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Hollow: "Cactus Tree" and the Signs of Freedom

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In the midst of Henry James's magnificent heartbreak of a novel, *The Portrait of a Lady*, there is a curious turn of phrase—a phrase, you could say, for conjuring. Famously, *Portrait* is a novel about a young woman granted an almost unlimited freedom of action who is determined to live a life of bright and searching intensity and who, in part as a result of that very gift of freedom, brings herself to ruin. In the midst of the unspooling of this drama, one character pauses to wonder, of our tragic heroine Isabel Archer, "what queer temporal province she was annexing" (James 1983, 281).[1] In the small piece that follows, I want to take up James's offhand provocation. I want, I mean, to think a bit about young women, about freedom and its perils, and about some of the queerer temporal provinces to which we might be brought in our attentions to one track, one long-ago song in the expansive archive of songs by one of the most indispensable musicians of the twentieth century.

My work here clusters around a series of interlinked questions: Can a song written by a woman in her very early 1920s map out the arc of the nearly 50-year career trajectory that would follow it? When this happens—*if* this happens—what kind of folding are we in the presence of, what kind of anticipatory resonance or pop prolepsis? What is the proper name for the queer temporal provinces of pop idioms such as these or, for that matter, of the work of criticism as it encounters the time-folding magic of certain songs?

To answer these questions, and to think through some of their satellite implications, I want to address the closing track from Joni Mitchell's debut

album *Song to a Seagull* (1968), "Cactus Tree," setting it in brief dialogue with another powerhouse work close to it in time and theme, Paula Fox's *Desperate Characters*. Now, "Cactus Tree," as Mitchell enthusiasts will be quick to tell you, was neither her first nor her most indelible hit from the 1960s; she had already written both "The Circle Game" and, even before that, "Both Sides, Now." All this is true enough. And yet "Cactus Tree" nevertheless holds something of a place of pride in Mitchell's body of work, singled out as it would be by one of Mitchell's own narrators. Nearly a decade later, in the closing track from the masterwork that was *Hejira* (1976), the speaker in Mitchell's "Amelia" would pause in her flight from romantic catastrophe and, memorably, spend the night at "the Cactus Tree Motel."[2] From the seeds of that little aside—what I take to be its backward-looking acknowledgment of *something*: be it achieved clarity, continuity, maybe a strong early attempt at an abiding set of preoccupations—the impulses of my argument here will grow.

My central claim, which I want to pursue by looking at some formal aspects of the lyrics and by framing them around the historical questions the song seems to pose about "the decade full of dreams" that is its subject, is both straightforward and counterfactual: it is that many, if not all, of what would come to be the signature conflicts of Mitchell's work, the most enlivening and also the most dismaying, are prefigured in this song. "Cactus Tree," I mean to suggest, brings to its first full expression less an idle embrace of "freedom," that keyword of the era, than a wrought, mistrusting, precisely calibrated *ambivalence* about the promises of that freedom, particularly as it had come to be routed through the gendered idioms of 60s-left cultural radicalism. A sub-claim here is that the exquisite, exemplary poise with which she holds the tensions of this ambivalence in balance, in a songwriter so young, about breaks your heart. But it offers us, too, a revelatory way into the pressures and contradictions, the tensions that refuse to resolve, at the defining center of Mitchell's career.

It's worth saying from the start: there are ways of not much liking this song. Were you to insist to me that "Cactus Tree" had no place whatsoever in your private pantheon of Mitchell tracks, and could not rightfully be compared to "River" or "A Case of You" or "Refuge of the Roads" or "Coyote" or any

of the other likelier possibilities, I would not have a lot of heart to persuade you otherwise. The reasons are clear enough. If, for instance, you have any sort of allergy to what we might generously call Mitchell's youthful *poeticism*, "Cactus Tree" will be a song you might well find difficult to love. More precisely, you would not do well to take to this song any quick impatience you might harbor with respect to a certain hippieish indulgence in figures and phrases a little too easy, a little too artful, and altogether too delighted with themselves. When, at the outset, the singer speaks of a man "bearing beads from California / with their amber stones *and green*," the preciousness of that small reversal may well set your teeth on edge. A good deal more of this is to come, alas, as when the singer speaks of the man who has "climbed the scaly towers / of a forest tree"—with *towers* offered as a rhyme for, yes, inevitably, *flowers*.[3]

Let me say it directly: I understand the distaste for this sort of pat prettiness, I do. You do not need to persuade me that these are, each of them, figures unable to mask quite how pleased they are with their own poetic loveliness, or to overcome the atmosphere of coffeehouse confectedness they conjure around themselves. I get it. Nor, extending the claim, do you lose points with me either for identifying precisely that confection, so vivid in what is sometimes called Mitchell's "folk waif" period, with a familiar style of specifically countercultural affectedness.[4] We might specify such affectation with any number of expressions of high-flown hippie piety—"hey, if we think really hard maybe we can stop all this rain," to take the iconic example from Michael Hadleigh's 1970 film *Woodstock*—any one of which might help us clarify that style of quasi-political toothlessness it is difficult not to find, in its laxest moments, aggravating. This is, admittedly, an ungenerous accounting of the counterculture. But then anybody who grew up listening to punk rock, or just beguiled by the array of detonating refusals to be found there, will likely have a clear enough sense of what I mean, if only because so much of the eviscerating force of punk was aimed at, precisely, the played-out pieties of hippiedom, its neutering of the conflictual ugliness of politics, its unmaskable self-satisfaction. If you're the kind of listener for whom there hovers about the too blandly pretty lines of the song some faint trace of just those enervating pieties, then listen: love it though I do, I will not blame you too severely for

consigning "Cactus Tree" to some playlist of worn-out period pieces not much in need of revival.

I would nevertheless want to insist, though, that, for all this, the song is in fact not truly in thrall to these figures, or not quite. Nor is it employing them as thoughtlessly, as unselfconsciously, as you might fear. To the contrary, what animates "Cactus Tree" is the way it ballasts these flights toward flower-child effusiveness with a language much more exacting, and unadorned, and resolutely quotidian. Indeed, the drama the song unfolds, the tension it works through by coiling and uncoiling, *is* that moment-to-moment counterbalancing. And, to anticipate some of my argument, this is precisely the style of rhetorical grace that will come to mark Mitchell's later work so significantly, and to give it much of its shape. And it is here, in "Cactus Tree," in early vivid form.

How does this work? In the song, it takes form chiefly as an agile counterweighting of what we might describe as poetic language with something nearer to the ordinariness of vernacular speech: the punctuation—though we might also say the puncturing—of flowery indulgence with plainspokenness. We have looked already at some of the moments of hippie over-prettiness. But think too of when Mitchell sings the following lines:

> There's a lady in the city
> and she thinks she loves them all
> There's the one who's thinking of her
> There's the one who sometimes calls.

There are so many small graces here—and they are, after a manner of speaking, *formal*, unfolding at the level of idiom, diction, the management of rhyme. Consider the closing phrase, "the one who sometimes calls," which is so *un*fanciful, so rooted in the workaday world; it is a phrase that sounds as it appears in the song, only more unfanciful, only more anchored in the rudiments of the quotidian, by virtue of being linked to the more elevated discursive precincts of a phrase like "she loves them all." But that freighting of particular words and phrases with the anchoring heft of the quotidian recurs elsewhere in the song too. "The one who sometimes calls," that is, answers back to similarly idiomatic lines that punctuate other verses. Some are small

and offhand—lines like "he can miss her just the same." And some carry a special sort of punch, like "He writes, 'Wish you were beside me' "—a bit of reported speech that pierces with its truncated simplicity. The matter isn't only that such lines ring in a key only the more marked by plainspokenness as a result of being nested alongside the more high-flown phrases. That's true, but the counterweighting works in the other direction as well. These are the moments without which the later pivotal lines of the song would carry within them so much less gravity, so little a sense of being not merely abstractions but abstractions anchored in this way to the ordinary and unglowing human world.

This movement is perhaps nowhere more striking than in a verse nearing the end of the song:

> There's a man who writes her letters
> He is bleeding from the war
> There's a jouster and jester
> And a man who owns a store

I dissemble not at all when I say that, in the Introduction to Poetry classes I used to run back at the college where I worked, I taught this stanza. I taught it as an exemplification of the point made by modernist critics like Josephine Miles, John Hollander, and Mary Kinzie, about the extraordinary ligaturing work done by effective rhyme. Part of the function of rhyme, they remind us, is to fold together anticipation and surprise—you know *that* it's coming, inside the structure of a rhyming poem, but you do not know *what* is coming. This effect is heightened, they further remind us, by the yoking of words and phrases from contrasting rhetorical registers.[5] Here, in Mitchell's stanza, is about the finest materialization of this principle you're likely to find anywhere this side of Alexander Pope. The phrase "bleeding from the war" becomes more, not less, vivid, and in this more a condensed emblem of horror, by virtue of its swift conjoining with a phrase that could not speak more utterly of the homely, the unexceptional: *a man who owns a store*. The concision of that pairing, heightened by the rhyme, is jolting.

The point here is not finally to marvel at Mitchell's rhetorical poise—though I confess that, possessing as I do the heart of a formalist, I find it hard not to be moved by it. Nor is it even to note how that poise will work to similarly

stirring effect in later works, though such moments are delectable. Think of the lines at the end of "Amelia"—think, I mean, of how "dreams, Amelia, dreams and false alarms" rings alongside the phrase, borrowed from an entirely other lexical universe, "747s over geometric farms." Or think of the heart-lifting wonderfulness of the moment in "Refuge of the Roads," where the narrator has a lover who has managed, in a winning way, to give her back herself "simplified." Ah, but then it all goes wrong. Said lover begins, as Pamela Thurschwell has remarked, in a phrase of deathless perfection, *mansplaining enlightenment*. He tells her, "Heart and humor and humility will lighten up your heavy load." Nothing exposes the windy paternal self-indulgence of the lover's phrases, his high-minded sententiousness, quite as killingly as the curt *simplified* quality of the narrator's prompt reply to all this: "I left him then." You can hear it a thousand times—most of you probably have—and still, as A. R. Ammons might say, it makes the heart move roomier.[6]

In "Cactus Tree," though, these formal moves do much besides. Above all, they make exquisitely clear the most substantive stakes of the song. With maximal fineness, they register the song's calibrated relation to its central preoccupations, which are of course "freedom" and the ways it circulates in what the song names, at the very outset, "a decade full of dreams." It is a relation that, for Mitchell, is not at all simple or self-evident. Indeed, it is precisely the wrought-up, articulate tension that the song nurtures and sustains in relation to an idea of "freedom" that makes it both the early-career powerhouse that it is, and something of a Rosetta stone for the whole of the career that was to follow. For Mitchell is of course invested in, attracted to, and not unbeguiled by prospects of freedom, even when they speak in idioms somewhat worryingly sententious; but in her persistent ironizing of those languages, her undercutting leaning *against* them, she registers as well a far-sighted misgiving about what "freedom" can and will mean in the contexts in which it circulates—especially for women.

Just as you might be excused for any knee-jerk recoil from its more indulgently hippieish turns of phrase, in a similar way you could be forgiven too for taking "Cactus Tree," at first blush, to be something of a second-wave anthem of liberation, of the sort that a book like *Girls Like Us* might be said to hail.[7] It seems very much to be the song of a young woman living in the

enjoyment of the freedom proper to this decade full of dreams, and especially in the enjoyment of its *erotic* freedom—the freedom, say, to have just this heterogeneous array of lovers, taxonomized in their startling variety verse by verse. (Here they are, the great Whitmanian catalog of them: the sailor, the climber, the man in the office, the letter-writer, the veteran, the jouster, the jester, the man who owns the store . . .) And this is one way of describing the narrative of "Cactus Tree." The singer tells us over the course of the song that she will resist the calls they make, these many unlike and unlikely men, for contracts and pledges, abridgements of her field of action. The point could not be clearer—"they will lose her if they follow"—we are told, and that is that. And there is, too, a wonderful, winking, half-comic exhilaration—again, an erotic exhilaration—to be heard in lines like, "and who knows, there may be more." Here, then, is "freedom" figured as a liberation from outdated modes of female constraint and confinement. That freedom takes form for the singer as a putting away of a whole host of antiquated and specifically patriarchal proprieties, and "Cactus Tree" registers the blisses, many and not at all inconsiderable, that can be seen to follow from it.

There is much to this take from the song. We might hear in it, for instance, something of a thickening of those slacker, more vaporous countercultural versions of "freedom" that can be heard, however faintly, around the song's more quaintly poetic turns of idiom. To the degree that we take seriously the pleasures the song broadcasts, the possibilities taking form for the singer as a litany of trailing men, we do well not to dismiss the style of freedom the singer might be seen to embody. Again, though, as with the flights of poeticism that mark so many of the verses and lines, the song is not in the thrall of freedom so conceived. It is not, however richly it figures certain of the pleasures of what might be called "liberation," a cheerleading account of the freedoms opening in a decade full of dreams, though neither is it much interested in reactionary refusal or rebuke. What it finally expresses most pointedly is, instead, a fierce and finely calibrated *ambivalence* about freedom in exactly that construction—the mode of 60s-left cultural radicalism, say, as it moves through the porous outlands where sex, gender, and politics come into vexingly tight relation. All of this comes into focus in the compressed power of the song's ending:

They will lose her if they follow
And she only means to please them
And her heart is full, and hollow
Like a cactus tree

In part because of the clarity with which the song sees the joys of freedom, the genuine human delights, these final undercutting lines arriving a bit like a punch in the solar plexus. Again, this is a song not interested in dismissing freedom, and even less the erotic possibilities of freedom for young women at the end of the 1960s, and no just reading of the song can make it say that. But it is a song passionately invested in *mistrusting* that freedom, in worrying over the languages in which it gets articulated, the promises it makes, the falsities those languages mask.

In this articulate mistrust, expressed as an attunement to the hollowness of the proffered promises of freedom, particularly as they are shaped by and around the lives of women, Mitchell is of course not alone. Pamela Thurschwell, in an essay in this volume, describes Mitchell's especially spiky sort of wariness in relation to worlds shaped by patriarchal presumption—worlds of liberation and confinement both—as a strong iteration of a whole genre of critique, which she names "irritable feminism." For Thurschwell, Mitchell takes her place among other writers roughly contemporaneous to her—all of them white, feminist, Canadian—who are bound together by a style of anti-patriarchal intellectual comportment that is unconsoled by the easier liberal pieties of female *progress*, that is alive to the forms of micro- and macro-aggressivity and subjugation and violence that sleep within them, and that is keen to dwell in the forms of conflict that do not resolve with the satisfying definitiveness of, say, a pentatonic scale. Alice Munro and Margaret Atwood are, in their different idioms, the avatars of this style for Thurschwell, and her reading of Mitchell in relation to them is revelatory. What it reveals, among other things, is something of the *restlessness* that works itself out in Mitchell's corpus, an expansive and ill-satisfied rovingness that describes not simply an interest in roads and travel—those lines of flight from romance and its decaying enclosures that we see so vividly in a record like *Hejira*—but an intellectual, and political, and explicitly feminist disposition. (This is a

"style" in the strong figuring Seamus Heaney gives us when he speaks about "technique," by which he means to signify an aesthetic, certainly, but also what he calls, winningly, a "stance toward life."[8])

In the interest of expanding the point and clarifying what I take to be at stake in the style of articulate mistrust we have been tracking in "Cactus Tree" and elsewhere, I want for a moment to set Mitchell alongside still another white feminist author working contemporaneously to her. Consider the example of Paula Fox and, in particular, her ferocious, compressed, and bleak novel *Desperate Characters*. Here is a novel that transpires over a few days in 1968—the season of the release of *Song to a Seagull*—though in a setting a good deal removed from the multiscenic "Cactus Tree," with its traversed open spaces and fleeting glimpses of office life. For the heroine at the center of *Desperate Characters*, 1968 feels, contrarily, claustrophobic—even if the scenes of her confinement are especially comfortable, sumptuous even. The novel opens upon a scene of unexceptional, but unmistakable, plenty, in the key of high-bourgeois American urbanity:

> Mr. and Mrs. Otto Brentwood drew out their chairs simultaneously. As he sat down, Otto regarded the straw basked which held slices of French bread, an earthenware casserole filled with sautéed chicken livers, peeled and sliced tomatoes on an oval willowware platter Sophie had found in a Brooklyn Heights antique shop, and *risotto* Milanese in a green ceramic bowl. A strong light, somewhat softened by the stained glass of a Tiffany shade, fell upon this repast. (Fox 1999, 21. Cited internally hereafter)

If there is an old-worldish insularity to this tableau—an antiquated formality that comes splendidly clear in the delicate deployment of a word like *repast*—it is soon enough interrupted. Disruption comes not from the as-yet-undisplaced neighbors in this rising Brooklyn neighborhood, these "slum people" (32) whose ragged windows can be seen from the Brentwood's back terrace. Or not only. The novel commences rather with a startling if tiny burst of violence, unleashed on the threshold between the Brentwood's tasteful interior and the wild outer world it keeps at bay. Sophie, in this first scene, is bitten on the hand by a feral cat that had been scratching around their back door and which, against Otto's wishes, she had gone out to feed: "It sank its teeth into the

back of her left hand and hung from her flesh so that she nearly fell forward, stunned and horrified, yet conscious enough of Otto's presence to smother the cry that arose in her throat as she jerked her hand back" (25). Over the course of the rest of the novel, the wound festers. Sophie resists having it treated—that early note about Otto's chastening and censorious presence carries through the whole of the book—and because of this the possibility that she has been poisoned, that she has contracted a strain of rabies that even in the midst of all this cossetted security might actively be *killing her*, never dissipates from the novel. It is, throughout, alive with a corrosive menace.

The story the novel tells is of a period of stilled unhappiness, edging out toward crisis, in Sophie's marriage to Otto and, more broadly, in her life. Sophie and Otto are childless, and well-off; Sophie is a translator, though she has let her work lapse; Otto is a lawyer, and much of the local turmoil in the novel involves the fact that Otto's long-time partner, Charlie, has broken up their partnership, exasperated by what he understands to be Otto's stolidity, his conservatism, and above all his want of sympathy for Charlie's own burgeoning, essentially countercultural political commitments. Charlie understands himself to have been, in a basically domesticated way, *radicalized*. "You won't survive this," Charlie complains bitterly one night to Sophie, "what's happening now. People like you . . . stubborn and stupid and drearily enslaved to introspection while the foundation of their privilege is being blasted out from under them" (60). It's worth saying that no one in the novel is convinced by this, or convinced rather that in Charlie it expresses anything other than a dilettantish cocktail-party self-besottedness, a way of staging what Sophie aptly diagnoses as a sibling-like rivalry with Otto. (His disquisitions are coded by the novel, we might say, in exactly the way that "Refuge of the Roads" codes, and ultimately undercuts, those of the mansplainy "enlightened" lover.) But Charlie's crisis, and Otto's struggle with his partner's abandonment, however glancingly they both seem to touch the malaise of the world, open out onto the crisis that, for Sophie, *had* had a radical power, a capacity to shake her out of her accumulated habits of being, and into a newer, rawer relation to the world without. This was her affair some years earlier—undisclosed to Otto—with a man named Francis Early.

In the middle of the novel is a chapter in which Sophie recollects her affair, its initiation, its stages, its eventual nonclimactic dissolution. It is, without

question, the scene of Sophie's most enlivening intensities, her least befogged passages of contact with the world, and the place where the resonances of the book, alongside Mitchell's song, are most clear. "But she had had her secret hoarding," we are told,

> seeing him as he searched for her in a bar where they met and where she, as usual, was early, watching him as he made coffee on the stove, noting with intense pleasure his long thin back, his slightly stooped shoulders, his sharply drawn profile as he turned from time to time to say something to her. (83)

Sophie will later realize that "her involvement with Francis had shoved her back violently into herself" (84), though this violent inwardness makes also for an outward attunement, a fine keenness of regard for the suddenly unblurred details of her life. She is vitalized, clarified, *galvanized*:

> She had never looked better; the whites of her eyes were as clear as a child's, her dark hair was especially lustrous, and although she didn't eat much, she seemed to be bursting out of her clothes, not because of added weight, so much as of galvanized energy. Strain, she thought, became her, tightened up her face which was overly plastic, lightened her rather sallow olive skin. She didn't have a moment of repose, thinking, thinking, thinking about him. (85)

If a sort of gendered conformity adheres to these passages—a new keenness of stance toward life acquired not in solitude but through immersive contact with a man—the force of Sophie's revelations, the breadth of their power to rework her relation not only to him but to herself and to the worlds she inhabits, mitigates at least something of this conventionality. There is a "Cactus Tree"-like achieved vividness of life here, a fierce and burning clarity that for a time unclouds Sophie, in a way that even the potentially lethal bite with which she is afflicted cannot.

And yet, here too, what's so striking about Sophie's retrospective account of her affair with Francis Early is the way that, while holding close to its expansive range of effects, she understands it to have been unavailing, its own kind of ruse—and *not* because it came to an end, failed to issue in some new scene of intimacy that might replace the airlessness of her relation to Otto

with something larger and freer. In a way that might recall to us Mitchell's self-chastising narrator, Sophie seems rather to regard exactly that possibility, the all-but-narcotic promise of a liberation from the suffocations of domestic intimacy in a sex-driven *replacement* intimacy, as part of the ruse with which she must somehow contend, the humiliating lie that she recognizes but cannot, for all that, prevent herself becoming entangled in. Some of this, Sophie will tell herself, is surely recrimination. "Later," we are told, "during a time when there was no room in her thoughts for anything but remorseless obsessive recollection, a perverse desire to debase the tenderness she had felt for him led her to insist to herself that it had all been a kind of fatigued middle-aged prurience" (83). Revealingly, though, her sense of the inadequacy of whatever form of liberation Francis would present to her begins in fact, *before* she is well and truly embarked on their affair. After an exchanged, electric touch between them had sent them into a taxi, speeding to Francis's apartment, they enjoy a frozen moment together, in which Francis takes her hand, at which touch, "a tremor passed over her and her mouth went dry" (80). But then comes one of the most lacerating sentences of the whole novel: "She had, then," we are told, "an anguished foreknowledge that she would be a long time missing him" (80). Such foreknowledge, and the *anguish* that attends it, does not exhaust itself in the suspicion that what she is about to embark upon is mere "fatigued middle-aged prurience," a judgment that the novel does indeed mark as a sort of recriminatory wish, a falsifying story Sophie uses to comfort herself in the aftermath of loss. (It is as if, like Mitchell in "Amelia," she endeavors to console herself, not totally convincingly, with the idea these were all merely dreams, "dreams and false alarms.") The more unnerving possibility broached by *Desperate Characters* is that, without being in the grip of anything like cynicism or unconverted bourgeois conventionality or staid gender obedience, Sophie knows to *disbelieve* the promise of liberation that is shortly to arrive to her. Like Mitchell's narrator in "Cactus Tree," she will take its measure, and when she does it will be accounted as something richer in possibility, and less mired in self-deception, than Charlie's enthusiasms, or her husband's stolid resistance to them. But it will be insufficient nevertheless, unavailing, hollow.

All this gives, retrospectively, a stinging resonance to a scene that comes earlier in the novel (though *after* her affair), at a party on the night Sophie

suffers her terrible bite. There she encounters "a couple in their early twenties" who are bedecked in countercultural markers—he has frizzy long hair and an army fatigue jacket covered in buttons, she hair to her waist and a "heavy bracelet around one of her ankles" (38)—and bristle at the *squareness* of the party. Their encounter ends thus:

> They looked at her as though they'd never seen her before, then they both padded softly out of the living room, looking neither left nor right. "That's a beautiful anklet!" Sophie called out. The girl looked back from the hall. For an instant, she seemed about to smile. "It hurts me to wear it," she shouted. "Every time I move, it hurts." (39)

When we first come upon it, the moment seems a bit of sharp observational comedy, mordant and undercutting. In the reflected light of Sophie's affair—the affair that was vivifying, clarifying, galvanizing, and unredeeming—it glows with a terrible inner darkness. The options for freedom, on either side of the generational divide marked out by 1968, are not without compelling force. They might even be beautiful. For the women, however, in and out of scenes of domestic confinement—in whatever proximity to the available idioms of liberation—they are also more and other than beautiful. They constrain. They *hurt*. They hurt with all the ache the protagonist of "Cactus Tree" avows, whose heart is full but unnourished: hollow.

We can, I think, read the novel's stirring conclusion in close relation to such submerged revelations as these. Here, Sophie thinks through her conviction that her phone will ring, that she will in fact be told that the cat that bit her was rabid, and wonders whether this "appalling certainty," this certainty of harm, "did not arise from reason or its systems, but was a fatal estimate of her true life?"

> "*God, if I am rabid, I am equal to what is outside*," she said out loud, and felt an extraordinary relief as though, at last, she'd discovered what it was that could create a balance between the quiet, rather vacant progression of the days she spent in this house, and those portents that lit up the dark at the edge of her own existence. (185, emphasis in the original)

Rabidity, for *Desperate Characters*, is the condition that adheres Sophie to the world: the heart's rabid desire for love even at the cost of steep self-deception;

the world's rabid malignancy, its narrowness of care and brutal, multiplying, deforming inequities. It is a novel that does not want for sympathy, a warm-blooded seriousness of regard, for anybody's hunger for some species of liberation, for a freedom that might crack open at least a little these narrownesses. But it is wedded no less committedly to its mistrust, an unwillingness to be beguiled by the languages in which those supposedly broadening freedoms are cast.

So when, in that beautiful moment in "Amelia," Mitchell stops at the Cactus Tree Motel, I take the moment to be a nod in the direction of the readings we are undertaking here. It is moment of several stacked recognitions. The song invites us to see that "Cactus Tree" is a shimmering distillation, less of Mitchell's youthful and ardent poeticism, than of her fierce and unsparing ambivalence: a testament, in all, to what would become for her, over many years and many records, a habitual resistance to "freedom" itself, in the offered registers, *especially* as they entangle the sexual and political. In ways that might recall to us the ferocity of vision we find in Fox—and recall to us as well Munro, and Atwood—Mitchell is a singer who mistrusts the available idioms of freedom, the languages that circulate around her and promise liberation from the toils of (say) being a woman. She does not dismiss them, nor she does present herself in the posture of someone unbeguiled by them. But she disrupts and disturbs them, with a mistrustfulness that's only the keener for being, also, beguiled.

As we know, that undercutting skepticism in regard to liberatory languages could calcify into unlovely forms—Mitchell's sometime racism, her sometime polemical antifeminism. "I was never a feminist," she says to Malka Marom in one of the interviews collected in *Joni Mitchell: In Her Own Words*. "I was in argument with them . . . And even though my problems were somewhat female, they were of no help to mine" (Marom 2014, 62).[9] Fair to say, I think, that these are no one's favorite versions of Joni Mitchell. I would not want to dismiss them too hastily, though, or to contextualize them away. As a song like "Cactus Tree" shows, they are interwoven with the very aspects of artistry, the cultivated mistrust and vibrant ambivalence, that make her the particular kind of extraordinary that she is. "Cactus Tree" is a track where Mitchell's roving inquietude of mind, her often self-undermining refusal of complacencies no matter how steadying or pleasurable, expresses itself neither as dismissal nor embrace but a live wariness in relation to the hollowness of 'boomer

utopianism, a hollowness vivid not solely to women but to women especially. Quite as much as the soprano radiance of her voice, the intricacy or thrumming insistence of her guitar, that exquisite self-confounding balance makes the song *sing*. And in its handful of minutes, and the queer temporal province we find ourselves in as it plays and replays, it maps out, too, in exquisite miniature, a whole future of songs, one that holds many of us even still.

Notes

1 The phrase, which comes early in chapter 28, appears in the New York edition, of 1907–1909.
2 Joni Mitchell, "Amelia," *Hejira* (Hollywood: Asylum, 1976).
3 Joni Mitchell, "Cactus Tree," *Song to a Seagull* (Hollywood: Reprise Records, 1968). All citation of "Cactus Tree" hereafter come from this recording.
4 See here for instance Luftig (2000), the second section of which is titled, "From Folk Waif to Rock and Roll Lady."
5 See especially Hollander (2001), and Miles (1976). On the "small and local movements" of style as a register of the distinctiveness of a given writer's disposition see Kinzie (1993, xii–xiii).
6 Joni Mitchell, "Refuge of the Roads," *Hejira* (Hollywood: Asylum, 1976). I've stolen the phrase "the heart moves roomier" from the closing of A. R. Ammons's poem "The City Limits." See Ammons (1986, 89).
7 *Girls Like Us* is a conjoint biography of Carole King, Joni Mitchell, and Carly Simon, that is long on boomer heroicization, largely in the key of second-wave liberation. See Weller (2009).
8 "Technique," Heaney writes, "involves not only a poet's way with words, his management of meter, rhythm, and verbal texture; it involves also his [sic] stance toward life." See "Feeling into Words," in Heaney (1980, 47).
9 It is here, too, that Mitchell narrates her own chronicled experiments in blackface (as on the cover of *Don Juan's Reckless Daughter*, from 1977). See especially 206–212.

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