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Joni Mitchell and the Literature of Confession

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Around 1970, a new genre of music emerged that was sometimes mistaken for folk, but which was actually an element of rock and roll and included the music of the singer-songwriters James Taylor, Carole King, Carly Simon, and Jackson Brown.[1] Joni Mitchell would become the most important contributor to this genre, both because of the longevity of her career and aesthetic achievement. The new music was connected to folk in the sense that some of its most important performers, including Mitchell, had begun their careers in the folk scene. And, since the music was less raucous and softer than what had been typical of rock, the mistake is understandable. But the differences are more significant. While folk music generally made use only of acoustic instruments, these singer-songwriters were often backed by rock bands, including drum kits and electric guitars. The music usually did not sound traditional; it bore the influence of numerous kinds of popular music, and often, as was the case with both Taylor and Mitchell, involved significant musical innovations. Most important, where folk had been public music that celebrated the people and their traditional forms, these singer-songwriters wrote about their private experiences. As this suggests, confessionalism was central to this new genre. When the confessional songs of Mitchell and Taylor first appeared, they were likened to the confessional poetry of Robert Lowell, Sylvia Plath, and others that had emerged around 1960. I want to explore in this essay not only this connection but also the larger literary and cultural confessionalism that developed in the 1960s and became even more significant in the 1970s. Putting the work of Mitchell and the other singer-songwriters in the context of the larger confessionalism of the period helps us understand why it emerged and what it meant, but it is also vital to understanding how the confessional mode differs from medium to medium. Confessionalism in songwriting is not the same as confessionalism in poetry, just as confessionalism in fiction isn't the same as confessionalism in cinema.

When people hear a work of art called "confessional," they often assume that the term primarily refers to the truth of its representation of the author's own life. But that is not how the literary critics who first identified confessional poetry understood the term. The key issue for M. L. Rosenthal is the way that the self is presented in the poems, the poet appearing as him- or herself and not in the convention of an invented "speaker."[2] As another literary critic explained after Rosenthal's term had

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gained wide currency, "A confessional poem would seem to be one in which the writer speaks *to* the reader, telling him, without the mediating presence of imagined event or *persona*, something about his life. . . . The sense of direct speech addressed to an audience is central to confessional writing."[3] In my book *Rock Star: The Making of Cultural Icons from Elvis to Springsteen,* I argue that if we understand *confessional* in this way, then Joni Mitchell's songs seem to fit better than most of the poems that have been called confessional.[4] That's because many of Mitchell's songs and those of other singer-songwriters are even more direct in their address than are most confessional poems.

To limit the discussion of the "confessional" to poetry, however, is to ignore the fact of a much broader movement of confessional art in the 1960s and 1970s. In 1979, Christopher Lasch published a best-selling book called *The Culture of Narcissism* in which he devotes some pages to confessional writing, none of it poetry. His examples include Norman Mailer's *The Armies of the Night: History as a Novel/The Novel as History*, Phillip Roth's *Portnoy's Complaint*, and several novels by Erica Jong.[5] To those works Lasch cites, one should also add the films of such directors like Woody Allen and Paul Mazursky, the movement called the "New Journalism," associated with Joan Didion, Tom Wolfe, and Hunter Thompson, and, more recently, the growing popularity of the memoir. All of these forms represent the increased importance of the self and its subjective perspective in the culture, and together with singer-songwriter music should be understood as a significant cultural movement.

Formally, what these various instances of the confession share is the effect of direct address, the convention that the "author" is speaking in an unmediated way to us as an audience. In novels, that can be a first-person narrator, a fictional "author," like Roth's Portnoy, or it can be the actual author representing him or herself as a character, something Mailer does in *Armies.* Lasch observes of the confessional mode an "increasing interpenetration of fiction, journalism, and autobiography."[6] *Portnoy's Complaint* is literally a confession, as the novel is told to the narrator's psychoanalyst, but Portnoy is not Roth, and this novel makes no claim to be telling the truth about the author's life. When Mailer labeled *Armies* a "nonfiction novel," however, he was asserting the factual character of his reporting while drawing on the formal devices usually reserved for fictional narrative. There are two cultural developments entailed here. One is that an author is interesting enough to be a protagonist of his own novel. While the first generation of literary celebrities such as F. Scott Fitzgerald and Ernest Hemingway were known for various extraliterary exploits, they did not make themselves the main characters of their own fiction, but that is exactly what Mailer does in *Armies* and several books that follow it. Mailer had pioneered more open forms of self-promotion and had titled an earlier book, a collection of fiction, nonfiction, and poetry, *Advertisements for Myself.* Paradoxically, *Armies* is written in the third person, so the author speaks of himself as "Mailer." The confessional character of the work comes from the frequent focus on Mailer's inner states and the author's frank appraisals of celebrities who turned up at the anti-Vietnam-War protest in Washington, which is the novel's central event. The increased interest in authors' extraliterary lives is one of the conditions for the emergence of the singer-songwriter.

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The second cultural development is the increased recognition of subjectivity in genres where objectivity had previously been assumed as the norm. *Armies* won the Pulitzer Prize for nonfiction and the National Book Award in arts and letters, indicating that it was not understood primarily as a novel. Indeed, the book is often regarded as a chief instance of the New Journalism, a trend usually traced to Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood*, of which the term "nonfiction novel" was first used. Capote used novelistic techniques, but *In Cold Blood* is narrated in the third person by a seemingly omniscient narrator. The pattern in the New Journalism, as illustrated by Hunter Thompson's *Hell's Angels* and Tom Wolfe's *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*, however, was for first-person narration in which the subjective state and impressions of that narrator are part of what is reported. Joan Didion's essays, collected in *Slouching Toward Bethlehem* and *The White Album*, involved significant personal revelation and a subjective approach. *The White Album*, similar to much confessional poetry, discusses in detail her nervous breakdown. In these texts, the author is not a character as in Mailer but expresses subjectivity openly as a participant in the events being described. The assumption here seems to be similar to the credo of cinema verité, which was that the presence of the camera needed to be acknowledged in order not to falsify the event being recorded. In New Journalism, the presence and perspective of the author likewise must be openly represented, avoiding a claim to reportorial disinterest.

By the time Lasch published *The Culture of Narcissism,* he could also have used film to support his observation of the widespread presence of the confessional mode. Two influential examples are Paul Mazursky's *Blume in Love* and Woody Allen's *Annie Hall*. These films mirror the different approaches of Roth and Mailer, in that *Blume* is a film about a fictional character confessing, while *Annie Hall*, because its director and writer is also the film's male lead, seems to be the author's own confession. Mazursky's film was described by Pauline Kael as "a hip updating of *The Awful Truth*," Leo McCarey's 1937 screwball comedy, both films beginning with a divorce and ending with a reconciliation. But while McCarey's film is conventionally "narrated" by the camera, Blume, played by George Segal, narrates much of his story in voice-over. That Blume is unhappy and still in love with the wife who left him after he cheated on her makes the character of that narration confessional. *Annie Hall* begins with Woody Allen addressing the camera directly, making the entire film the confession, not literally of Allen, but of the character he plays, Alvy Singer. Yet because Allen was known as a standup comedian, the film's opening invites the audience to ignore the distinction. Like confessional prose and poetry, *Annie Hall* produces a powerful sense of direct address which seems to give the audience access to the artist's inner life. This confessional mode of cinema would be one to which Allen repeatedly returns from the late 1970s through the 1990s, and can be found in different forms and in different degrees in other "relationship stories" of the period, such as *When Harry Met Sally* and *High Fidelity*.[7] The genre of "relationship story" is especially relevant because the analysis of love, courtship, and marriage found there is the same kind of activity Joni Mitchell pursues in many of her songs.

The confessionalism of the nonfiction novel and of film was predated by confessionalism in poetry, which is in many respects more similar to song lyrics.

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Lowell's *Life Studies* is the work around which the concept of confessional poetry was first developed. Rosenthal was the first to use the term in a review of the book, and he later developed the concept at greater length in his book *The Modern Poets*. Besides Lowell, prominent poets associated with confessionalism include three who studied with him—Plath, W. D. Snodgrass, and Anne Sexton—as well as John Berryman. As I have noted, confessional poetry is defined by the treatment of the self in the poems, the poet speaking as him or herself without the mediation of a fictional "speaker." This distinguished confessional poetry from the high modernism of Yeats, Pound, and Eliot, who were associated with Eliot's dictum that "poetry is an escape from personality." Confessional poems are not necessarily literal in their direct address; Berryman's *Dream Songs*, for instance, are about a character named Henry whom the poet described as his alter ego. However, even though Henry is not the same as the poet, we read him as revealing the poet's self; confessional poetry is about the poet regardless of the literal subject. Many of the poems in *Life Studies* are focused on Lowell's parents, but the context makes clear that it is their relation to the poet that matters. Confessional poetry was associated with particular kinds of revelations, things that one would be more inclined to confess rather than those about which one would be likely to brag. Problems of mental illness are a frequent topic, as are alcoholism, sexual indiscretions, marital difficulties, and so on. The threat of and even the desire for suicide may be the most shocking of confessional poetry's revelations, one that is reinforced by the fact that Plath, Berryman, and Sexton did take their own lives. Rosenthal asserts,

> Confessional poetry is a poetry of suffering. The suffering is generally "unbearable" because the poetry so often projects breakdown and paranoia. Indeed, the psychological condition of most of the confessional poets has long been the subject of common literary discussion—one cannot say gossip exactly, for their problems and confinements in hospitals are quite often the specific subjects of the poems.[8]

While confessional prose is sometimes seen as produced for the purpose of self-promotion—even when the works describe behavior that is less than admirable—confessional poetry was described by Rosenthal as "self-therapeutic" in motive, the poet seeking to get well by writing about his or her problems and their sources. This implies that the poems are not some sort of pure emotional outpouring, but rather a distanced reconsideration of past experience. Lowell's poems all fit that description, even if the events and emotions described are raw and undisguised and may therefore shock. There are poems by Plath and Sexton which seem more like primal-scream therapy than psychoanalysis, but that doesn't mean these poems were not intended as self-therapy. Rosenthal places the poets on a sort of scale of "intellectual objectivity," with Lowell at one end as the most "objective," and Plath and Sexton, having less distance between poetic expression and subjective experience, at the other.[9] Of course, the work of all of the confessional poets I've mentioned here is finely wrought verse. So even those poems that express extreme emotions do so in language that one recognizes as art.

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Lasch identifies a therapeutic character in confessional prose, but for him this is evidence of the general narcissism his book is critiquing. Therapeutic prose is contrasted with socially critical writing, the former being self-indulgent and uninterested in the larger world. Confessional poetry, however, was from Rosenthal's initial description of it always associated with social critique. He reads Lowell's poems in *Life Studies* not as self-absorbed but as revealing "the whole maggoty character" of American culture, "which [the poet] feels he carries about in his own person" and is thus looking "at the culture through the window of psychological breakdown."[10] Elsewhere, Rosenthal contrasts the poetry of Lowell and Plath with that of other poets whose work seems to amount to mere "private notations."[11] Lowell and Plath succeed in representing their individual suffering in a way that transforms it into cultural critique, putting the poet "at the center of the poem in such a way as to make his [or her] psychological vulnerability and shame an embodiment of [their] civilization."[12] It is important to keep in mind that when these poets were writing the poems in question, the late 1950s in Lowell's case and the early 1960s in Plath's, critique was not commonly associated with poetry, which was generally approached under the doctrine of art for art's sake. Moreover, the civil rights, women's, and anti-war movements were either in their infancy or waiting to be born. Lowell would go on to emerge as a poet strongly identified with the anti-war movement and social justice, while Plath would be regarded as an essential voice by second-wave feminism, but both articulated their critique in advance of the movements with which they were associated.

One reason that Plath's poems resonated so powerfully with the women's movement is that they illustrated one of its most influential slogans, "the personal is the political." That they did resonate is demonstrated by Elaine Showalter in the second issue of the feminist theory journal, *Signs,* where she observes, "A relatively tiny group of women writers has engaged the attention of critics so persistently over the past five years that they could be said to constitute a new 'great tradition.' While the current interest in women writers encompasses a number of familiar names, the work on Charlotte Brontë, George Eliot, Virginia Woolf, Doris Lessing, and Sylvia Plath predominates."[13] Plath is the only poet mentioned and Lessing one of only two contemporary writers. Plath was recognized for giving expression to the suffering caused by patriarchal domination in the 1950s before the emergence of second-wave feminism. Showalter notes that "her suicide, in conjunction with the suicides of Virginia Woolf and Anne Sexton, has made her a tragic heroine."[14] Because the autobiographical stance of the poems creates an "identification of Plath the sufferer with Plath the creator," this heroic status must be a part of the poems' meaning.[15]

This is not to say that there was unanimity in women's judgment of Plath, nor that she was herself understood as a feminist. Jane Marcus asserts that "Plath was not a feminist; her novels and poems were not feminist."[16] Rather, in Marcus's view, Plath's work expresses an "obscene" hatred of men, and she finds "the hatred in the poems is enhanced by the elegance of form, the strength of line, irony, wit, and control," producing an aestheticization of "death as revenge" that the critic likens to the fascism and anti-Semitism of Yeats and Pound.[17] Marcus's pointed feminist critique echoes that made by other critics who observed that Plath's use of the Holocaust to express her personal suffering is unjustified. Irving Howe, for example, criticized Plath for the

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way she, in "Lady Lazarus," "enlarge[s] the magnitude of her [suicide attempt] through illegitimate comparisons with the Holocaust" and for "a willed hysteric tone, the forcing of language to make up for an inability to develop the matter."[18] Joni Mitchell's own critique of Plath and Sexton is less pointed, but not inconsistent with these judgments. As interviewer Stephen Holden reports,

> she heatedly rejects any comparisons of her work to that of women like Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton. "The only poets who influenced me were Leonard Cohen and Bob Dylan," she insisted. "What always bugged me about poetry in school was the artifice of it. When Dylan wrote, 'You've got a lot of nerve to say you are my friend,' as an opening line [of "Positively Fourth Street"], the language was direct and undeniable. As for Plath and Sexton, I'm sorry, but I smell a rat. There was a lot of guile in the work, a lot of posturing. It didn't really get down to the nitty-gritty of the human condition. And there was the suicide-chic aspect."[19]

As I have argued elsewhere, Mitchell's rejection of confessional poetry as an influence does not negate the importance of that body of work for the reception of hers and others' confessional songs of the period.[20] Indeed, Mitchell herself did not always reject the connection. In a 1979 interview, she said she "became a confessional poet" because her fans' adoration was "too much to live up to. I thought, 'You don't even know who I am. You want to worship me?' . . . I thought, 'You better know who you're applauding up here.' It was a compulsion, to be honest with my audience."[21] Note that what Mitchell is claiming for Dylan and, by implication, herself is an even more direct address than that of the confessional poets. I believe she is correct in this judgment.

Confessionalism in popular music was first popularized, not by Mitchell, but by James Taylor in the form of his 1970 hit single, "Fire and Rain," and Taylor's first two albums have more in common with confessional poetry than do Mitchell's songs or those of most other singer-songwriters. Like the most important confessional poets, Taylor's self-titled first album dealt, in "Knocking Around the Zoo," with his experience of confinement in a mental hospital. The self-therapeutic character of the album was noted by Jon Landau in his *Rolling Stone* review: "Mr. Taylor is not kicking out any jams. He seems more interested in soothing his troubled mind."[22] *James Taylor* did not reach a wide audience on its release, but *Sweet Baby James* (1970) did. While this album is less specific about the singer's problems, it is even more starkly an instance of direct expression. The album's hit, "Fire and Rain," produces a powerful autobiographical effect through lyrics, music, and production. The song begins, "Just yesterday morning," making it the revelation of a particular loss, one so devastating that the singer "can't remember who to send" his response to.[23] This kind of suffering was not the usual subject of popular songs, which conventionally deal with lost love rather than lost lives. While the song is based on events and conditions of Taylor's personal life, the lyrics are not explicit enough to allow the specifics to be easily grasped. The song works not because we know the references, but because we feel the singer's pain.

Joni Mitchell's first confessional songs may be found on *Ladies of the Canyon* (1970). Her earlier recordings were more folk in style, and she was originally marketed as a

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folk performer. *Ladies* combines impersonal songs like "Circle Game," "Woodstock," and "Big Yellow Taxi" with songs like "Willy," which begins, "Willy is my child, he is my father."[24] "Willy" is a love song, but one that analyzes as well as celebrates a relationship. It is confessional in the sense that the singer is revealing something about a particular relationship rather than discussing love in general. This gives the song an autobiographical cast whether or not listeners were aware that the song was written about Graham Nash, with whom she had lived in Laurel Canyon. Because popular music celebrities are the subject of more published gossip than poets, such information would have been available to Joni's fans, but there is no evidence that such knowledge was for most listeners significant in their appreciation of the song. Indeed, before David Yaffe's recent biography, *Reckless Daughter*, in which Yaffe confidently asserts their identities, the men Joni wrote about in her songs remained, as an earlier biography attests,[25] a matter of speculation. What is most significant about Willy is not its source but its analytic stance, something that would be the hallmark of Mitchell's later confessional songs.

Blue (1971) was Mitchell's first album to fully exhibit the characteristics of the new genre; it was her breakthrough recording and it remains her greatest achievement. All of the tracks are confessional, and none of them sound a bit like folk music. Indeed, reviews considered whether it might be best understood as a collection of art songs (Dan Heckman) or of cabaret music (*Stereo Review* called the songs "torch songs").[26] The confessional character of *Blue* did not, for the most part, lie in its apparent simplicity, although most tracks feature relatively sparse arrangements, often with only piano accompaniment. The songs themselves are complex musically, while the lyrics, while not in general obscure, are complex in the ideas they present and in their form, which often ignores typical pop patterns. "Blue," for example, dispenses with the usual form of the pop song in favor of something much more like free verse, using rhyming triplets but not in any regular pattern. The song is addressed to Blue, but it's not clear whether Blue is a person or a mental state:

> Blue, here is a song for you
> Ink of a pin
> Underneath the skin
> An empty place to fill in[27]

The confessionalism of *Blue's* songs has been most often illustrated by lines from "River," to which Mitchell herself has called attention: "I have, on occasion, sacrificed myself and my own emotional makeup, . . . singing 'I'm selfish and I'm sad,' for instance. We all suffer for our loneliness, but at the time of *Blue*, our pop stars never admitted these things."[28] "I'm selfish and I'm sad" is a frank admission in the plainest of language, and Mitchell describes it as a sacrifice, suggesting that writing or even singing the song was a sort of ordeal, perhaps as much because of having abandoned the usual social mask as of the feelings expressed. The song does express suffering, but, unlike "Fire and Rain," it seems less like a cry for help than a piece of self-analysis, which is a good description of the project of the album as a whole.

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There is, of course, a self-analytic dimension to the confessional mode in general, and Lasch observed that self-disclosure allows writers "to achieve a critical distance from the self" and that "confessional writers walk a fine line between self-analysis and self-indulgence."[29] But Mitchell's songs on *Blue* and her other confessional albums are more analytic than most confessional prose or poetry. Like most of Mitchell's confessional albums, *Blue*'s focus is on relationships, and the singer's attitude toward them is repeatedly presented as ambivalence. "All I Want," for example, reveals the emotional waffling and exacting dualities that can accompany the quest for self-knowledge; traveling "a lonely road" and "looking for something," the singer vacillates: "Oh I hate you some, I hate you some / I love you some / Oh I love you when I forget about me."[30] "A Case of You" begins by saying that love has been lost, but the chorus proclaims that the singer could still drink a case of the apparently former lover. Like the characters in many films, Mitchell seems to be describing over and over the experience of being caught in a double-bind of the desire for intimacy and the desire for freedom. Many of the songs are about travel, both the singer's and her partner's, which represents both freedom and loneliness. The songs offer no solution to the conflicting desires they express, suggesting that the best we can do is to live with them. In that regard, the songs are similar to most of the relationship stories, but while those films have mainly male protagonists, Mitchell represents a woman's experience. That a woman could articulate the same ambivalence about love as men have long done was unusual in 1971.

On *Blue*, the language that Mitchell uses might be best described as conversational, not only because of her choice of words but also because her lines sometimes do not obey a regular rhythm or make use of a consistent pattern of rhyme. "River" uses mainly off or half-rhymes, and the lack of rhyme on the chorus is especially notable. "A Case of You" contains lines that run much longer than the song's rhythm should permit. This is done in part to enable the song to include pieces of remembered conversation—a technique found also in "The Last Time I Saw Richard"—and both songs retell in some detail what seem to be particular incidents in the singer's life. That specificity is a feature of confessional songwriting as well as much confessional poetry. But while a remembered conversation is an element of many of the poems in *Life Studies*, Lowell's conversations take place farther in the past and involve his parents and grandparents. Mitchell seems to be reporting much more recent incidents, and her family history is not her subject here or elsewhere.

Prior to writing these songs, Mitchell had rejected Graham Nash's marriage proposal—even as she called him the love of her life—because she feared having to sacrifice her artistic goals to play the role of helpmeet and homemaker. This is the context for "My Old Man," which proclaims that the singer and her man don't need to be married, while "The Last Time I Saw Richard" seems to present both Richard and his bride as shadow figures—people the singer refused to become.

> Richard got married to a figure skater and he bought her a dishwasher and a coffee percolator and he drinks at home now most nights with the TV on and all the house lights left up bright[31]

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The fact that Mitchell chose not to marry in order to pursue her career represents a central biographical difference between her and the poets Plath and Sexton. Their coming of age in the 1950s in upper-middle-class households meant that they could only imagine themselves as wives and mothers whatever else they might do. This is largely the substance of Plath's unhappiness, and, as we saw, why she was both attractive to feminists and not understood to be one of them. Born more than ten years later and not bound by expectations of academic achievement or class status, Joan Anderson experienced the struggle and the freedom to define her own identity. She married Chuck Mitchell, a fellow folksinger, after giving birth to another man's child in the hopes of providing her with a father. She decided, however, to give the baby up for adoption, and the marriage lasted less than two years. According to Yaffe, Joni called Chuck "my first major exploiter, a complete asshole," but Chuck did help Joni set up her own publishing company.[32] That Joni was able to leave and go on to make her art central in her life made her an unusual woman even in the 1960s. The fact that she would retain control of the publishing rights to her songs and that she has had complete artistic control of her albums distinguishes her not just from most women in the music industry, but from most men as well.[33]

The song on *Blue* that might be closest to confessional poetry is "Little Green," which is now known to be about the child Mitchell gave up for adoption. It is paradoxical that while the events behind the song are traditionally the stuff of confession, the song's reference to them is obscure. This obscurity itself makes it more like the poetry, and less like the direct address of many other confessional songs. Critics did not get the title reference until Mitchell herself explained the song when she and her daughter were reunited in 1997. The song itself begins ambiguously, referring to a "her" whom we should call "green," but not letting us in on who she is. The chorus refers to "a little green,"[34] and gives us a series of hopeful images, but ends with the prediction that there will sometimes be sorrow. The last verse describes the adoption decision obliquely as signing papers but asserts that the emotions accompanying the decision do not include shame. The refusal to be ashamed should be read as a statement of strength, something that cuts against the vulnerability often expressed elsewhere on the album.

Mitchell's confessions, then, are those of a woman who has already come to consciousness, but who did not need the women's movement to do it. This may account for her rejection of the label "feminist," which she asserted in 1991 was "too divisional for me."[35] It may also account for why her songs are less angry than the poems of Plath and Sexton. Of course, there are other explanations that should not be excluded, especially that the two poets seem to have suffered more severely than Mitchell from mental illness. Mitchell did suffer from depression, something that might have been gathered from listening to *Blue* had the disease acquired the currency in 1971 that it would have by the 1990s. After recording that album, she went to live in the wilderness of northwest Canada where she claims to have read every work of psychology in the library in an attempt to figure out her own unhappiness. That struggle yielded *For the Roses* (1972), a record that is more angry but less sad than *Blue*. Where *Blue* tends to make the singer the cause of her own unhappiness, *For the Roses* accuses men of failing her. "Blonde in the Bleachers" says of the unfaithful man to whom the song is

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addressed, "'Cause it seems like you've got to give up / Such a piece of your soul / When you give up the chase." Yet, the songs here seem to render the singer more the victim than do those on *Blue*, presenting her as more willing to accept mistreatment.

Another way that confessional songwriting differs from confessional poetry is that popular songs are typically less dark in tone. This is doubtless in part a necessity of selling songs that will be listened to for entertainment, often in social settings, rather than pondered over by lone readers. It is in part an effect of the music, which is not funereal, even when it is somewhat sad. And even the darkest songs, like "Fire and Rain," contain hopeful lines. *Blue* is not, as one critic asserted, "doleful"; the singer of these songs is not wallowing in self-pity or contemplating suicide.[36] Rather, she is trying to think her way out of contradictions of self and to comprehend the minds of others. And if the emotional tone of "River" is made darker by the minor key and slower tempo, other cuts on the album are musically upbeat even if the lyrics are not. "All I Want," for example, is jaunty, even though it verbalizes the singer's loneliness and is addressed to someone she both loves and hates. "California," similarly, is an infectious ode to the place where the singer wants to return despite bad news and loneliness. The songs "Carey" and "My Old Man" are more upbeat in both music and lyrics, even though both express a degree of dissatisfaction or unhappiness. Rather than presenting us with unbearable suffering, these songs give us a life in which the blues are frequent, but exist in tension with hope and joy. *For the Roses* included Mitchell's first hit single, "You Turn Me On I'm a Radio," which Ellen Willis describes as "an irresistible tour de force, a metaphysical poem . . . based on the crucial technological metaphor for rock and roll. Witty, playful, gently self-mocking, it explores the lighthearted surface that half covers and half exposes Mitchell's passionate fatalism (or fatalistic passion)."[37] The song is infectious with a great hook, but it is also the confession of a woman who will put up with a man who often makes her unhappy.

The project of self-analysis and the related project of an analysis of love in contemporary culture reaches its culmination in *Court and Spark* (1974). The songs here are more distanced from particular events in the singer's life, but still seem to be serious, witty ruminations on the difficulty of relationships, placing the singer at the center of most of them. There are two songs, however, "Free Man in Paris" and "Raised on Robbery," which clearly are not sung from the songwriter's perspective. The former is a confession of a man who laments the earlier freedom he had in Paris but has given up for his career in the music industry, a song usually said to be about David Geffen, whose home Mitchell platonically shared for a time. The latter is about a woman trawling a bar for a man to take her home and pay her for the privilege. The character evoked has little to do with Mitchell's persona, making the song among the least confessional of her work during this period. Even the songs focused on the "I" who is singing are less direct, in part because the events described are often depicted as patterns rather than single events. This is someone who has a sense of how she is and how things are, and has accepted these conditions. This makes the songs on *Court and Spark* more like popular songs in general, even though their analytic look at relationships remains unusual.

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Analysis of love and sex is what all of the songs on *Court and Spark* have in common. Just as the relationship stories then emerging in cinema are not love stories—*Annie Hall* is a comedy about a failed relationship—but stories about love, *Court and Spark* contains, as Loraine Alterman said in reviewing the album, not love songs but "songs about love."[38] And, while most relationship stories were told from a male perspective and all of them were directed by men, Mitchell gives us a woman's perspective on love. The attitude conveyed on tracks such as "Car on a Hill" or "People's Parties" is self-reflection, the singer musing on the state of her own life and emotions and comparing them to those of others. Where *Blue* had located the source of the singer's unhappiness mainly in herself, *For the Roses* mainly in the men who let her down, here the source seems to be in relationships, in the patterns of interaction between lovers. The singular relationships depicted on *Blue* have given way to "The Same Situation," repeated over many years, of love not turning out to be what romance had promised. Yet the singer of these songs cannot give up on relationships, either. As "Help Me" reveals, she still falls in love too fast; the singer, like the man to whom the song is addressed, loves her loving but loves her freedom more. There is in these lines a sense that Mitchell is now identifying with men like those whose hands she says, in "Blonde in the Bleachers," could not be held for very long. The strong implication of "Court and Spark" is that there is no moving beyond this contradiction that we want to love but that it will not be enough.

One wonders why Joni Mitchell has not become the feminist heroine that Plath and Sexton became. Is it because the experience of unbearable but unresolvable oppression is more politically useful than the example of triumph in the face of oppression? Is Mitchell's example not relevant because it suggested that women could achieve equality if they only were willing to make the necessary sacrifices? Or is it merely that she is a singer-songwriter and a popular musician, making her work low culture? The controversy over Bob Dylan's being awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature suggests that this cultural divide is still very much with us. While I would argue that Mitchell's songs are aesthetically superior, the Nobel was awarded, one assumes, because of Dylan's cultural impact. There are ways in which Dylan's example prepared the way for Mitchell, and she has acknowledged his influence; his impact, however, was also a function of his gender as has been the greater seriousness with which his work has been treated.

Joni Mitchell's songs expand our conception of the confessional mode. While critics of the confessionalism of the singer-songwriters often associated it with narcissism and self-absorption, it is better understood as self-analysis and social critique. The issue is not a matter of explicitly political positions staked out by the singer-songwriters, but rather of the songs, like the poems, illustrating that individual lives matter. This is a political position, one often associated with the right; but second-wave feminism challenged that by starting with the lives of individual women as the basis for its campaign for gender equality. The point, of course, is that the individual life is always also a social life, and its meaning is never merely private. Neither the poets' nor Mitchell's use of autobiography was an exercise in self-absorption: it was the bridge by which they sought to understand the larger world.

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