

THE FUSION OF THE IMAGINATION AND  
THE MATERIAL UNIVERSE:  
HUGH HOOD, *FLYING A RED KITE* (1962)<sup>1</sup>

*Aleksander Kustec*

Let her live a week, he thought, and she  
may go on living into the next generation, if  
there is one...

Hugh Hood, "After the Sirens"  
(*Flying a Red Kite*, 1962)

I have often been treated as a writer who  
relies upon actuality, on what has happened, for  
his material, whereas I know myself to be a  
writer in whose work imagination and fantasy,  
the purely private and extra-historical, take the  
primary place.

Hugh Hood, "Introduction"  
(*Flying a Red Kite*, 1962)

In the first weeks of January 1957 Hugh (John Blagdon) Hood moved to Hartford, Connecticut, U. S. A, where he became Professor at Saint Joseph College. This is how Hood remembers this period:

I was going to get married that April and I wanted to have a substantial body of material on hand to prove to my wife-to-be that I was no idler, that this writing business was something we must both take seriously. Many times afterwards when I couldn't get anybody to accept my first stories, I said to Noreen, 'If in the course of my life I can get half a dozen stories, I'll be satisfied. I'll know that I've done the best I could with what I had. And that would be an honourable record, six.'<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The study is a continuation of my research on Hugh Hood's writing, which I started in my MA thesis "Tipično kanadski elementi v sodobni kanadski kratki zgodbi" [Typical Canadian Elements in the Contemporary Canadian Short Story], University of Ljubljana, 1996.

<sup>2</sup> Hood, "Introduction" in *Flying a Red Kite: The Collected Stories I*, p. 17.

At the time Hood did not know that he was going to become one of Canada's greatest stylists and contemporary short story writers. Between January 1957 and March 1962, when he was going through a final selection of short stories for his first book, *Flying a Red Kite* (*FRK*), Hugh Hood wrote thirty-eight short stories and two novels (*God Rest You Merry* and *Hungry Generations*). The numbers show that Hood was an extremely productive writer in that period. From the thirty-eight stories he chose eleven for *FRK*, fourteen of them were published in subsequent collections, in various journals and short story anthologies, while thirteen of them have not been published yet.

Hood's *FRK* represents the beginning of a new era in Canadian short story writing, or as John Metcalf would say, "one of the foundation stones in a tradition which is building."<sup>3</sup> It represents an unusual fusion of the imagination and the material universe, which is very hard to find in earlier Canadian short stories. In comparison with Morley Callaghan, Hood uses a discourse, which is much purer and more explicit. He wishes to elicit emotional reactions from his readers. His stories are deeply imaginary, less closed, and contain a high degree of subtlety, nicety, and precision. We need to get deeply engaged, return and re-examine our viewpoints and constantly redefine our positions. Hood masters the modern technique, which reflects his religious belief, and creates a poetic balance between observation and contemplation. He is capable of penetrating into the human mind and the literary work as well. Callaghan, on the other hand, wants to impose his presence between the reader and the story and retains complete control over the narrative. In his stories he interprets, explains and accents his didactics and moral doctrine in a way not acceptable for the modern reader.

Hugh Hood is a typical contemporary Canadian short story writer, who has strongly contributed to the formation and the proliferation of the contemporary Canadian short story. He is an expert in genially and skilfully hiding, uncovering, and explaining the unknown. His characters are highly credible and all of them appear in probable situations. These characters are exposed to changes that strongly effect the growth of their personality. The road to success is unmerciful and perplexing, intertwined with self-abnegation. They are religiously devoted pilgrims on a long journey to some sacred place, brought face to face with various kinds of temptation. A divine force leads them to the Promised Land, gives them hope and opens their eyes, so they are able to see and, as a result, come to a greater understanding of the meaning of life.

In *FRK* one can find eleven extremely exciting short stories.<sup>4</sup> Each story is a unified piece of literary craftsmanship, in which Hood tries to enlighten his readers on issues concerning moral values, aesthetic and human relations. Success is the central subject and "the ability of the protagonists to synthesise concrete and abstract, timely and timeless, daily and divine".<sup>5</sup> In all his stories we can sense a dialogue in progress between two worlds: the imaginary and the material.

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<sup>3</sup> Metcalf, *Canadian Classics*, p. 73.

<sup>4</sup> "Fallings from Us, Vanishings", "O Happy Melodist!", "Silver Bugles, Cymbals, Golden Silks", "Recollections of the Works Department", "Three Halves of a House", "After the Sirens", "He Just Adores Her!", "Nobody's Going Anywhere!", "Flying a Red Kite", "Where the Myth Touches Us", "The End of It" In the order as presented in *FRK*.

In "Fallings from Us, Vanishings" and "O Happy Melodist!" Hood deals with the complexity of relationships between partners. One half (Arthur Merlin, Alexandra Ellicott) sees the world with a romantic vision, whereas the second half (Gloria, Jim Savitt) does not. The repeated accusations between the partners are the driving force of both stories. For example, in "Fallings from Us, Vanishings" Arthur, emotionally hurt, tries to make Gloria visualise the world that has inspired him for so long, but without success: *Don't you feel anything about the ocean, about the water?* (FRK, 35). Gloria is a 23-year-old woman who can see only what her eyes permit her to see. She does not believe in ghosts and is not interested in the past. The only thing that matters to her is bare physical existence: *I feel what I am, she realized, with intense joy. I can tast myself being me. I'm this woman.* (FRK, 38). That is not enough for Arthur, his romantic soul has to deal with the past, for it is the only way he will come any closer to a greater understanding of the present. But it is labour lost for both of them and the parting of the couple is inevitable:

He watched her go; and as she began to merge with the twilight and the firm outline of her figure wavered, she seemed to him to be one, only one, of a long file of daffodil girls marching out of the past and into the future, girls he'd read about in story books, girls he'd known, girls he hoped still to meet some day. Multitudes forever young, beautiful golden girls long dead and others unborn, the descending heirs of Eve, all going out of the light through the twilight and into the dark. Away up the beach her form quivered in his sight, and then his eyes lost her and he was standing alone in a sandy place. I'd rather be lonely, he thought.

I'd rather be lonely  
*Than happy with somebody new.* (FRK, 41)

Hood continues with his romantic peregrination in "O Happy Melodist!". This time the male and female exchange roles. Jim Savitt (40 years old) is a very shallow and senseless chap, who spends most of his days reading *Playboy* and dreaming about tying the knot with Alexandra. On the other hand, Alexandra Ellicott (36 years old) is a *monolith of insideness* (FRK, 49), who has no intention of becoming the property of any man that sees her only as an object resembling a *comfortable divan for lounging* (FRK, 61). She wishes to have a man who can talk to her without her sex getting in the way and, above all, to come to respect her as woman.

In "Silver Bugles, Cymbals, Golden Silks" and "Recollections of the Works Department" Hood uses the first-person narrator and focuses on the growth of the individual. Both stories are the fruit of Hood's imagination, but at moments we can sense that much of the material does contain autobiographical elements. We follow two boys growing up, one in an orchestra, the other in a constructional enterprise. Both of them recognise that they have outgrown their comrades and the environment they have lived in for so many years. The need to move on. We feel

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5 Copoloff-Mechanic. *Pilgrim's Progress: A Study of the Short Stories of Hugh Hood*, p. 21.

the presence of romantic imagination acting as a progressive force, uniting together the past with the present, so as to form a homogeneous or harmonious whole. This force keeps the characters from stopping and from giving up their dreams. It would be wrong for them to resist. They need to allow themselves to let things drift with all their being. This force is also present in "Three Halves of a House", where the house is given emblematic extensiveness. In the town of Storerville, where life has come to a standstill, one can find two families: the Boston's as tenants and the Haskells (Ellie, Grover) as landlords. The whole plot revolves around Maura, who is now living in Montreal, and who once lived in the house with her husband. She is to inherit the estate, but the problem is that she is seen as *an outsider who's gotten stuck fast inside* (FRK, 127). In fact, Maura is the only one who has succeeded in escaping from "death-in-life"<sup>6</sup>, and is not prepared to accept the pathetic generous offer from Grover, the *monster of selfishness* (FRK, 124):

'You'll take it, won't you? Look at me, Maura, please! It's so dark I can't see you.' He turns to face her and throws his arms stiffly wide apart. 'It's yours! I don't want it. You will take it, won't you? Take it, take it, please!' (FRK, 135)

"After the Sirens" is my favourite story, and also one of Hugh Hood's most anthologised short stories.<sup>7</sup> It was written in Hartford in January 1960 and was his seventh short story, along the previously mentioned two novels. It has a special place in FRK. Before he wrote the story, Hood had read a 400-page brochure on personal protection, which he received one day in the mail. He read it, contemplated about his family and the possibilities, if an atomic catastrophe were to happen. The story is the result of the author's imagination, but the family, which has the central position in the short story, is actually his own. The cellar, which the family uses after the catastrophe, is the same cellar we can find on 140 Hawthorn Street, where the Hood's were living at the time the author was writing the story. Hood used the brochure as material, but made up the whole section in the story where he described in detail the nuclear attack and the events that followed. He wanted to let the public know about his concern of the dire consequences of an atomic chaos. Hood is convinced that every short story writer can use material from different sources:

The resources of a writer of fiction are deeply divided, but fortunately into only two parts. He or she can derive material either from observation of the external world and from material communicated by other such observers, in short from experience, from

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Copoloff-Mechanic. *Pilgrim's Progress: A Study of the Short Stories of Hugh Hood*, p. 37.

<sup>7</sup> One can detect a strong tendency of the canonisation of the short story in English-Canadian literature. Since 1960 over 60 editors (David Helwig, John Metcalf, Maggie Helwig, Sandra Martin, Robert Weaver and others) have published more than 100 anthologies of Canadian short stories. The greatest interest was shown in the seventies and eighties. The most anthologised Canadian contemporary short story writer in English is Alice Munro, followed by Mavis Gallant, Hugh Hood, Norman Levine, Clark Blaise, Margaret Laurence, Margaret Atwood etc. Cf. Kustec, "Tipično kanadski elementi v sodobni kanadski kratki zgodbi" [Typical Canadian Elements in the Contemporary Canadian Short Story], pp. 63-85.

what has actually happened to him and others, or he can derive material from the inner world of imagination and reflection. These are the two wells at which one drinks. Any writer's stories therefore can be shown to be stories of observation or imagination, or a composite of the two. (*FRK*, 18)

That is precisely what he does in "He Just Adores Her!". By using exactly the same model as in his previous stories, Hood makes up a story, putting two neighbours, who are total opposites, in the spotlight. The Roseberys are all in all happy in their marriage, but their everyday life is extremely boring and monotonous. On the other hand, life has just started for the Lovelaces, who are their neighbours and have just got married. Their love is inexhaustible and full of passion:

FALLING ASLEEP, Larry couldn't keep her image out of his mind. He remembered a cold night just after they were married, when he'd awakened to discover his arm hanging outside the covers, icy cold. Purely by reflex, he'd yanked the arm inside and slapped his frozen palm into Elizabeth's bare belly. Instead of squealing, as he'd expected, she'd stirred slowly, and waking gave the dearest of soft sighs. Ever afterwards, remembering, his nerves had rung with pleasure. (*FRK*, 159)

A marriage without passion is actually a dead marriage, and that is what Hood is trying to convey to his readers. Unfortunately, the Roseberys are not aware of their suffering and narrow-mindedness, and, as a result, have no understanding for their neighbours.

The following story in *FRK*, "Nobody's Going Anywhere!", opens many issues - for example, assimilation, semitism, refugeedom, identity and death. Even though Peter is the central character, it is his daughter Sally who is the driving force. She keeps asking her father all kinds of questions, which urge him to reflect upon his thoughts. For Peter life is only a story in which *nobody's going anywhere* (*FRK*, 183). It is not until Peter has answered all her questions that he gets the feeling that *he had gotten the story straight* (*FRK*, 183).

The central and most symbolic story in Hood's collection *FRK* is, without doubt, "Flying a Red Kite". After a long bus drive, Fred Calvert, the merchant and main character, returns home all tired and dirty. He is extremely angry because of the cynical statements made by a drunken priest on the bus while driving past the cemetery Notre Dame des Neiges. Fred, the character referring to Hood himself, decides to take his family on a pilgrimage into the mountains where he wants to fly his red kite. The red kite pervades through the whole collection. It is a *natural symbol* (*FRK*, 186), as Fred points out, and "an emblem of this merging of divine host and mortal witness, and a tribute to the imagination that seeks to apprehend it".<sup>8</sup> Upon releasing the kite, Fred experiences epiphany. Doubt is replaced with

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8 Copoloff-Mechanic. *Pilgrim's Progress: A Study of the Short Stories of Hugh Hood*, p. 22.

faith in the divinity of the spirit. At the same time he feels a certain degree of personal satisfaction, knowing that the priest was mistaken:

They gazed, squinting in the sun, at the flying red thing, and he turned away and saw in the shadow of her cheek and on her lips and chin the dark rich red of the pulp and juice of the crushed raspberries. (FRK, 196)

The action of turning back and fixing one's thoughts on some subject; meditating, and giving deep and serious consideration before making a final judgement is what Hood expects from his readers. We need to explore and explain our responses; clarify, explain, and evaluate our experiences, and, above all, communicate our ideas. With a close reading of Hood's short stories, we are given the opportunity to capture the essence, the meaning, of meaning, and, nevertheless, the cardinal message which the writer is trying to get across to us. His stories are of immense literary value. The redemption of man becomes our firm belief, something that is open to everyone, irrespective of our aspirations, cultural and psychological growth. Catholic theology is a moral force, which inspires deep in thought visions, or as Keith Garebian asserts in his study entitled *Hugh Hood*:

Hood's Catholicism infuses hope into his art, and, with his monism, allows him to see life and art as a continuous relationship shot through with trinitarian structures. The three highest forms of human activity for him are religious worship, art and love, and all his fiction makes a single tapestry of these three interrelated motifs. Because his emphasis is on hope, grace, and redemption, his critics say his art lacks drama and an adequate sense of evil. (Garebian 8)

By using Christian images, he assimilates them with reality, and in a unique way studies the alegoric understanding of reality.<sup>9</sup> Hood's understanding of allegory can be compared to that of Northrop Frye's, who is convinced that "genuine allegory is a structural element in literature"<sup>10</sup> and that commentary is "an allegorical interpretation, an attaching of ideas to the structure of poetic imagery".<sup>11</sup> Hood has rejected the dichotomy between dreamy Romanticism and down-to-earth realism, by showing the abstract in concrete form - a typical characteristic of his writing. His use of Christian imagery is highly sophisticated, and by assimilating it with reality, "he is able to bring together various meanings at a single moment of action, by conducting correspondences of the natural to the supernatural".<sup>12</sup> Hood uses simple objects from the material universe (streets, buildings, etc.) and fuses them into his imagination. He uses visual imagery,

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<sup>9</sup> In a way Hood's graduate studies at the University of Toronto led the author of *Flying a Red Kite* to do research on the meaning of allegory. He reached a conclusion that there exists a casual correlation between Dante, Spenser, the Holy Bible, and his writing. Without doubt, Hood is closer to Dante than to Spenser who is too dualistic and platonistic, and without a true perception of the certainty of the mortality of things. He explained his views in detail in his dissertation "Theories of Imagination in English Thinkers 1650-1790" (1955).

<sup>10</sup> Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism, Four Essays*, p. 54.

<sup>11</sup> Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism, Four Essays*, p. 89.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Garebian, *Hugh Hood*, p. 13.

images that resemble moving pictures. By doing so, he unifies the aesthetic with the moral didactic. These images symbolise completed ideas and constitute a specific structure. Even though his analogies and emblems lead us into static meditation, they rise from actions and not from the world of absolute imagination. This world is real and not fictitious. We cannot be satisfied with staying on the surface; only by getting under will we be in the position to understand the permanent substratum of things. We become aware that this can only be achieved with uninterrupted contemplation. Hood believes that his prose is "super-realistic". He agrees with Aristoteles that soul and body are one. Imagination and active intellect are not separate conceptions, they need to be regarded in context with each other. The same can be said for emotions and ideas, for "the power of abstraction is an intimate penetration into the physical reality of living beings."<sup>13</sup>

The last two short stories in *FRK*, "Where the Myth Touches Us" and "The End of It", become "the secular testament to the genuine presence embedded within the manifest".<sup>14</sup> In "Where the Myth Touches Us" Joe Jacobson represents the young generation of ambitious writers, waiting for their moment of glory. David Wallace, on the other hand, is a member of the older generation, which is in the eventide of life and has no understanding for the newcomers. Hood deals with the question of conduct. The existence of writers, as Hood declares, *has a certain shape of its own* (*FRK*, 202), but every writer goes through the same episodes - *the early works, the middle period, the periods of stagnation and doubt, the triumphant later years, and the final apotheosis* (*FRK*, 202). At the beginning the relationship between David and Joe is of respect without professional rivalry. David acts even as his mentor:

Don't sit down and write up all those easy stories right off the bat, do you see? Save them, and build your early stories while you're learning how to write. When you've formed your style, then you can do those stories that come along line for line. Don't shoot them off all at once.' (*FRK*, 203)

The gap between the older and younger generation becomes apparent as the story further develops. Hood wishes to demonstrate to us how difficult the writer's profession is, how much self-abnegation is needed, and how important it is to hold on and be firm for any price:

There's a point where the myth, if you want to call it that, the great story of which you've stumbled into a small part, assumes a kind of possession of you. You don't use it; it uses you. I don't mean that you're inspired. But the myth touches you, gets into you and begins to tell the story for you, through you, making the decisions for you. (*FRK*, 210)

David's words sound like magic to Joe's ears, for only *a short-story writer knows of the secrets of the heart /.../ the talent is the diligence* (*FRK*, 213).

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<sup>13</sup> Cf. Hood, "Sober Coloring: the Ontology of Super-Realism" in *Narrative Voices*, edited by John Metcalf, p. 97.

<sup>14</sup> Copoloff-Mechanic. *Pilgrim's Progress: A Study of the Short Stories of Hugh Hood*, p. 43.

Unfortunately, David loses his touch for reality and, literally, becomes the victim of his own myth. He is totally blind and can only see himself riding his Pegasus, which will bear him in the flights of poetic genius. The prevailing moral tone in Hood's stories is not doctrinaire. We do not get the feeling that Hood wishes to preach to his readers, he is only inclined to observation, therefore, does not thrust himself upon us, but allows us to make our own judgements. It is high time that we speak our thoughts, and stop closing our eyes to reality. We are encouraged to interpret issues of great importance to mankind.

The last story, "The End of It", was written upon request by Hood's editor. It represents a unique closure to the composed cycle in *FRK*. We get to know another artist, Philip Sanderson, who, similarly as Arthur Merlin in "Fallings from Us, Vanishings", is searching for a passageway to aesthetic eternity. Sanderson is a cameraman, who is working for the Canadian National TV and is trying to achieve *the whole present* (*FRK*, 230). He is convinced that life cannot be imitated, it is up to us to arrange it as we wish. Life is like a photocomposition: it has to be captured at the right moment, otherwise, it will be lost forever or will have no artistic value.

When Hugh Hood started writing, he had no clear perception of what he was going to write about. By using moral realism, Hood wants to deal with credible characters in credible situations, showing us that people in totally common everyday circumstances may carry out melodramatic, violent and unpredictable actions.<sup>15</sup>

Hood is considered by many as the master of style in Canadian literature.<sup>16</sup> He has an extremely visible sense for language and an elegant and polished style. His sentences in *Flying a Red Kite* are systematically arranged and morphologically well organised. He is inclined to use metaphorical language, colourful adjectives, long sentence forms, and other typical elements of practical stylistics, but it must be stressed that he does not overuse them. Hood believes that we need to read and write more short stories. Furthermore, he is convinced that it would be very hard to live without them. As a result from what has been stated, the short story writer has a very important and responsible task:

The man who makes art out of stories, the tale-teller, is satisfying one of the oldest human needs by giving public expression to his habit of fantasy. He illustrates for his listeners the human ability to organize

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<sup>15</sup> Cf. Hood, "Sober Coloring: the Ontology of Super-Realism" in *Narrative Voices*, edited by John Metcalf, p. 95.

<sup>16</sup> Hugh Hood a very disciplined writer who works according to a fixed timetable and synchronised rhythm:

"I have made it a habit for many years to work on a novel in the months from January to May. I'll do a first draft, take the ensuing summer and fall for other matters, then return to the novel the following winter and finish a final draft in May of the second year. / In the fall I'll write three or four stories. Novels: winter and spring. Stories: summer and fall."

There is a very strong symbiosis between his short stories and novels. When writing a novel, Hood often ruminates about his short stories. Above his desk one can find a list of the following eight stories to be written. When the story matures to the point that a title for it is chosen, Hood starts writing it. Cf. Hood, "Floating Southwards" in *Making It New*, edited by John Metcalf, pp. 105-106.



experience and interpret it by arranging events in formal patterns. Narrative doesn't have to be written down in a book. Books are just one of the ways of preserving and re-telling stories. [...] The story-teller's art is as rooted in nature as the arts of building and cooking and the rituals of courtship and the choice of a partner for life. Stories are the sweat produced by a man's effort to control and understand the world.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Hood, "Why Write at All?" in *Sixteen by Twelve*, edited by John Metcalf, pp. 86-87.

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