this society of ours, about it in the down-to-earth way we all experience it. Satire, surrealism and symbolism are all effective ways of dramatizing our world, but to most of us they offer the escape hatch of “Well, that’s a little too exaggerated. Now if he had only looked at the other side . . .” That escape is not available to Hood’s readers. He has shown us where we are in terms no one can fail to recognize.

Taken collectively, are not Hood’s novels an achievement one searches widely to match in English Canada? Has he not given us an ordinary, recognizable world in which extraordinary things nonetheless happen? On the levels of nature and of

grace, of expertise and illumination, has he not demonstrated a skill and a sense of feeling illuminating our present and our future? The graces of his short fiction have been apparent since the publication of *Flying a Red Kite*; is there not something to the novels as well? They offer a panorama of our society and the fate of the individual within it. Balancing between a sense of the real and a glimpse of the visionary, they bring to us a picture of this world and the grace that is there for anyone who would reach out for it.

FOOTNOTES

- ¹ Hugh Hood in a letter to the author, undated.
- ² "The Isolation Booth," *Tamarack Review*, #9 (Autumn, 1958), 5-12.
- ³ *A Game of Touch*, Longman, \$5.95.
- ⁴ See the Director Max Mars's philosophical reflections on the camera's lies, pp. 73-4.
- ⁵ *The Camera Always Lies*, 195-6.
- ⁶ Letter to the author, 23/XII/66.
- ⁷ This equivocal female crops up again in Hood's fiction, most obviously in "The Tolstoy Pitch," *Fiddlehead*, #79 (March-April 1969), 44-59. There, however, the wife-who-only-wants-what-is-best is drawn with less subtlety, the story being an attempt to convey the sort of sellout that does not in fact take place in *White Figure*, however much the novelist may toy with the possibility.
- ⁸ For example, see the oft-reprinted "After the Sirens," *Flying a Red Kite* (Toronto: Ryerson, 1962), 125-35.