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## Vision's Immanence

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## Screening Readerly Pleasures

Modernism, Melodrama, and Mass Markets in  
*If I Forget Thee, Jerusalem*

The opening chapter of *If I Forget Thee, Jerusalem* contains a reference to the prefabricated tastes of the provincial doctor and his wife that introduces one of the novel's principal concerns. Describing the wife's gumbo, the narrator points to their dislike of fresh fish: "And when he (the doctor) came home at noon she had the gumbo made, an enormous quantity of it . . . to be warmed and rewarmed and then rewarmed until consumed by two people who did not even like it, who born and bred in sight of the sea had for taste in fish a predilection for the tuna, the salmon, the sardines bought in cans, immolated and embalmed three thousand miles away in the oil of machinery and commerce" (499–500). Although only a passing reference, this mention at the novel's outset of industry and commerce, of the large-scale production of "consumable" goods and the manufacture of mass-market commodities at a distant (coastal) location, suggests a key point of reference for the narrative that follows. The doctor and his wife epitomize for Faulkner a kind of consumer and a kind of taste. Prefabricated, mass-produced consumer items, packaged in industrial fashion and distributed as part of a centralized national economy are for these characters preferable to home-spun, freshly cooked

recipes with a local or regional flavor. They even “can” the gumbo, after a fashion—letting it grow stale and consuming its monotony serially. The doctor and his wife also represent the kind of people and sensibility against which Charlotte and Harry define themselves: the conservative, “respectable” couple who live in the passionless, sterile confines of marriage. As such, the older couple appears in the frame portions of “Wild Palms” as an index of the sort of people who live narrowly and for whom the stimulations of genuine experience, whether it be in art, love, or food, are distasteful.

Such is the case, this novel will assert, for many of its readers. Although Faulkner had already, with the publications of *As I Lay Dying*, *The Sound and the Fury*, *Light in August*, and *Absalom, Absalom!*, established himself as a practitioner of a rarefied, regional modernism, in *If I Forget Thee, Jerusalem* he returns to a subject and a method he had taken up in one of his earliest novels. As in *Sanctuary*, though more ironically and obliquely, Faulkner here addresses the reading tastes and pleasure of the commercial market. Commenting as he does on the tastes of the doctor and his wife in the novel’s opening, Faulkner makes clear his disdain for people who prefer bland, ready-made industrial products to something with a more personal or idiosyncratic stamp. Yet as Faulkner’s potential audience, those people or their tastes prompted the stories and formal devices of both “Wild Palms” and “Old Man.” With each section, Faulkner shows his readers a distinct but different kind of reading experience. Through both sections’ formal and generic aspects, and through the way Faulkner manipulates their relationship, “Old Man” and “Wild Palms” refer to one other as well as to popular cultural models outside of themselves. In particular, “Old Man,” the more recognizably modernist section, works to undermine the kind of generic or mainstream pleasure afforded by “Wild Palms.”<sup>1</sup> As with *Sanctuary*, which drew on pulp fiction for setting its terms and method, or *Absalom, Absalom!*, which mounted an immanent critique of historical film, *If I Forget Thee, Jerusalem* shows readers their own “canned” tastes for certain forms of narrative. In particular, its strategies of representation and the nature of its stories suggest another immensely popular and influential genre: the domestic tragedy or melodrama.

Referring as he does to the mass-produced cans of preserved fish (the salmon, sardines, and tuna favored by the doctor and his wife), Faulkner also suggests the predilection of readers for commercial, mass-marketed cultural forms. The analogy between the two is clear, and it follows from more than the novel’s several references to film and popular fiction.<sup>2</sup> “Wild Palms” derives

from the conventions of domestic melodrama, both cinematic and theatrical, a genre that Faulkner rightly understood to be prefabricated in terms of its plots and characterizations. Presenting his story's melodramatic elements self-consciously, Faulkner includes several ways for readers to recognize how the narrative of Wilbourne and Charlotte functions parodically and as a critique of these generic figures and modes.

Faulkner's critique of the commercial market and popular taste manifests itself in other ways as well. Part of his immanent critique of melodrama in "Wild Palms" includes positioning Wilbourne as a typical spectator for melodrama and as an audience for his own love story with Charlotte. Faulkner also includes, through the section at the Utah mine, references to the effect on audiences of silent film that contribute to his interrogation of popular culture's political impact, even suggesting specific melodramas. Later Faulkner uses the setting of the cell in Parchman Prison and Wilbourne's "viewing" of Charlotte's memory as a way to extend his critique of consumer culture and of film genre. In the close of "Wild Palms," and in a culminating critical move for this novel—as well as for his decade-long exploration of popular culture—Faulkner considers commercial film's inherent affinity with pornography, in particular the way both work to simultaneously stimulate and frustrate desire. Before arriving at these conclusions, Faulkner establishes a critical backdrop in the opening sections of "Old Man." Here Faulkner uses a central trope—the repeated descriptions of the broad, flat surface of the Mississippi—both as a reflexive device for readers and as a figure for a pervasive and influential popular cultural object: the movie screen. These various aspects of the novel provide a means for readers to reflect on the kinds of mass-market pleasure that "Old Man" and "Wild Palms" both draw on and expose.

## "Old Man"

### *The River, Empathy, and Description*

The overriding image of *If I Forget Thee, Jerusalem* is the vast, broad surface of the River. Repeatedly in the "Old Man" section, Faulkner's narrator describes the floodwater as it flows from the Mississippi, continuous and smooth.<sup>3</sup> In the second section of "Old Man," we encounter the River directly for the first time. Faulkner presents it in a series of descriptions that function ostensibly to set the "scene" for the flood but that in fact do little to provide a

realistic account of the setting. Rather, these passages undermine processes of both description and characterization. At the outset of the novel, that is, Faulkner uses a descriptive strategy that is unreal or abstract in order to counter conventions of realism that are associated with earlier American literature and with generic models for fiction, both of which provide the novel's backdrop.<sup>4</sup>

In his descriptions of the River, Faulkner fashions an object that corresponds less to a natural presence or location than to a broad, flat, reflexive surface that forces readers' confrontation with their own act of reading. Doing so allows Faulkner to use "Old Man" as a means to reflect on the methods and content of the novel, including those of "Wild Palms" as well as other examples of popular narrative such as pulp fiction, film, and melodrama. The larger project of *If I Forget Thee, Jerusalem* is a critique of those popular models that Faulkner incorporates into his text. The flood, as we shall see, is one specific, material means of doing so.<sup>5</sup>

Presenting readers with a reflexive, unbroken expanse, the descriptions of the River subvert a common aspect of reading experience. Performing figuratively, even abstractly, rather than offering an element of setting or description, the River takes on the properties of a mirror which, by showing readers themselves reading, breaks the process of imaginative identification and empathy. Being "blocked," as it were, from imaginatively entering the narrative space of these sections, the reader is effectively not "absorbed" into the story or into an identification with character.<sup>6</sup> In addition, certain descriptions suggest another two-dimensional, flat plane that suggests Faulkner's concerns with the culture industry. These passages about the River evoke both the movie screen and the mirror, and they function similarly: to show readers something about their own tastes and pleasure. The motives for this are clear. Writing, in "Wild Palms," what amounts to a romance story or a family melodrama, Faulkner sought with "Old Man" a narrative strategy that would deny readers the mode of reading to which they were accustomed and that they would experience in the novel's other story.<sup>7</sup> We will see how "Wild Palms" includes its own way of subverting or parodying readers' generic expectations. In its story of run-away lovers and its use of a conventional narrative method, however, "Wild Palms" nevertheless resembles cultural practices and standards. From its opening, "Old Man" functions differently, operating formally in a manner that actively frustrates readers' expectations.

This element of "Old Man" is clear in key passages of description. One of

the distinctive features of the landscape and the River in “Old Man,” for instance, is, paradoxically, its featurelessness. Rather than a variegated vista, this portion of the novel offers a flat, monochromatic surface, evident in Faulkner’s first depictions of it. Looking at the River, the convicts note its stillness and apparent two-dimensionality: “[T]hey now looked at a single perfectly flat and motionless steel-colored sheet. . . . It was perfectly motionless, perfectly flat. It looked, not innocent, but bland. It looked almost demure. It looked as if you could walk on it. It looked so still that they did not realize it possessed motion until they came to the first bridge” (536). Faulkner’s language here both emphasizes the act of looking and takes on the flat, recurring aspect of the image the convicts see. In its near-incantatory repetition of the phrase ‘it looked’ moreover, this description conveys the trance-like state of abstraction that the convict enters upon contemplating his scene. Later, the tall convict “looked at the rigid steel-colored surface not broken into waves but merely slightly undulant” (544). The very first description of the River’s appearance includes language that stresses its flat, still, and—importantly—reflexive qualities: “[N]ow they saw that the pit on either side of the road had vanished and instead there lay a flat still sheet of brown water which . . . ravelled out into long motionless shreds in the bottom of the plow furrows . . . gleaming faintly in the gray light” (536). This “gleaming” gray or colorless sheet provides an object for the Tall Convict’s hypnotic act of reflection, not a marker of location or orientation (indeed, the convict never finds his bearings while on the water). That the River provides the occasion for this reflection is clear when, upon seeing it for the first time, the convict finds himself musing on his own appearance. Facing the open expanse of the water and seeing the faint, thin line of the other levee, he realizes, “*That’s what we look like from there. That’s what I am standing on looks like from there*” (544). Prodded out of his reverie by the guard, the convict has to leave off a moment of specular identity forming.<sup>8</sup> Like the convict, readers too are thrown back on themselves as they confront this static, shapeless surface. For what they “see” in such descriptions is not an illusory, realistic space of depth or an imaginary setting but a singular, flat monolith possessed of a gray-colored, reflective sheen.

That the surface of the River provides no element of spatial illusion, no realist account of the landscape in which readers can place themselves also contributes to the “Old Man” section’s odd, abstract quality. Without the creation of illusionist narrative space through which to enter the story, readers are thwarted in their ability to fully identify with that story’s central character.

Undermining identification in this way, Faulkner offers readers an experience at variance with many of the standards for adventure plots and romance narrative, especially of the type that readers knew from nineteenth-century realism or from popular fiction. In this light, the convict's own reading experience is instructive. In our introduction to the convict, when we learn the impact of his over-identifying with the characters in adventure stories, we are given an object lesson in the dangers Faulkner associates with a naïve or too-direct involvement with characters in fiction: “[F]ollow[ing] his printed (and false) authority to the letter [,] he had saved the paper-backs for two years, reading and rereading them, memorizing them, comparing and weighing story and method against story and method” (509–10). Using a gun he purchases by selling subscriptions to the *Detective's Gazette*, the convict's attempted robbery is a complete fabrication from popular cultural materials. Basing his failed plans for a train robbery on the popular and sensationalized stories he reads in pulp fiction, the convict makes a painful discovery about the limits of readerly identification. For after the robbery's failure, all it gains him is a fifteen-year prison sentence.

In “Old Man” Faulkner means to avoid the fault that the convict later attributes to the dime-novel writers. This is clear when the narrator indicates that the convict blames, not himself for the crime, but those “whom [the convict] believed had led him into his present predicament through their own ignorance and gullibility regarding the medium in which they dealt and took money for, in accepting information on which they had placed the stamp of verisimilitude and authenticity” (509). Here Faulkner associates mimetic or realist practice with taking money for writing. For this reason and others, Faulkner's practice with “Old Man” avoids the harbingers of novelistic “verisimilitude and authenticity” such as realist description. In an extension of Faulkner's nonrealist account of setting, the convict (despite his centrality in “Old Man”), possesses little interior life, depth, or psychology whereby readers are encouraged to (falsely) identify with him.<sup>9</sup>

### *Description and the Movie Screen*

Faulkner's treatment of the flood scene includes other indications that, as a narrative space, it operates differently from other sections of the novel, particularly the realist “dimensions” and account of setting in “Wild Palms.” Passing into the area of the flood in the second chapter of “Old Man,” the convicts enter a space that is less a recognizable landscape or location than a

uniquely surreal, imaginary realm. From the time the convicts, riding the truck, leave the marker of their trail back to the penitentiary and what they know of reality—the main road, which, we're told, has “vanished” (538)—they enter a space denoted as unreal. Making their way into the waters and area of the flood, the convicts cross out of the clearly defined and plotted geography of their rural setting into the unplotted, formless topography of dream: “They crossed another bridge—two delicate and paradoxical iron railings slanting out of the water, travelling parallel to it for a distance, then slanting down into it again with an outrageous quality almost significant yet apparently meaningless like something in a dream not quite nightmare. The truck crawled on” (538).

Leaving the area of the farms and the extension of the penitentiary, an institution that structures itself physically like a plantation or a penal colony, the convicts enter into a new kind of reality, connoted by a description of a new kind of space. Upon confronting the vast, boundaryless body of water that the truck (and the narrative) is entering, one of the convicts, fearful of drowning in the truck bed, succumbs to hysteria and begins screaming. Described as “a middle-aged man with a wild thatch of iron-gray hair and a slightly mad face” (538), this convict and his madness herald a departure from the normative or ordinary in this section of the novel. Entering into the dream-like, watery space of the flood, the novel foregrounds its interest in evoking a narrative system and visionary space that functions as oneiric, hallucinatory, or unreal.

At this point Faulkner's other figure for the River may have become clear. The other model for experiencing narrative that interested Faulkner in this novel was film, in particular the silent cinema that he knew and that he viewed so assiduously when he was young.<sup>10</sup> In addition to resembling a mirror (or to performing like one), the descriptions of the flood recall the movie screen—another flat, two-dimensional surface Faulkner had in mind in the period he wrote this novel and that, he understood well, encouraged audiences' collective acts of dreaming. As we have observed, Faulkner cast the scene of the convict's crossing into the flood in language that specifically recalls the dream-state and that, in so doing, demonstrates an affinity with cinema.<sup>11</sup>

In the opening chapters of “Old Man,” film figures in several other ways in addition to Faulkner's invocations of dreaming (each of which I discuss in turn). One includes a reference to an image associated with the South and its history that was peculiar to popular narratives, both literary and cinematic, and with which Faulkner was undoubtedly aware: the image of the plantation.

Another is that, like the film screen, the descriptions of the River provide an innocuous, blank surface onto which the convict projects his own imagination or longing. Like the film screen, the River later offers a surface for the play of color and light that produces a captivating, mesmerizing “spell.” Through all of these passages and discursive moves we can see the way Faulkner’s treatment of the River as a figure for cinema serves his critique of popular commercial cultural practices and forms.

In the middle of the second chapter of “Old Man,” Faulkner’s convicts witness a plantation burning. Seen from the moving train that takes the inmates to the levee in the midst of the flood, the image of the flaming plantation house appears as a surprise, mirage-like and surreal:

Two hours later in the twilight they saw through the streaming windows a burning plantation house. Juxtaposed to nowhere and neighbored by nothing it stood, a clear steady pyre-like flame rigidly fleeing its own reflection, burning in the dusk above the watery desolation with a quality paradoxical, outrageous, and bizarre. (542)

Isolated and remote, the house appears in the narrative as it does in the landscape—unexpectedly and seemingly without motivation. Anachronistic, it is out of place physically as well as historically, and its contrast to the watery landscape is emphasized visually. Or rather, it would be, were its visual aspect (or at least its realist illusion) not undercut by the lack of background or relief (juxtaposed “to nowhere,” surrounded “by nothing”). The description of the plantation suggests a simultaneous presence and absence, as the fire denies its own image or connection to its surroundings, “fleeing” its reflection and flaunting its contradictory, “paradoxical” state of being.

What are we to make of this odd, substanceless image in the middle of Faulkner’s novel? Clearly, Faulkner means to evoke an image of the southern past—but he does so in order to render its (re)disappearance. Though plantation houses remained in Mississippi in 1927 when the events of “Old Man” take place, they did not function in the region’s social and economic life then as they had historically. Where and how they existed more predominantly in 1939, however, when *If I Forget Thee, Jerusalem* appeared, was in representations of Old South living, particularly in that supremely visual medium, the Hollywood cinema. What I suggest that Faulkner offers with this image is a “screening,” on the River’s surface, of the image of the burning plantation. Reflected on the surface of the water, the house appears to the convicts as an

image or a representation, not as an actual material presence in itself. In the same year that the novel was published, David O. Selznick's International Pictures offered another spectacular and sustained image of a burning plantation—"Twelve Oaks," along with much of the city of Atlanta, in the film version of Margaret Mitchell's *Gone With the Wind*. While not a direct reference to Selznick's film (though it may have been to Mitchell's novel), Faulkner here refers to the act of preserving or evoking the plantation, which Hollywood had already performed in other southern movies—evoking it to raze it, burning in the eye and in the public imagination.<sup>12</sup>

Later in "Old Man," happening on the pregnant woman in the tree whom he's been sent to retrieve, the convict reveals a habit of thought produced, Faulkner makes clear, through his film viewing, and in particular from the kind of romanticizing practiced by Hollywood.<sup>13</sup> Despite the fact that he blames the dime novels for his imprisonment, the convict has maintained his habit of reading them in jail. We are told that "[H]e had continued (and even with the old avidity, even though they had caused his downfall) to consume the impossible pulp-printed fables carefully censored and as carefully smuggled into the penitentiary" (596). An eager consumer of the dime novels, the convict reveals a similar susceptibility to the "impossible" stories of the movies. Seeing the pregnant woman lower herself into the skiff, the convict is shocked at how much his real charge is at odds with a popular-cultural or Hollywood version of the female in distress. He also reveals that the movies, like his reading, contribute to his manner of seeing himself and his world: "and now he watched her move, gather herself heavily and carefully to descend . . . and who to say what Helen, what living Garbo, he had not dreamed of rescuing from what craggy pinnacle or dragoned keep, when he and his companion embarked in the skiff" (596). The significance of this mention of Greta Garbo, occurring when it does, is not only that it furnishes a specific reference to popular culture and to film. More importantly, it indicates the convict's mental operation of projecting himself into an imaginary or fantasized role, a process experienced by film viewers and facilitated by the presence of an innocuous blank surface onto which those imaginings can be projected. As he sees himself here, the convict plays a role like one he has seen in the movies. This moment of projecting his self into an idealized role occurs soon after the convict encounters the River and, with the reader, confronts its still, gray two-dimensionality, an image that, as we've seen, provides the occasion for identity forming.

In a signal passage that occurs later in this section, this act of dreaming or of

projecting effected by the River (and the screen) extends from the convict, through his listeners in the prison barracks, to the novel's readers. For the description of the convict's act of telling his story in the prison barracks specifically evokes the apparatus of cinema and its projective surface, the screen. Inserted into the middle of the novel, this reference to the convict's act of telling his story after he has been returned to prison suggests the dream-like, hazy quality of the images his story evokes—as well as the shadowy figures that appear on the movie screen. As the convict relates the sequence of being shot at by the National Guardsmen when he attempted to surrender, his story affects his listeners in a singularly captivating way:

And now when he told this, despite the fury of element which climaxed it, it (the telling) became quite simple . . . as though he had passed from the machine-gun's barrage into a bourne beyond any more amazement: so that the subsequent part of his narrative seemed to reach his listeners from beyond a sheet of slightly milky though still transparent glass, as something not heard but seen—a series of shadows, edgeless yet distinct, and smoothly flowing, logical and unfrantic and making no sound. (613)

The “bourne” from beyond which the convict tells his story implies a remote, shadowy realm or dreamy space—like that of film—of either extreme, hyperclarity or of bewilderment. The images depicted there, moreover, strikingly resemble figures from film—“a series of shadows, edgeless” that are fluid and moving, “yet distinct” in that they depict realistically the human form. As a further connection to the earlier reference to Greta Garbo, the 1920s icon of the silent cinema, the images from the convict's narrative are “not heard but seen.” Here, in other words, is Faulkner's overt interest in the terms and manner of the convict's narrative: its roots in, and similarity to, the fantasy world of film, both of which are supported by the framings and articulations of the screen. It is the mental processes produced by those articulations that Faulkner critiques throughout the novel, and in its following section.

*“Old Man”'s Immanent Critique:  
Pictorialism, Narrative, and Melodrama*

Another similarity between silent film's manner of representation and the early sections of “Old Man” has to do with the specific role played in these sections by silence and pictorialism. Throughout “Old Man” appear descrip-

tions that, in their emphasis on the image, offer readers a momentary visual simulation or picture whose effect, in part, is to arrest the movement of the convict and his story. Occurring in the middle of an ongoing narrative, these moments provide a form of spectacle that operates in many ways like the film image, especially as it is used in a particular genre: melodrama. To historians and theorists of the genre, and in both its theatrical and cinematic versions, melodrama demonstrates an emphasis on *mise-en-scène*. Frequently offering an elaborately composed spectacle, melodrama made use of what Robert Lang calls “speaking pictures.”

In his history of American film melodrama, Lang elaborates the role in the genre of silence and the image. The section “Spectacle and Narrative,” especially, establishes several elements of early film that, as we shall see, figure in Faulkner’s descriptive method in the opening sections of “Old Man.” Stressing the role in melodrama of *mise-en-scène*, Lang refers to the origin of melodrama’s “image-emphasis” in the late-seventeenth-century theatrical ban on the spoken word in France and England. As a result of Louis XIV’s prohibition of spoken performance by any theatrical company other than the Theatre-Français, the rest of the theatrical community devised an aesthetic that was oriented toward spectacle, pageant, and silence—but that was especially stylish and expressive visually. Defining this aspect of melodrama, Martin Meisal writes, “In the new dramaturgy, the [theatrical] unit is intransitive; it is, in fact, an achieved moment of stasis, a picture” (quoted in Lang, *American Film Melodrama*, 23). Lang connects the emergence of the tableau or the stage-image to the origin of the cinema, and of silent film melodrama in particular:

The silence of the early movies thus imitated the popular theater of this earlier time and grew out of the peculiar relationship between narrative and spectacle. . . . What is being described here [as the new dramaturgy], of course, is not the cinema—not quite, not yet—but what found its logical culmination in the tableau of the theatre and tableau vivant of the nineteenth-century parlor. The cinema—its spectacular component, at any rate, sprang from the impulses that produced the tableau vivant, but successfully sought a dialectic between stasis and movement, between spectacle and narrative. (23)

Moving from the notion of the “speaking” picture furnished by stage melodrama, Lang describes a similar speaking image in film. “Because the first films were made and screened without the benefit of recorded dialogue, and because

their first audiences were vast and heterogeneous . . . the cinema drew heavily on melodrama's investment in *mise-en-scène*. The movies were made to 'speak without dialogue' (24).

Because of inherent properties of the film medium, evident particularly in its early short subjects, film was effective at summoning up dramatic, suggestive images that efficiently communicated a great deal of narrative information. Well-composed, striking, and offered for audience's visual pleasure, these images produced a tension between a static spectacle and a narrative unfolding over time. "Old Man," as we shall see, generates a similar tension in its own use of the "speaking picture." In its emphasis on description, often at the expense of dramatic or narrative event, "Old Man" produces an element of what has been referred to as melodramatic "excess" (Lang, 25). Faulkner's use of spectacle or description in "Old Man," however, makes productive use of that tension between stasis and motion, offering it as a corrective to the utopian, escapist ideology of the lovers' constant travel in "Wild Palms."

Much of Faulkner's modernism emphasizes the image frozen in time, the famous "Faulknerian tableau" (epitomized in moments such as Caddy climbing the pear tree in *The Sound and the Fury*; Jewel and his horse at the beginning of *As I Lay Dying*; Rosa Coldfield's feet dangling from her chair in the opening of *Absalom, Absalom!*; or Lena Grove, waiting and watching the approaching wagon from the top of a hill in *Light in August*). In "Old Man," we find a similar presentation of the silent, frozen image or tableau in many passages of description. These moments, however, possess a significant difference: they show as well a new self-consciousness on Faulkner's part about this strategy. The first page of the third section includes a description of the skiff as it drifts away on the current "like a tableau snatched offstage intact" (592). Later in this chapter another reference to the theater highlights the timeless, static quality of the stage image. In the passing from night to day, the convict sees dawn break like "another of those dreamlike alterations day to dark then back to day again with that quality truncated, *anachronic* and unreal as the waxing and waning of lights in a theatre scene" (610–11; emphasis added). Faulkner invokes another silent theatrical model in an earlier description of a flooded town, one that includes a striking, tableau-like image:

While the two guards talked with the sentry before the tent the convicts sat in a line along the edge of the platform like buzzards on a fence, their shackled feet dangling above the brown motionless flood out of which the railroad embank-

ment rose, pristine and intact, in a kind of paradoxical denial and repudiation of change and portent, not talking, just looking quietly across the track to where the other half of the amputated town seemed to float, house shrub and tree, ordered and pageant-like and without motion, upon the limitless liquid plain beneath the thick gray sky. (539–40)

In the terms provided by Lang and others, this account of the convicts and the flood epitomizes melodramatic and silent film expression. The nontemporal aspect of the melodrama—its emphasis on spectacle over event—is evoked in the scene’s “denial of change” and by the use of the image of the men’s dangling feet. Its silent, speaking picture is also created by the floating town—an image that “says” volumes about the violence and devastation of the flood. Moments such as these suggest that Faulkner’s account of a natural disaster or crisis is expressed through filmic modes of representation, strategies he likely absorbed through his own exposure to the medium.<sup>14</sup> Significantly, for a consideration of Faulkner’s filmic imagination, this passage presents an image of description spread out (or “projected”) against the backdrop of the flat, gray River, a moment in which the River operates again like the cinema screen. Finally, the function of the tableau (the cultural form Lang cites in his “pre-history” of cinema) is emphasized in the passage’s reference to that orderly, silent form, the pageant. Even Faulkner’s prose in this passage takes on a feeling of “silence.” Ending with a short, clipped, monosyllable, as he does nearly every paragraph in this section, Faulkner puts an abrupt stop to his otherwise long and flowing sentence, a move that seems to cut the rhythm of the sentence off and enforce a closing up or silencing of narrating, speech, or sound. The impression of the melodrama and the early cinema, in particular its formal compositions and, obviously, its use of silence, are here evoked by Faulkner’s strategy.

In addition to fashioning “cinematic” silent pictures or theatrical tableaux, Faulkner’s descriptions in “Old Man” include an emphasis on stasis that further suggests the atmosphere and aesthetics of melodrama. In its tumultuous third chapter, when the convict tries to control the skiff on the River, all time appears to him to stop. Struggling with the current, the convict finds that “he was not exhausted and he was not particularly without hope and he did not especially dread getting up. It merely seemed to him that he had accidentally been caught in a situation in which time and environment, not himself, was mesmerized; he was being toyed with by a current of water going nowhere,

beneath a day which would wane toward no evening" (594). This aspect of time arrested, described by Faulkner's narrator as "mesmerized," corresponds to the state of mind effected by film generally, as well as by early cinematic melodrama in particular.<sup>15</sup> "Time and environment," are here arrested, captured photographically or "mesmerized," as in film. Another description of the flood and of the movement of the convict on the water produces this feeling of the mesmeric. Referring to the convict's continual rowing, the narrator states, "[A]fter a while it no longer seemed to him that he was trying to put space and distance behind him or shorten space and distance ahead but that both he and the wave were now hanging suspended in pure time, upon a dreamy desolation" (610). Like other passages in this section, the convict's "dreamy desolation," partakes of the qualities of silent film, its "suspending" of action through spectacle or stasis "in pure time."

Faulkner's distortion of time in key sections of "Old Man" are important, as they can be seen as an instrument of his effort to critique melodramatic and cinematic strategies of representation. In addition to reproducing many of those strategies in his narrative method, Faulkner references silent film icons and, we have seen, demonstrates the influence of film on the convict's imagination. Viewed in this light, the temporal distensions and the at points grinding inactivity of the "Old Man" narrative, its seemingly excessive emphasis on description, function to put certain formal properties of the section—and of its corollary in silent film—on display. Faulkner's immanent critique in "Old Man" can thus be seen to produce a certain kind of "unpleasurable" effect, one in which stasis and inactivity emerge as definitive aspects of the narrative. We can also see how Faulkner's intimations of silent film melodrama serve his broader interests in the novel. Putting these qualities of the "Old Man" on display, however, he draws them to readers' critical attention. This approach can also be read as a deliberate counter to a different, contradictory aspect of melodrama—one that is also a crucial element of "Wild Palms."

If "Old Man" epitomizes stasis, the ongoing, forward-rushing movement of a story like "Wild Palms" manifests another element of melodramatic "excess." As a romance narrative of lovers on the run, "Wild Palms" stands in direct opposition to the static, description-laden method of "Old Man." In the "Wild Palms" section, Faulkner is interested in demonstrating the effects of such a concern with travel and escape, showing his lovers in the thrall of what amounts to a utopian ideology. Richard Godden refers directly to this aspect of "Wild Palms": "By showing how his couple confuse mobility with freedom,

Faulkner demonstrates an infinite regress that allows no exit and no future; his is a precise representation of the prison of liberal utopianism that elects flight from the bourgeois relations rather than their transformation" (*Fictions of Labor*, 207). As a result of the characters' preoccupation with motion and their constant travel, the "Wild Palms" section reads like a fluid, escapist narrative—at least in comparison to several aspects and sections of "Old Man." That is to say, the story of Harry and Charlotte "moves." Because of the emphasis in "Old Man" on stasis, produced often, as we have seen, by its emphasis on the image, the convict's story offers a deliberate counter to Harry and Charlotte's. Such a contrast reveals Faulkner's awareness of his own strategies and effects, suggesting a willingness to use those effects in opposition. This, of course, was Faulkner's own assessment of the novel when he used a musical metaphor to refer to its use of "counterpoint." The two sections were written alternately, he said, so as to "sharpen" or bring into relief the difference in affect or tone of each.<sup>16</sup>

My point here is simply that Faulkner's means of creating contrast also includes a difference in a visual aspect of either story, with "Old Man" making greater use of a static pictorial method than the more "flowing" realist narrative of "Wild Palms." Initiated as it is by the "projector" of the doctor's light on the stairs, "Wild Palms" appears in its own right to take on properties of a motion picture.<sup>17</sup> What follows its opening is the kind of escape story that movies favored (and continue to produce) but that "Old Man," in its insistence on description and stasis, arrests and offers readers a way to see critically.<sup>18</sup>

Key to distinguishing Faulkner's immanent method in *Jerusalem* is his self-consciousness about his narrative practice. A description of the flood appears in the second chapter of "Old Man," for example, that establishes the section's mode of presenting static, imagistic renderings of the scene—but it does so in an acutely self-referential fashion, showing Faulkner working the novel's two sections off of each other to rhetorical effect. The narrator describes the way the convicts' truck, moving along the flooded road, "slipped abruptly beneath the brown surface with no ripple, no ridgy demarcation, like a flat thin blade slipped obliquely into flesh by a delicate hand, annealed into the water without disturbance, as if it had existed so for years, had been built that way" (538). This description draws attention to its own image (or what Lang refers to as melodramatic "effect"—the predominance of scenic and visual elements [23]), emphasizing its static quality. In addition, it prefigures the pivotal action Wilbourne is to perform in "Wild Palms" and thus refers to the rest of the novel's

narrative. Such self-referential moves on Faulkner's part at this early point in the novel reveal him emphasizing his own materials and strategies as well as the way they are directed at readers.

A final "summoning" of film practice confirms the immanent critique Faulkner mounted throughout the "Old Man" section. Significantly, it indicates Faulkner's self-consciousness about the ways "Wild Palms" will be keyed to melodramatic strategies, and it reveals Faulkner's deliberate ironizing in "Old Man" of materials and language that will appear in "Wild Palms." At the end of his first day on the River, as darkness falls, the convict's sensory experience of the light misleads him, a fact that further enables the play of his imagination. As a result of the change in light, he continues to believe himself to be somewhere—as well as someone—he is not. In a passage that focuses on the convict's ocular experience, Faulkner provides a description of the River's surface that suggests the play of light on the screen:

It was full dark now. That is, night had completely come, the gray dissolving sky had vanished, yet as though in perverse ratio surface visibility had sharpened, as though the light which the rain of the afternoon had washed out of the air had gathered upon the water as the rain itself had done, so that the yellow flood spread on before him now with a quality almost phosphorescent, right up to the instant where vision ceased. The darkness in fact had its advantages. (600)

Relying on what he doesn't see, or more properly on what the "phosphorescent" light on the water's surface allows him to think he sees, the convict negotiates his way through this part of the story by way of an optical illusion. The convict's experience of the River is similar to that of the viewer in the cinema: each observes an image in which "darkness has its advantages" because it allows a greater clarity to the light as it plays on its different surface (River or screen). Elsewhere, this light is described in terms that anticipate moments of the narrative in "Wild Palms" and that also invoke the sentimental patterns of melodrama—but that do so ironically. At the end of the convict's first afternoon on the water, the narrator points to that fact that "[i]t was raining steadily now though still not hard, still without passion, the sky, the day itself dissolving without grief" (599). "Passion" and "grief"—these are the currency of the romance narrative and the melodrama, not of naturalist descriptions of nature. Falsely animating the rain and twilight, Faulkner invokes terms that are specific to melodrama and that, moreover, appear in key moments of the story of Harry and Charlotte. Unlike the melodramatic narrative

of “Wild Palms,” especially its conclusion, passion and grief are here denied: the rain falls “without passion,” the day dissolves “without grief.”

Although these terms as they are used in either section of the novel appear in different contexts, it is difficult not to consider that Faulkner’s effort here in “Old Man” is to flatten or empty out the sentimental modes that are melodrama’s stock in trade. He will use these modes in “Wild Palms,” specifically on the section’s final page when Harry declares, “*Between grief and nothing I will take grief*” (715). Here “Old Man” anticipates Harry’s statement, demonstrating the way that, as I have been arguing, Faulkner uses the convict’s story to reflect or to comment critically on the lovers’ melodramatic escape narrative. As doomed lovers on the run, Harry and Charlotte epitomize a romance genre that Faulkner seeks, with “Old Man,” to ironize and subvert. In the “Old Man” section, Faulkner comments obliquely on narrative elements common to film and popular romance that had appeared in cinematic melodrama and that also go on to inform “Wild Palms.” He also, however, seeks to deny the emotional effect of those elements and to expose their limitations. Portions of “Old Man” serve to deny empathy, to flatten out the depictions of illusionist narrative space, and to parody the Hollywood hero. With his self-conscious references to the language of melodrama and to Harry’s self-pitying closing statement in “Wild Palms,” Faulkner further points up the hollowness of that language and of sentimentalizing narrative. In “Old Man,” through a range of strategies, he forecloses the possibility of their use.

## “Wild Palms”

### *Harry’s Melodramatic Imagination and Movie House*

Having detailed some of the ways in which “Old Man” simultaneously invokes and subverts melodramatic method, it is crucial to see how “Wild Palms” offers a particular version of a melodramatic narrative—and the ways Faulkner also subverts it. One of the clearest and most immediate differences between the novel’s two sections is the general use in “Wild Palms” of conventional novelistic method. Like other popular forms, melodrama relies on readerly and audience empathy, an identification that is facilitated by realism. The narrative of Charlotte and Harry has its descriptive flourishes, such as the descent into the Utah mine, or its flights of metaphysical speculation, such as Wilbourne’s monologue to McCord at the train station. Yet overall it presents

its characters and their story straightforwardly, with realist versions of setting, character, and dialogue. The "Wild Palms" section, for all its meditations on the cultural market (including Charlotte's artworks' devolving status to commodities and Wilbourne's writing pulp pornography), presents a generic, commercial version of narrative. Though they mean to escape bourgeois convention, the couple's adultery and flight from conventionality is itself a hallmark of popular, generic narrative: it is a melodrama, and a scandalous, sensational one at that. As the story of a "fallen" woman who leaves a bourgeois marriage and her children to pursue passion, only to die a painful and graphically depicted death, "Wild Palms" takes up a classically melodramatic plot of misguided love.

With the movement between the novel's sections, Faulkner provides an alternation not only between two narratives but also between two kinds of reading experience. We have seen how "Old Man" negates or denies the kind of reading experience that "Wild Palms" furnishes. This is not to say that "Wild Palms" is merely a "cheap," escapist entertainment; it too, as we shall see, provides its own reflexive, self-critical elements and turns. But it does function, like much realist narrative, to draw readers into the world or space of its characters' lives. In addition, like "Old Man," it reflexively "shows" readers their own experience of reading and their expectations for a particular kind of narrative pleasure.

One of the clearest ways the novel does this is through the character of Harry. For in his own tastes and proclivities, Harry stands as a surrogate for the reader and the popular culture consumer. Several sections of the novel demonstrate Harry's taste for melodrama, including the melodramatic story in which he himself takes part. In the scene in Audubon Park in New Orleans in which Harry watches a type of "mental home movies,"<sup>19</sup> he demonstrates this narrative preference. In this scene and others, Wilbourne shows readers their own taste for melodrama and for what Faulkner considered hackneyed forms of narrative. In order to see this, it is important to note that in the Audubon Park sequence Faulkner does not show Charlotte and Rittenmeyer directly. As in other novels, he reveals a scene "filtered" through the subjective, watchful consciousness of one of his characters. Wilbourne's imagined scene of Rittenmeyer and Charlotte includes a characteristically Faulknerian introduction:

And now, sitting on his bench in Audubon Park . . . he watched against his eyelids the cab (it had been told to wait) stopping before the neat and unremark-

able though absolutely unimpugnable door and she getting out of the cab . . . and mounting the steps. . . . He could see them, the two of them, Rittenmeyer in the double-breasted suit . . . ; the four of them, Charlotte here and the three others yonder, the two children which were unremarkable, the daughters . . . the younger sitting perhaps on the father's knee, the other, the older, leaning against him; . . . he could see them, he could hear them. (645)

Like Quentin Compson "watching" scenes of the Sutpen narrative or imagining them with Shreve, Wilbourne here produces a version of events that pleases him. And as with Quentin, we find an emphasis on seeing narrative action ("He could see them . . . he could see them"). "Projecting" their story in his head, using his eyelids as a kind of screen, Wilbourne casts Charlotte and Rittenmeyer in the standard roles of wanton woman and scorned husband and watches a scene of family tragedy. What is pleasing to Harry about this is that it conforms to the kind of plot he would expect of Charlotte—or of any married woman with her husband. Rittenmeyer's behavior especially, his rectitude and moral forbearance, accords with Wilbourne's misplaced sense of honor. While Rittenmeyer's behavior may be reasonable, it nevertheless appears here as part of a narrative construction of Wilbourne's (not as a reproduction of a past event). Faulkner positions Wilbourne on the bench so as to consume created images of Charlotte and her husband as viewers do the images of commercial and generic film.

For what is this scene with Charlotte and Rittenmeyer but a set piece from a melodrama?<sup>20</sup> As Harry plays it out, the scene includes several elements of classical film melodrama, portraying in its brevity the entire moral universe that early film scenarists favored and evoked so economically—like D. W. Griffith in films such as *The Voice of the Violin* (1909), *Home Sweet Home* (1914), and *Broken Blossoms* (1919). Over all, there is the sanctity of the nuclear family (with the father kneeling, his daughters sitting and leaning against him, forming a triangle, Christian symbol of divinity and the holy Trinity). There is also the image of the scorned husband bearing, tragically and stoically, the loss of his children's mother. Finally, this scene offers a "blessing" of the world Rittenmeyer and his family represents. Following the couple's stoic goodbye, in a passage that confers "rightness," we find a literal benediction:

*and they will both know they will never see each other again and neither of them will say it. 'Good-bye, Rat,' she says. And he will not answer, [Wilbourne] thought No. He will not answer, this man of ultimatums, upon whom for the rest of his life*

*will yearly devolve the necessity for decrees which he knows beforehand he cannot support, who would have denied the promise she did not ask yet would perform the act and she to know this well, too well, too well;—this face impeccable and invincible upon which all existing light in the room will have seemed to gather as though in benediction, affirmation not of righteousness but rightness, having been consistently and incontrovertibly right; and withal tragic too since in the being right there was nothing of consolation nor of peace. (648)*

In a description that uses a piece of photographic key-lighting, Rittenmeyer appears as though bearing the light of grace. Yet whereas the scene recalls cinematic melodrama in its formal details and its tone, its use of melodramatic method is ironic. Faulkner's irony in this description comes from the fact that it is Harry, not the authorial narrator, who is positioned as having produced it. For it is his imagination, as well as his interests, moral sense, or longing, that the passage points up. Harry conjures and embraces the Victorian, domestic worldview evinced in film melodrama, evident in his invoking of sacrifice and paternal "decrees." But this is a vision that Faulkner's self-conscious staging of the scene subverts. Even its phrasing is suggestive of the sentimental excesses of melodrama and romance—the fallen heroine knowing "*too well, too well*" of her lover's forgiveness and the contrition such knowledge implies; the strong husband's "*impeccable and invincible*" face; and above all, the husband/hero's "*incontrovertible*," "*tragic*" rightness. This is the phraseology and value system of melodrama, writ large for the purposes of Faulkner's critique of what this scene, generically, represents.

It is important in this respect that Harry's imagination repeatedly stresses the two-dimensional or surface elements of Rittenmeyer's character, a quality that contributes to his function as a plot device. As Thomas Elsaesser points out, melodrama works in stock types and surfaces, not psychologically motivated behavior or individualized experience. Rittenmeyer, simply put, is a type. (As such he departs radically from standard modernist treatments of character, particularly Faulkner's own in his famous explorations of interiority in all of his early modernist novels.) This quality in Wilbourne's conception of him is evident the first time he encounters Rittenmeyer on the train, when he and Charlotte initiate their journey. Describing Wilbourne waiting for Charlotte at the Carrolton Avenue station, the narrator registers her arrival through Wilbourne's perspective: "They were both there, the husband and the wife, he in the conservative, spuriously unassertive dark suit, the face of a college senior

revealing nothing, lending an air of impeccable and formal rightness to the paradoxical act of handing the wife to the lover" (530). "Wife," "husband," "lover"—these are the stock theatrical and melodramatic movie roles to which Wilbourne consigns Rittenmeyer, Charlotte, and, ultimately, himself. And they all function as purveyors of Wilbourne's vaguely defined but recognizably Victorian conception of "rightness." Wilbourne's limiting of the "players," especially Rittenmeyer, to a conventional, flat role is complemented by his description of Rittenmeyer's appearance: his conservative dark suit, we are told, "revealing nothing" of his interior life or psychology.

Even more clearly than through Rittenmeyer's appearance, Wilbourne's thoughts about Rittenmeyer's role in his and Charlotte's story reveal the melodramatic conception he has of their narrative. Walking behind Rittenmeyer down the aisle of the train as it leaves the station, Wilbourne reflects: "*He is suffering; even circumstance, a trivial railroad time table, is making comedy of that tragedy which he must play to the bitter end*" (532). As the scene continues, its contrived, theatrical nature becomes clear, particularly Wilbourne's act of constraining Rittenmeyer to the role of the wronged but virtuous husband. "He was trembling" to control himself, Wilbourne observes of Rittenmeyer, "the impeccable face suffused beneath the impeccable hair which resembled a wig" (532). Eventually Wilbourne himself becomes a part of the spectacle or performance. Responding to Rittenmeyer's threat to punch him when the two men face each other alone, he appears to watch and to hear himself speak from a position outside his own body: "Then suddenly Wilbourne heard his own voice speaking out of an amazed and quiet incredulity; it seemed to him that they both stood now, aligned, embattled and doomed and lost, before the entire female principle" (533). No longer a subject in his own life, a life he renders to himself passively and as a (film) spectator, Wilbourne too becomes a stock figure in a tragic, tortured love story. Charlotte herself is no longer his lover but an emblem, a symbol for a set of assumptions about the "entire female principle" with which Wilbourne constantly struggles and that Charlotte represents in her role as bourgeois wife.

Represents, that is, to Harry—for it is important to note that the scene of Charlotte and Rittenmeyer is played out entirely through Harry's speculation. He is not there to see it, and therefore he only imagines what would take place between Charlotte and her husband. Sentimentalist that he is, Harry imagines this scene as it would have been depicted in melodrama, as a confession of repentance on the part of the wanton woman. Met with her daughters' cold-

ness, Charlotte, in Harry's "scenario," utters a string of remarks that are demonstrably out of character for her (in Faulkner's conception) but entirely fitting for the heroine of melodrama. She came home "[t]o see the children," she tells Rittenmeyer (despite showing little interest in them throughout the rest of the novel); she reacts with uncharacteristic bitterness and self-pity when the girls scorn her, remarking to her husband, "So that's what you have taught them" (646). This scene of high drama and moral conflict conforms to standards of melodramatic content, affirming the Victorian sanctity of the family and punishing the reprobate mother. That this scene conforms to Harry's and not to the rest of the novel's sensibilities is entirely to the point. For with this demonstration of Harry's fantasy and spectatorial pleasure, Faulkner shows readers the tragic world of melodrama they had seen in film and drama and that they (unwittingly) expect from the "Wild Palms" story.

And, consequently, are denied. Not only in the novel proper, but in the immediate aftermath to this scene, which clearly shows Faulkner ironizing it. Finishing his "screening," Harry leaves the park and joins Charlotte in the cab to the train station.<sup>21</sup> Maintaining his reverie, he asks, "They were both well?"—to which Charlotte responds by jolting him back to reality and to her harsh, unromantic sensibility. Promising that he "will hold [her]" if something goes wrong with her abortion, he is cut off by Charlotte's admonition that he not "be a fool" and that he "[g]et to hell out" (649) if in fact it does. Charlotte's voice here speaks in the tone of the novel's ending (epitomized in the convict's expletive in the book's last line, "Women, shit"), and against Harry's longing for a romantic, tragic conclusion to his escapist fantasy. Here again, we see the dangling of a romantic plot only to subvert or frustrate it, an example of what I have been arguing is central to the method of the novel.

### *Silent Film Screening and the Proletarian Audience*

Melodramatic plots and narrative strategies appear elsewhere in "Wild Palms" and are similarly offered up to readers for their recognition of the novel's critical use of cinematic content and method. At the dramatic "climax" of Charlotte and Wilbourne's stay in Utah, Charlotte confronts the angry mob of immigrant workers from the mine. What is significant about this scene, immediately, are the similarities between Charlotte's method of placating the workers—her charcoal drawings—and the formal elements of silent film, as well as the way her drawings depict characters and content particular to cinematic melodrama. Of interest too is the way Faulkner's rendering of this scene

shows Charlotte communicating with the “audience” of the miners, as well as that communication’s effect. Coming toward the end of the couple’s stay, this scene addresses the exploitation of the workers that Wilbourne knows of and in which he has been, at least passively, complicit. Simultaneously, it registers a political effect of early cinema toward maintaining that exploitation. In a perhaps unwitting outcome, Faulkner’s treatment of the melodrama and the commercial cinema, evident elsewhere in the novel as a form of critique or protest, here replicates its socially conservative function.

To begin, the miners are positioned in the passage as spectators. Following Charlotte and Wilbourne from the mine into the commissary, they are described as though they have entered the cinema and are reduced to watchful, expectant eyes: “In the gloom after the snow-glare the faces vanished and only the eyes watched [Wilbourne] out of nothing, subdued, patient, obedient, trusting and wild” (630). Like the audience for silent film watching from the darkened space of the cinema (“the eyes watched . . . out of nothing”), the miners are spellbound before a mysterious and novel spectacle. And also like the audience for the early silent cinema, they are immigrant laborers.<sup>22</sup> Displacing the workers from the urban industrial centers where many of them lived, Faulkner nonetheless shows the miners in circumstances similar to those of the audience for the earliest movies: exploited, overworked, and susceptible to the sensory stimulations of the new medium.<sup>23</sup> Important to this resemblance is the motive for Charlotte’s drawing, as well as her staging of it. She and Wilbourne feel uneasy, recognizing the miners’ pent-up energy over months of not getting paid and sensing that their frustration may soon be directed at them. For Charlotte’s actions ultimately function in the same way as much of silent film: to quell or re-contain an outburst of proletarian energy.

Typically, throughout this scene Wilbourne fails to act. Seeing the miners watching him and Charlotte, he asks her impotently, “Now what?” (630). Charlotte’s response strikingly calls forth both the cinematic apparatus and the subjects of the silent film: “[A]nd now they all watched [Charlotte], the five women pushing forward also to see, as she fastened with four tacks produced from somewhere a sheet of wrapping paper to the end of a section of shelves where the light from the single window fell on it” (630). Setting up her “screen” on which falls the projection light, Charlotte proceeds

to draw swiftly with one of the scraps of charcoal she had brought from Chicago—the elevation of a wall in cross section with a grilled window in it unmis-

takably a pay window and as unmistakably shut, on one side of the window a number of people unmistakably miners (she had even included the woman with the baby); on the other side of the window an enormous man (she had never seen Callaghan, [Wilbourne] had merely described him to her, yet the man was Callaghan) sitting behind a table heaped with glittering coins which the man was shoveling into a sack with a huge hand on which glittered a diamond the size of a ping-pong ball. Then she stepped aside. (630–31)

There are several details to note about this description. In the first place, Charlotte's drawing recalls a scene from a classic melodrama: the New York section of D. W. Griffith's *Intolerance*, with its labor dispute modeled on an actual strike at Lawrence, Massachusetts. Important to this similarity is the role in Charlotte's drawing, as earlier in Wilbourne's imaginary film, of the stock type. The image of Callaghan is recognizable to Charlotte (she's never seen him "yet the man was Callaghan") as well as to Wilbourne and the miners—because as in most melodrama, the figure she depicts is a generic one: the corporate owner as villain. This image of Callaghan itself suggests a specific moment from Griffith's film: the industrialist boss in the deep-focus shot of him sitting alone and isolated at his desk (intercut with shots of his workers being gunned down by the police).

Before returning to the political meanings of Charlotte's drawing, it is useful to note its other formal similarities to early film. Significantly, the picture Charlotte draws is in charcoal, rendering it, like the photography of silent movies, in black and white. Also, Charlotte's drawing, like film, depicts motion: the man "was shoveling" money into a sack. The use of the past progressive tense here is key. For by way of it, Faulkner connotes an image of ongoing, sustained action.<sup>24</sup> Lastly, the description suggests one of film's principal technical properties: its capture and manipulation of light. The passage twice uses the word "glittering" to depict its details (the coins and the boss's ring). Unusual for a charcoal drawing, which is more often used to depict volume, shading, and depth, Charlotte's "filmic" image remains lingeringly on hard, shimmering surfaces—planes and lighting elements suited to the camera.

The depiction of Charlotte's drawing goes on in ways that further enforce the political overtones of its cinematic model and that, in so doing, reveal something of Faulkner's position on labor in this section of the novel. Upon recognizing the import of the scene Charlotte draws, the miners are enraged and are on the verge of seizing Wilbourne. Working fast in order to save him,

Charlotte again takes up the drawing. She draws an image of an immediately recognizable physician-figure (Wilbourne), who is being pickpocketed by the owner—thus who is himself being exploited, like the workers her drawing addresses. Charlotte then elicits help from one of the miners; drawing images in succession, she produces individual, separate “frames.” The “movie” she makes suggests the vision of cinema that D. W. Griffith, one of its originators as well as one of its most committed melodramatists, harbored. Watching Charlotte draw, Wilbourne muses:

This time [the figure Charlotte drew] was himself, indubitably himself and indubitably a doctor, anyone would have known it—the horn glasses, the hospital tunic every charity patient, every hunky gutted by flying rock or steel or premature dynamite and coming to in company emergency stations, has seen, a bottle which was indubitably medicine in one hand, a spoonful of which he was offering to a man who was compositely all of them, every man who has ever labored in the bowels of the earth. (631)

Charlotte’s drawing here is an example of Griffith’s “universal language,” the utopia that he envisioned cinema to be. Imagined as a liberating tool for the masses, for a man “who was compositely all of them,” cinema spoke in an idiom “beyond words” and communicated in a manner and a spirit Griffith hoped would cut across national, class, and ethnic lines. As Griffith said in his famous pronouncement to his actors, “We’ve gone beyond Babel, beyond words. We’ve found a universal language—a power that can make men brothers and end wars. Remember that, remember that when you go before the camera” (quoted in May, “Apocalyptic Cinema,” 25).

The effects of Charlotte’s drawing, however, like those of Griffith’s and other early filmmakers, are less clearly allied with the worker. Specifically oriented toward the proletarian masses, both Griffith’s cinema and Charlotte’s drawing appear to function progressively. As Griffith conceived it, his great vision for film was that it inspire, edify, or enlighten viewers. Offering images that were immediately recognizable to non-English-speaking or even illiterate workers, Griffith’s cinema hoped to empower laborers and working class audiences—or at the least, offer them a way to bond collectively without the benefit of a shared language or education. By the same token, the melodramatic mode of a film like *Intolerance* and the strike portion clearly sought to illicit sympathy for the worker.

Yet though conceived as a way to reach out to immigrant working classes,

much of silent film served mainly as a way to distract workers from their economic circumstances. Charlotte's actions ultimately function in the same way: to diffuse workers' revolutionary energy. Charlotte intervenes in a near riot on the part of the miners, and her production of a silent, moving image serves to siphon off the threat the disgruntled men are posing. Although she makes the drawings to establish an identification between Wilbourne's and the miners' shared exploitation, Charlotte's actions nevertheless serve the interests of the mine's owning company. Like the early nickelodeons, Charlotte's silent, moving pictures distract workers from their economic discontent and working conditions and thus preempt their act of violently resisting them.

This, finally, is what also distinguishes Faulkner's scene. In this section of "Wild Palms," Faulkner reproduces not only the content or the form of silent film melodrama, the moving black-and-white images of exploited workers. In depicting the miners as Charlotte's spectators, this scene also includes a reference to the (largely) urban, immigrant labor market that attended early film. In this way, it places his readers outside of the scenario of film viewing. Structuring the passage with the miners as he does, Faulkner allows readers to "watch" a silent melodrama in Charlotte's drawings, but also to recognize her drawings' generic qualities and their effect on her audience. The importance of this layering is that it affords readers an opportunity to see the way melodrama functioned, both formally and politically. The drawing's main resemblance to film is that it helps to maintain a social and economic order that is disadvantageous to labor. Though Faulkner's own politics may be not be immediately discernible in the effect of Charlotte's "screening," it is worth noting that his reproduction of a filmic process in this scene demonstrates the more conservative effects of early silent movies.<sup>25</sup>

This seemingly conservative bent may help explain a paradox in one of Faulkner's revisions of the novel. In the published version of *Jerusalem*, Faulkner's narrator compares the visual impression of the Utah mine as Wilbourne first sees it to an "Eisenstein Dante" (621). This appearance in "Wild Palms" of the Marxist ideologue and Soviet filmmaker is, ultimately, ironic, appearing as it does in the context of a setting and circumstance (the exploitation of labor) that Eisenstein wanted film to redress. The montage strategies that Eisenstein employed in classical proletarian films such as *Strike!* and *Potemkin* served, he hoped, to spur exactly the kind of revolutionary energy that the miners in "Old Man" manifest but that we see Charlotte's drawing disarm. Revealingly, in the original and typescript versions of "Wild Palms," Faulkner's description of the

interior of the mine—its calamitous visual impression, or, as others have described, its *mise-en-scène*<sup>26</sup>—refers, not to Eisenstein, a radical leftist visionary, but to a giant of Hollywood spectacle filmmaking, Cecil B. DeMille. Later, in final revisions, Faulkner deleted “DeMille” and wrote in “Eisenstein” instead.<sup>27</sup> The irony of this change is that Charlotte’s silent film may correspond better to both the political function of DeMille’s filmmaking (providing escapist entertainment for the middle and the working classes) than it would to Eisenstein’s Marxist-informed, revolution-inspiring dialectical editing.

### *Harry’s Peep Show*

The seemingly irreconcilable tensions generated by this reading of the mine and Charlotte’s drawing may find a resolution, or at least a clearer indication of Faulkner’s position on film, if we turn to the novel’s close. For in the prison sequence and the last pages of “Wild Palms,” we find a final suggestion of film that, unlike the conservative implications of the Utah scene, shows Faulkner making a more pointed criticism of the movie industry. Most specifically, the scenes of Wilbourne in the prison cell suggest Faulkner’s sense of the confinement or imprisoning of spectators in the trap of consumer culture. The prison setting offers a model of the way commercial film, like all commodity culture, stimulates consumers’ desire, only to frustrate (but then sustain) it by refusing satisfaction. In his construction of that model, Faulkner evokes the generic form whose function is, above all, to organize and manage viewers’ desire: pornography.

In my discussion of a widespread cultural melancholy in the last chapter, I described viewers’ nostalgia for an unattainable image of the Old South myth promulgated by historical film. In his depiction of Wilbourne’s nostalgic longing for Charlotte in his prison cell and his masturbatory, visual recollection of her naked body, Faulkner suggests that the workings of a genre like pornography make similar use of viewers’ longing. Generic, commodified forms of pleasure, he implies, whether in historical film or pornography, are underpinned by a common motive: to manipulate audience’s desires for the sake of profit. Faulkner’s larger concern in much of his thirties fiction, which he addresses directly at the end of “Wild Palms,” is that generic forms such as melodrama, the historical film, pulp fiction, and pornography all rely on a pleasure that is produced by the culture industry and whose nature is, finally, the same: projective, solipsistic, and melancholy.

The ending of *Jerusalem* offers a culmination of the critical dialogue in

which Faulkner's thirties fiction had engaged, its examination of a range of popular cultural strategies and effects. In specific, the close of "Wild Palms" sharpens Faulkner's commentary on the relation between this novel and the commercial market. At the same time, it also provides a final model for considering modern consumer art. Ending this section as he does in a prison cell, with Harry providing a focalizing consciousness, Faulkner offers readers another way to witness Wilbourne's treatment of his affair with Charlotte as a consumable narrative. Like the mass market and its repeated acts of cultural consumption, Wilbourne's eroticizing of Charlotte's memory furnishes him a way to endlessly re-view his encounter with her.<sup>28</sup> Wilbourne's nostalgic treatment of Charlotte's memory while he is in prison amounts to a form of narrative autoeroticism, providing a pseudo-pornographic object for his mental gaze that will provide him both titillation and, he believes, a means to retain Charlotte's memory.

In order to remember her this way, Wilbourne first needs to "record" his time with Charlotte and, in particular, his images of her body. In the final pages of "Wild Palms," as he realizes she is dying and what her death will mean, Wilbourne reacts to Charlotte's struggle and his trip to the hospital in a routinely detached, passive manner. Standing apart from his and Charlotte's last hours together, resigning himself, it seems, to her dying, Wilbourne watches from a distance the playing out of Charlotte's "death scene." His muted response to the end of his story with Charlotte is, for Wilbourne, hardly unique. But in his passivity at this point in the novel we see the deadening of affect and responsiveness that the novel attributes to consumers of commodity culture, an effect that was signaled at the start of the novel in the figure of the doctor and his wife—their stale marriage, stale gumbo, and taste for the ready-made. Here, at the novel's end, we see a similar characterization of Wilbourne, after he has demonstrated his own removed, voyeuristic preferences for consumer forms.<sup>29</sup> Wilbourne's impassiveness at the hospital is important for another reason as well. Anticipating his imminent prison sentence, Wilbourne's demeanor during the novel's final events provides him with the detached, "objective" position necessary for a mental "recording" of them, a process Faulkner evokes in his use of several cinematic details in the pages depicting Charlotte's death.

Waiting in the hall of the hospital during Charlotte's surgery, Wilbourne remarks to himself that the lighting inside the operating room resembles Kleig

lights—high-powered floodlights used in Hollywood film production (697, 701). For Wilbourne, Charlotte's death occurs under the circumstances of a film shoot, allowing it to become another source of replayable visual pleasure for him, like the scene of Charlotte and Rittenmeyer in New Orleans. Once the operation is finished, the Klieg lights are turned off and Wilbourne notices a ventilator blowing—like the cooling fan for the projector. And the projector is suggested elsewhere in the sound of the palm trees clashing outside, similar to the whir of the movie projector's gears.<sup>30</sup> After Charlotte dies, Wilbourne is permitted to enter the operating room, where the recording process continues. Although the "Kleigs were off" (702), another "single dome light burned" above the operating table, lighting Charlotte's body, which appeared "arrested for the moment for him to look at" (702). Earlier in the chapter is another more explicit reference to Charlotte's nudity artificially "lit" for Wilbourne's consumption and gaze. This description of Charlotte is rendered from Wilbourne's perspective, and it provides him with an eroticized image that he will take with him to prison. Waiting in the coastal shack for the doctor to return, Wilbourne sees Charlotte on the bed

on her back, her eyes closed, the nightgown . . . twisted about her just under the arms, the body not sprawled, not abandoned, but on the contrary even a little tense . . . [I]t began to seem to him that the sound [of the wind] was rather the murmur of the lamp itself sitting on an upended packing case beside the bed, the rustle and murmur of faint dingy light itself on her flesh—the waist ever narrower than he had believed, anticipated, the thighs merely broad since they were flat too, the swell and neat nip of belly between the navel's flattened crease and the neat close cupping of female hair. (687)

The erotic elements of this image hardly need enumerating. "Sprawled" on the bed with the nightgown "twisted" around and binding her, her eyes closed, and naked, Charlotte appears in the throes of a vaguely masochistic ecstasy. As in the operating room, the light here is trained on Charlotte's body in ways that facilitate Wilbourne's clear view of it as well as his technical remembering. Even the light itself has become "dingy," suggesting the tawdry quality of Wilbourne's imagination and the potentially shocking, but also standard pornographic image it offers him.

The artificial or synthetic "preservation" of Charlotte is suggested as well in a conversation between Wilbourne and the police officer who is guarding him

at the hospital. Seeing Wilbourne's worry, the officer offers an anecdote about the surgeon's work on another patient that relays the doctor's ability to remake human bodies.

"Just take it easy. They'll fix her up. That was Doc Richardson himself. They brought a sawmill nigger in here couple three years ago where somebody cut him across the guts with a razor in a crap game. Well, what does Doc Richardson do, opens him up, cuts out the bad guts, sticks the two ends together like you'd vulcanise an inner tube, and the nigger's back at work right now." (699)

The "vulcanizing" of the black man's intestines performed by Doc Richardson allows him to continue living, but only by supplementing his damaged body synthetically. That his body is diminished is clear: "'Of course he aint got but one gut and it aint but two feet long so he has to run for the bushes almost before he quits chewing. But he's all right. Doc'll fix her up the same way'" (699). Doc Richardson does not "fix Charlotte up" the same way—that is, his efforts, synthetic or otherwise, to preserve Charlotte fail, as she dies on the operating table. Wilbourne's own efforts at preservation, however, are more successful. And they rely on techniques, like Richardson's, that make use of synthetic materials and technology.

Later, in several passages from Harry's cell, Faulkner conflates Wilbourne's acts of memory, masturbation, and what may be seen as a kind of film viewing. Charlotte's memory, we are told, cannot exist for Wilbourne completely apart from her body; there must be "flesh to titillate" (714), or at least the palpable, material reminder of flesh. In the absence of Charlotte's actual body, Wilbourne's filmic memory of her in a reproducible, visualized narrative provides this "titillation." Masturbating over the quasi-pornographic image of Charlotte, "thinking of, remembering, the body, the broad thighs and the hands that liked bitching" (715), Wilbourne is able to re-view scenes from their erotic life together in ways that allow her to live on. "*But memory. Surely memory exists independent of the flesh,*" he reasons. "But this was wrong too," the narrator corrects—to which Harry responds "*Because it wouldn't know it was memory,* he thought. *It wouldn't know what it was it remembered. So there's got to be the old meat, the old frail eradicable meat for memory to titillate*" (709). The "old meat" Harry needs to stimulate himself and his memory is Charlotte's eroticized body. In the absence of her body, then, he uses his stored-up images of it. In the "grief" that Harry accepts in place of "nothing," he reanimates the scenes of Charlotte he has chosen to record. Doing so provides him

with solace; it also stimulates his arousal as, we are told, “it did stand to his hand, incontrovertible and plain” (715) once he remembers Charlotte’s body.

Preparing himself for a fifty-year prison sentence, Wilbourne gives himself ample material to both inspire and sustain his nostalgic longing. This nostalgia, however, does not function, finally, to help Wilbourne overcome Charlotte’s loss. Rather, it takes the form of a sustained, faintly pleasurable suffering. In this way Wilbourne’s “grief;” his memorializing of Charlotte through the storehouse of her images, is also a form of indulgence. And this indulgent aspect of Wilbourne’s serial, repeated grieving returns us to a broader consideration of commercial culture. The masturbatory pleasure Wilbourne experiences stands, for Faulkner, as the kind of sensation and experience prompted by many popular cultural forms. Commercial film, particularly in genres such as pornography or the silent film melodrama, may—like the memory of Charlotte for Harry—“titillate the senses” or even provide temporary satisfactions. It does not, however, fulfill the longings it stimulates. Thus it leaves consumers in a state something like Harry’s at the end of the novel: a melancholy condition of being repeatedly drawn back to the source of an unfulfilled loss or longing.<sup>31</sup>

Seeing Harry in his prison cell at the end of the novel, readers may recognize the similarity between his position of entrapment and passive spectatorship and that of the consumer of commercial fare such as film. Like the viewers of silent films of history discussed in the previous chapter, the film viewers of melodrama or pornography, both of whom Faulkner suggests through Harry, also experienced what in the modern period became a widespread cultural melancholy. Consumer art, whether it seizes on narratives of history, images of the female body, or depictions of the bourgeois family, produces in its audience an appetite that is constantly stimulated but constantly frustrated. It is this unsatisfied longing inherent in commercial forms that Faulkner recognized and that I refer to as a kind of Freudian melancholy.

Earlier in this discussion I argued that the nostalgic longing for the southern past prompted by early film narratives derived from and effected a generalized American melancholia, an incapacity for many Americans in the modern period to understand meaningfully the historical lessons of the Civil War. With the ending of “Wild Palms,” and with *If I Forget Thee, Jerusalem* generally, Faulkner demonstrates the ways in which other forms of popular culture produced a similarly morbid, debilitating effect. Melancholy thus defined describes a compulsively repeated action and an accompanying cast of thought

that attaches to a nostalgia-rich and neurotically charged object of longing. Watching his memories of Charlotte as though they were a movie, standing in his private screening room and masturbating, Wilbourne shows readers what Faulkner wanted them to see about their own experience: the deadening, narcissistic prison of popular culture that refers consumers only to projections of their own desire.

The ending of "Wild Palms," however, like Faulkner's other novels from this period, provides something more for readers than the films and popular cultural models Faulkner critiques through so much of his thirties writing. Harry's story in "Wild Palms" may not itself provide the kind of satisfaction I am here suggesting that popular culture denies. Yet through the novel's workings—its references to the culture industry that Faulkner deplored, its ironic representation of its generic materials, and the undermining of "Wild Palms" by the strategies of "Old Man"—it provides readers with something unavailable to Harry in his prison cell, namely, a critical reflection on the nature of consumerist pleasure. And in doing so, it furnishes something else unavailable to Harry: a way out of the metaphoric prison of consumer culture and its transient pleasures—artificial, "melancholy," and profit-serving.