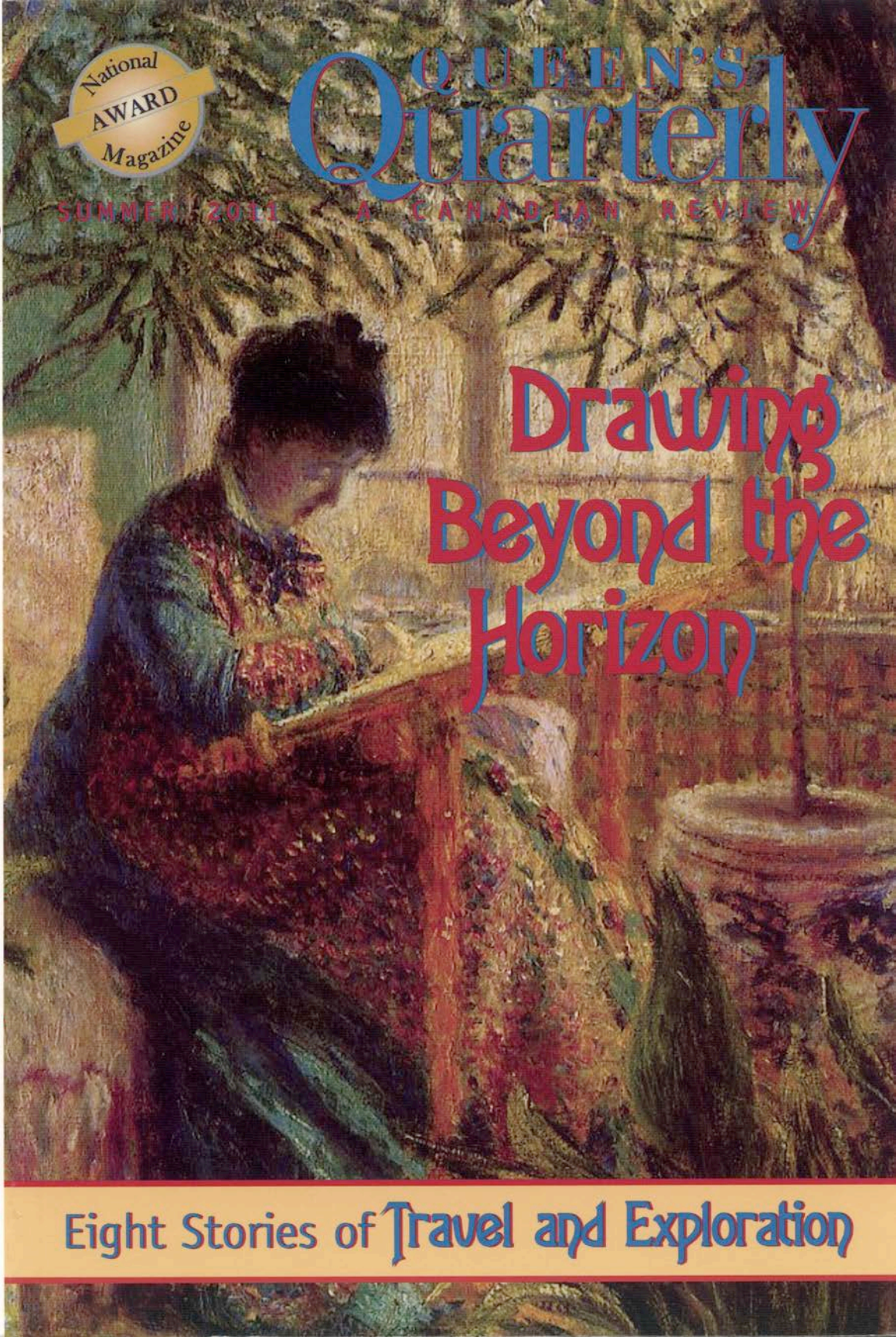

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THE HISTORY BEYOND THE HORIZON

TOM GERRY

"I Sing My Sorrow and I Paint My Joy": *Joni Mitchell's Songs and Images*

JONI MITCHELL is best known as a musician. She is a popular music superstar, and has been since the early 1970s. Surprisingly, considering Mitchell's status in the music world, she has often said that for her, painting is primary, music and writing secondary. Regarding *Mingus*, her 1979 jazz album, she commented that with it she "was trying to become the Jackson Pollock of music." In a 1998 interview Mitchell reflected, "I think of myself as a painter who writes music."[1]

In our era, when many critics and philosophers view interarts relationships with suspicion, it is remarkable that Mitchell persists so vigorously in creating work that involves multiple arts. To consider Mitchell's art as the productions of a multi-talented person does not get us far with the works themselves, since this approach immediately invokes the abstractions and speculations of psychology. On the other hand, postmodernism has taught us that there is no absolute, transcendent meaning available as content for various forms. In the face of such strong objections to coalescing arts, Mitchell insists through her works that her art is intrinsically multidisciplinary and needs to be understood as such.

Interarts relationships have been studied at least since Aristotle decreed that the *lexis*, the words, takes precedence over the *opsis*, the spectacle, of drama. Although recognized as being distinct, the arts have also commonly been discussed as though they are analogous. Music is said to possess colour and texture; paintings display rhythm

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and harmony; history is dramatic; a novel's characters are finely drawn. The use of terms from one art to describe a quality in another art, however, can lead to confusion. In the early 1940s, comparative literature scholar René Wellek warned against simply transferring key terms from art to art, advocating instead a comparison of structural components. Still, such transferred characterizations might be "merely" – innocently – metaphorical, ways to verbalize qualities using vocabulary from different fields.

But Leonard Diepeveen argues that most analogies with metaphors at their centre – rather than non-metaphorical objects – do not hold up. To assert that a poem and a painting share the (metaphorical) characteristic of "depth," for instance, entails over-generalizing at best, and at worst, "it hides significant differences in application between the halves of the comparison." "Depth" in paintings usually refers to a sense of three-dimensional space, whereas paintings are actually two-dimensional; "depth" in poems is altogether different, possibly referring to themes, allusions, or levels of language. Diepeveen stops short of altogether banning metaphor from interarts comparisons, mainly because so much of our language is metaphoric. He insists, though, that the basis for comparison must be stated in as "non-metaphoric" terms as possible, and that the uniqueness of each art being compared must be clearly established at the outset. He suggests, for example, that the technique of quoting from other works could be a similarity of some paintings and some poems.[2]

W.J.T. Mitchell, another contemporary authority on text-image studies, is also opposed to traditional methods of comparing writing with art. In his book *Picture Theory*, he argues that these comparisons, which unify the fields of representation and discourse, assume a single master code based on mimesis, semiosis, and/or communication. However, Professor Mitchell continues, sometimes text-image studies are not so fruitless. He says that William Blake's poems and engravings, for instance, are often interdependent and require consideration together – not only how the expressions in the different media compare, but how they are juxtaposed, blended, and separated.

To a greater or lesser extent, "all arts are composite arts," Professor Mitchell observes in *Picture Theory*.[3] Joni Mitchell is conscious of this fact; her grade seven teacher in Saskatoon, Arthur Kratzmann, told her that "If you can paint with a brush, you can paint with words." Her first album, *Joni Mitchell: Song to a Seagull*, is dedicated to Mr

Kratzmann. At the same time, she is deliberate about the particular characteristics of artistic media – words, music, and painting. Her songs and paintings do far more than juggle interarts metaphors; they attempt to create multidimensional effects by bringing together in a variety of ways the arts in which she works. In order to appreciate Mitchell's work, it is necessary to think over specific ways in which her works engage with multiple disciplines. The quotation in this article's title, for instance, underscores this awareness on the level of moods: "I sing my sorrow and I paint my joy."[4] A clue to why Mitchell relates song to sorrow and painting to joy emerges from a 1994 interview, when she specified that her songwriting began in earnest when she had to give up her daughter for adoption; and,


get out of the kitchen
get out of the kitchen
get out of
the

she says, "When my daughter returned to me, the gift kind of went with it. The songwriting was almost like something I did while I was waiting for my daughter to come back."[5]

MITCHELL'S work always reveals both its composite nature and its conscious incorporation of diverse arts. For the purposes of this exploration of her work, I will focus first on composite aspects, then on her maintenance of the media's distinctiveness, leaving musical aspects mainly in the background.

As with the *Joni Mitchell: Song to a Seagull* cover, in the painting *Get Out of the Kitchen* words are part of the painting. Mitchell is highlighting the graphic jolt of the alphabet as well as the words' linguistic values. The words appear disjointedly and repeatedly, almost as graffiti, echoing the defacement by the sketched moustache of what might have been a peaceful self-portrait. The command to "Get Out of the Kitchen" actually seems secondary in impact to the act of vandalizing a domestic scene.

With her song lyrics, in a complementary fashion, Mitchell often introduces intensely visual, painterly images. In "Stay in Touch," from the album *Taming the Tiger*, she writes: "We are burning brightly / Clinging like fire to fuel." In the song "Taming the Tiger" these images appear: "I watched the stars / Chuck down their spears / And a plane went blinking by." "The Three Great Stimulants," a song from *Dog Eat Dog*, presents a startling, highly visual image: "Last night I dreamed I saw the planet flicker / Great forests fell like buffalo." And in "Love or Money," from *Miles of Aisles*, Mitchell creates similes that picture a feeling: "Vaguely she floats and lacelike / Blown in like a curtain on the night wind." These and a vast array of other visual renderings have been important elements of the distinctiveness of Mitchell's lyrics throughout her career.

On another structural level, Mitchell has compared the green wash with which she has started paintings – such as the ones reproduced on the *Turbulent Indigo* and *Both Sides Now* album covers – to the drone effect of her guitar strings in certain of her characteristic tunings. This effect is particularly evident on *Turbulent Indigo*'s title song and "The Sire of Sorrow." She has also structured songs, for instance "The Reoccurring Dream" (*Chalk Mark in a Rainstorm*), as aural collages. (Indented italics and regular type distinguish voices.)

Recognize this?
Dreamer
There are lots of strings
Dream on
We can solve everything in science
Naturally
Science
It's a picture of how to get what you want out of life.

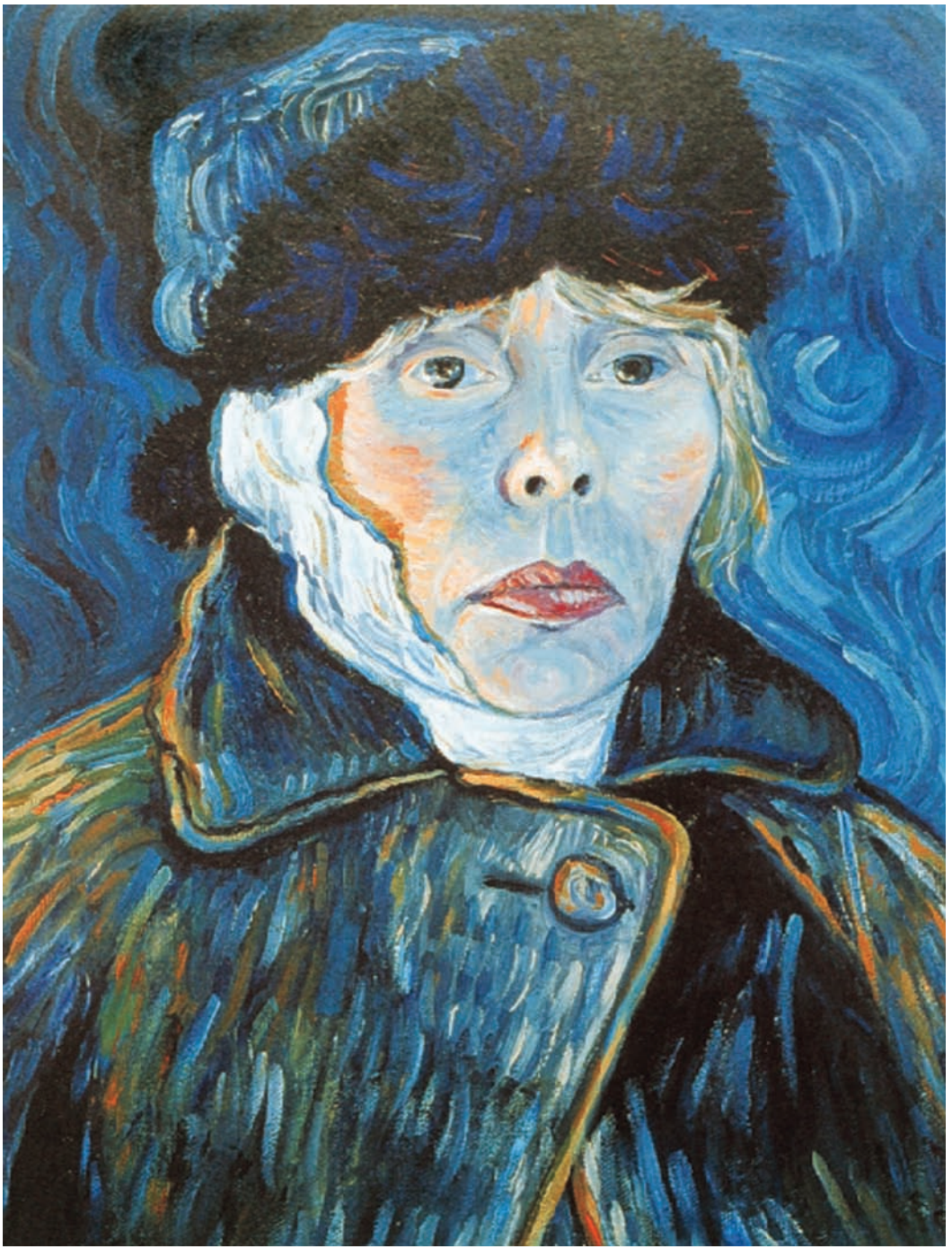
Quotation is a prominent technique in Mitchell's paintings and her song lyrics. As a compositional strategy, quotation is useful in both visual and verbal media. The album *Both Sides Now* takes quotation to a new maximum for her, in that she did not write most of the songs. She had previously covered several songs, but generally her earlier lyrics quote less entirely from other works. Some, like "Cool Water" (*Chalk Mark*), adapt lyrics by other writers. "God Must Be a Boogie Man" (*Mingus*) is derived from the opening of Charles Mingus's autobiography. "Love," from *Wild Things Run Fast*, is directly based on Corinthians II: 13. And "Taming the Tiger" quotes William Blake's well-known poem "The Tiger."

In her paintings too, quotation has played important roles. The most obvious example of her visual quoting is the cover painting for *Turbulent Indigo*, which is a self-portrait, with Mitchell as Vincent van Gogh as he painted himself.

On the inside cover of *Wild Things Run Fast* is reproduced a painting which features a book open at Henri Matisse's *La Danse*. This quotation of Matisse is especially significant because of his *Jazz* series, which, along with Blake's work, is a profound exploration of the relations among texts and images.

NOT only is Mitchell adept at creating composite works with quotations, interchanged images – painterly in lyrics, verbal in paintings – and structural reflections, but she also maintains the distinctiveness of the media in which she works. Mitchell has released twenty albums of music; she has also published her poems and lyrics as books. Her album covers, which package and entitle her music, nearly always exhibit her paintings.

We also see Mitchell keeping her words distinct from, but clearly related to, her painting in works where she illustrates her words. In these instances, Mitchell introduces strong elements of irony for



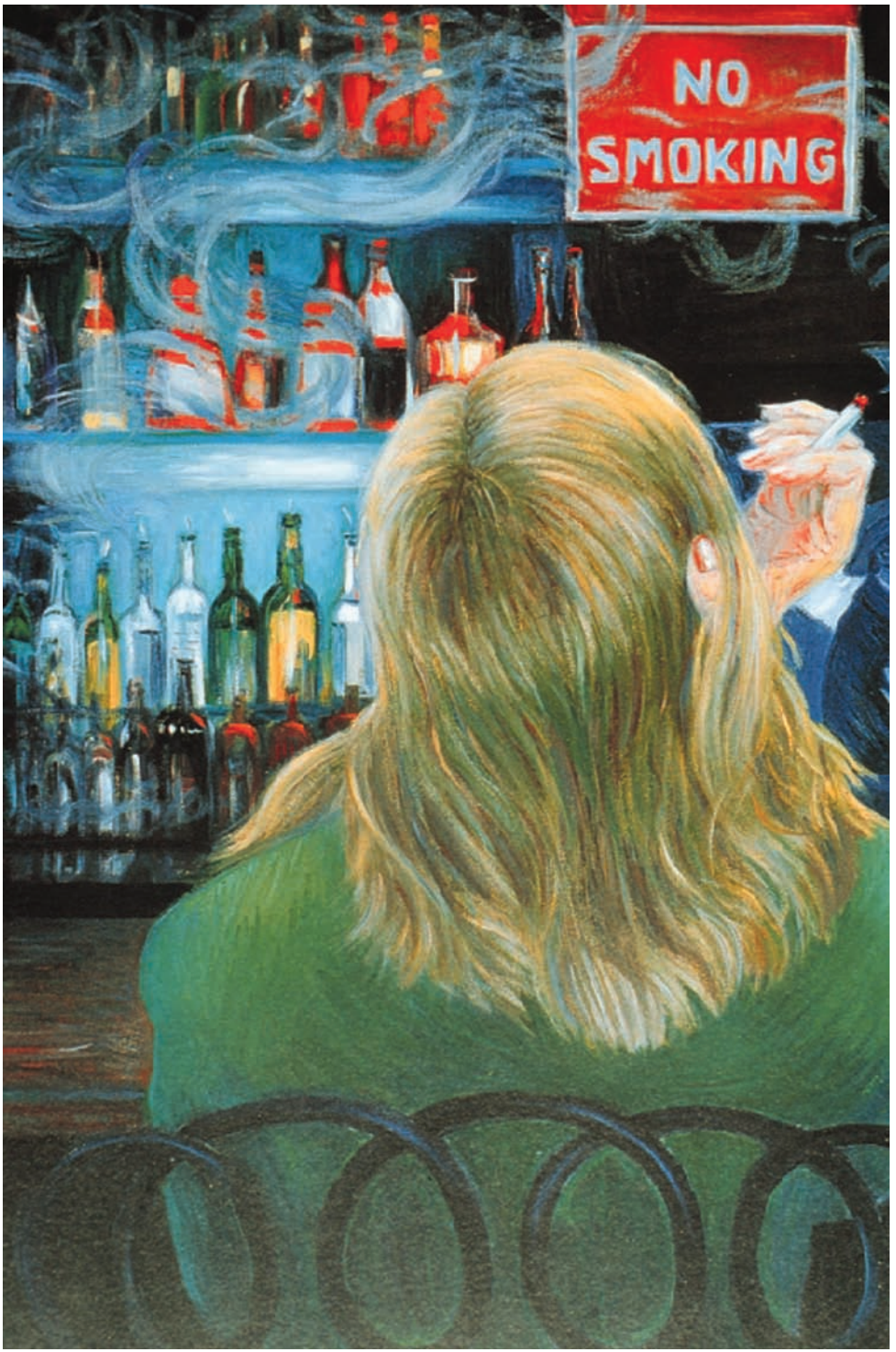
various purposes. The painting *Middle Point*, reproduced in the booklet accompanying *Taming the Tiger*, includes a frame with four words printed on it, surrounding the picture of a shoreline scene where a person sits. The playfulness of these near-homonyms occurs both on the level of their meanings and the interrelations of these meanings. How do "Idle" and "Ideal" go together, for example? And on the level of the words' interrelations with the image, is the person an "Idol"? If "Ideal" refers to the setting, whose ideal is it? Or is it the setting that is ideal? The words make up an idyll, a short description of a picturesque scene, and the image is an illustration of it.

Irony turns to outright contradiction in the paintings reproduced on the front and back covers of *Both Sides Now*. The "both sides" are once again self-portraits, one from the front, one from the rear. On the front Mitchell paints herself looking pensive, smoking, with a glass of wine on the bar in front of her. On the obverse, we see the back of Mitchell's head, some bottles, and some people dancing/embracing. These people, possibly lovers, are probably the subjects of the lone drinker-smoker's thoughts. Above the bottles is another shelf of

bottles, and a "No Smoking" sign. These words immediately create humour, of a sort created too by Magritte's "smoking" painting of a pipe entitled "Ceci n'est pas une pipe." The subject's disregard for the sign's directive adds to the self-portrait a hint of her being a protester as well as lonesome. Further, the disjunction of the words and the image in Mitchell's painting sets up an antagonism, well expressed by the lyrics of the Rodgers and Hart song "I Wish I Were in Love Again," included on *Both Sides Now*. The lyrics express the ironic consciousness that even though love is far from perfect, as compared to being alone, "I much prefer / the classic battle of him and her."

MITCHELL has noted that when she is confronted with a blockage in one medium, she turns to another. Usually, she says, the block is with words, whereas painting is more of a constant flow.[6] This observation leads to one of the most obvious aspects of Mitchell's writing and painting, its self-expressive nature. Self-portraits abound in the corpus of her paintings, as personal stories, moods and feelings, observations and opinions dominate the subject matter of her songs. This personal emphasis has put off some listeners and viewers, but also has attracted many. Fundamental to her powerful need for self-expression, Mitchell's writing, painting, and music are ways she constructs her self. From the beginning of her career, she has not let what she has called "the star-maker machinery" ("Free Man in Paris," *Court and Spark*) construct an image of Joni Mitchell. She has controlled her image, not in the service of greater success, but to facilitate authentic communication between herself and others. Mitchell has noted that her "main interest in life is human relationships and human interaction and the exchange of feelings person to person, on a one-to-one basis, or on a larger basis projecting to an audience."[7] The purpose of this exchange is indicated in "All I Want," the first song on *Blue*: "All I really really want our love to do / Is to bring out the best in me and in you too."

Mitchell has posed the question, "Will the real me please stand up?" She is aware, in other words, that she leads a multi-faceted life – or "lives."[8] In his book *The Alphabet Versus the Goddess: The Conflict Between Word and Image*, Leonard Shlain argues that the alphabet is left-brain-based, being linear and rigid, in contrast to graphic images which are right-brain-based, holistic and flowing. Shlain analyzes the disturbing, unbalancing effects of Western culture's adoption and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SMOKING

imposition of the alphabet. To create works which incorporate words, music, and painting is one of Mitchell's personal integrative techniques.

Mitchell has expressed the need for authenticity and honesty in human relationships in many ways. Explicitly, for instance, she has complained that "pop music … is full of falseness, just loaded with it …"[9] In her work she employs a number of strategies both to counteract such falsity, and to ensure that her work authentically expresses her self:

- she has changed styles as her own interests have changed, not as the music business has dictated;
- she has been frank about foregrounding her self-consciousness, rather than pretending to an "objective" stance;
- from time to time she has adopted disguises, again to enact dimensions of her self. The *Turbulent Indigo* cover's "Van Gogh" self-portrait is a good example, as are her disguises as a young black man and a magician on the cover of *Don Juan's Reckless Daughter*;
- she has portrayed changes, particularly in love, as integral to life.

Also indicative of Mitchell's insistence on genuineness in self-concepts and in relationships are her political songs. These songs run the gamut from almost entirely personal to newsily topical. Mitchell's 1985 album, *Dog Eat Dog*, is her most publicly political, with songs about capitalist greed, starving Ethiopians, destruction of the environment, and consumerism. *Shine*, her 2007 ballet score, returns to this political direction.

ANDRÉ MALRAUX, in *The Voices of Silence*, has observed that "every art purporting to represent involves a process of *reduction*. The painter reduces form to the two dimensions of [a] canvas; the sculptor reduces every movement, potential or portrayed, to immobility." Mitchell's use of words and images together resists this reduction. The melodic, musical aspects of her creations are less directly representative of "something out there" than they are attempts to enlarge lived experience by sharing moods and feelings.

Conversely, but still related to Mitchell's constructing her self, music, painting, and poems all make use of structures such as rhythm,

rhyme, repetition, songs and albums as forms, album covers, and picture frames. In this sense, these arts allow for closure and stability, if temporarily; simultaneously they open creative possibilities.

Thematically, Joni Mitchell's paintings, lyrics, and music constitute a sense of the inevitability of inconsistency and even paradox in life. For example, her 1969 song "Both Sides, Now" contains these words:

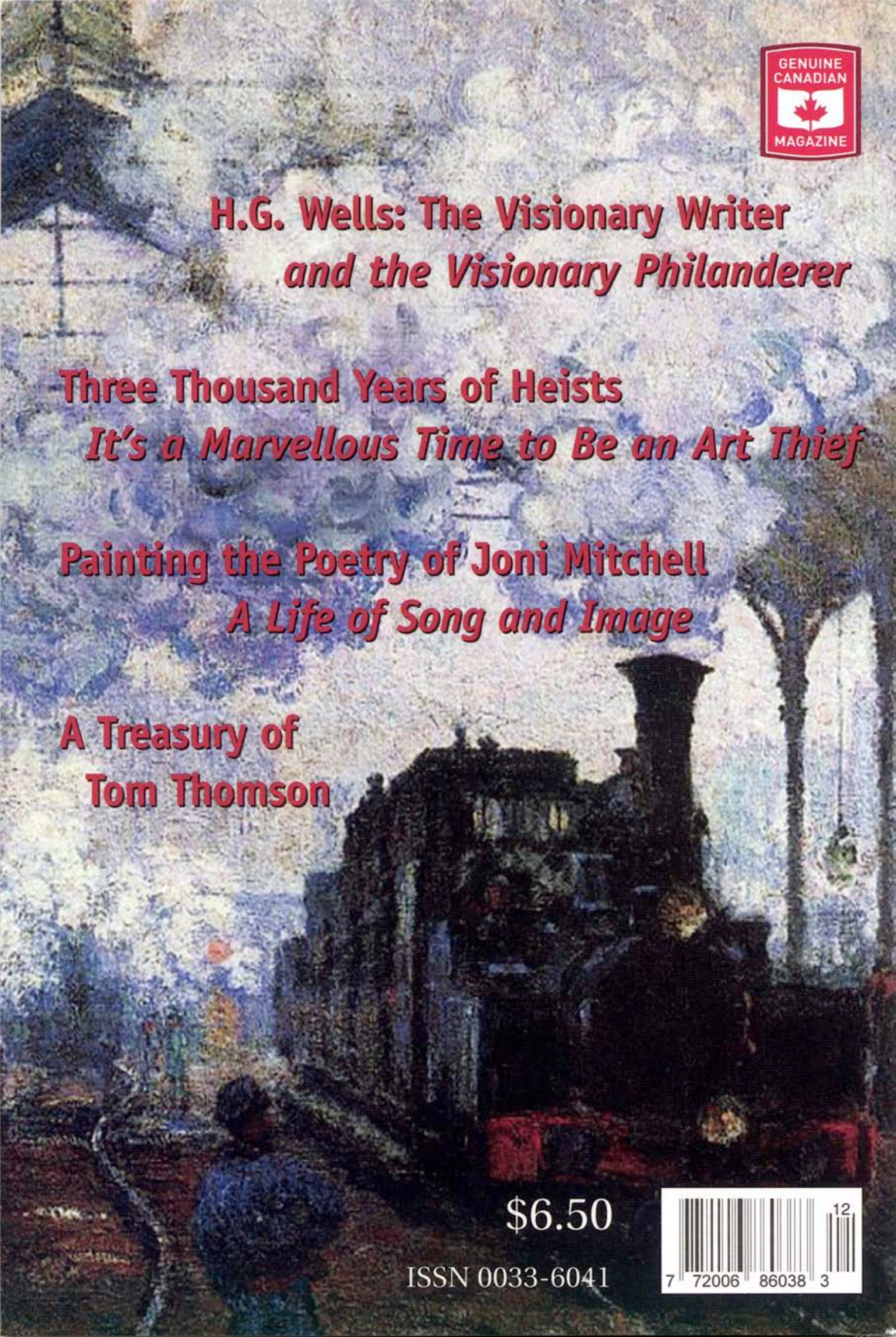
> I've looked at life from both sides now
> From up and down, and still somehow
> It's life's illusions I recall
> I really don't know life at all.

"Up and down" is reminiscent of Mitchell's saying, "I sing my sorrow and I paint my joy." Her 1998 album *Taming the Tiger* expresses much the same view, with great joy and acceptance. Addressing her mother, in the album's final song, "Face Lift," she sings:

> I'm middle-aged, Mama
> And time moves swift
> And you know
> Happiness
> Is the best
> Face lift!

Notes

1 Stacey Luftig, *The Joni Mitchell Companion: Four Decades of Commentary* (New York: Schirmer, 2000), pp. 115, 203.
2 Leonard Diepeveen, "Shifting Metaphors: Interarts Comparisons and Analogy," *Word and Image*, 5:2 (April 1989), 208, 209–13.
3 W. J. T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), pp. 84, 94–95.
4 Anne Bayin, "Joni Mitchell: Portrait of the Artist as a Young Woman," *Elm Street*, November 2000, p. 99.
5 Alexandra Gill, "Joni Mitchell in Person," *Globe and Mail*, 17 February 2007, p. R15.
6 Luftig, pp. 53, 109.
7 Luftig, p. 72.
8 Luftig, pp. 61, 62.
9 Luftig, p. 257.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