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 **"Fluid Currency": Money and Art in Faulkner's *If I Forget Thee, Jerusalem***

Mason Golden

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

"Fluid Currency":
Money and Art in Faulkner's *If I Forget Thee, Jerusalem*

Mason Golden (bio)

"Art is knowledge *sui generis*."

—Theodor W. Adorno

By the time the Library of America republished William Faulkner's *If I Forget Thee, Jerusalem* in 1990, the novel, originally published under the title *The Wild Palms* in 1939, had received little in the way of critical analysis relative to Faulkner's other works from the thirties. Although it sold well upon its release and earned the praise of critics like Conrad Aiken and Jorge Luis Borges (who translated the novel into Spanish), its position in Faulkner's canon was shaky from the start. William McFee, writing for the *New York Sun*, deplored what he took to be "preposterously distorted characters and incredibly sinister social forces." Malcolm Cowley, admittedly struggling with Faulkner's latest "experiment," reported in *New Republic*, "The book seems negligently planned."¹ Cowley's criticism has primarily to do with Faulkner's alternation between two apparently unrelated narratives, "The Wild Palms" and "Old Man," section by section. Cowley was certainly not alone in his confusion.

Part of the trouble for the book's initial readers resulted perhaps from the decision by Random House, against the author's wishes, to use the title *The Wild Palms* for the entirety of the text. Faulkner's intended title, *If I Forget Thee, Jerusalem*, taken from the lament in Psalm 137 of the King James Bible, "If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget her cunning," although it is hardly explanatory, may nonetheless have cued early readers to the significant interrelatedness of the two narratives.² But whereas the editors at Random House had reason **[End Page 729]** to suspect that the high-minded Biblical allusion might turn some readers away, anything *wild* was likely to grab attention and perhaps generate sales. Although the stated reason for changing the title was that "it would arouse anti-Semitic feeling," the real impetus for the change was the desire to sell books, and Faulkner conceded.³ A remark to Saxe Commins, his editor at the time, reveals his ambivalence. Referring to the infamous rape in *Sanctuary* (1930), Faulkner laments, "I'll always be known as the corncob man."⁴ His ambivalence speaks at once

of Faulkner's anxiety about his legacy and of his compliance with the market.

From the time of his major breakthrough with *The Sound and the Fury* in 1929 until the publication of *The Wild Palms* ten years later, William Faulkner seems to have sought something of a double life as a writer, driven on one hand by the market-oriented writing of short stories and screenplays and on the other hand by what John T. Matthew's refers to as the "private economy" that governed the writing of novels like *The Sound and the Fury* and *As I Lay Dying* (1931).⁵ Faulkner's partitioning of his more experimental, modernist work—that by which he believed he "would stand or fall" as a writer⁶—and the writing he produced for market in order to support himself may explain in part his overwhelming productivity between 1929 and 1939.⁷

But it also speaks of Faulkner's investment in a particular kind of status. Lawrence Rainey's observation that "modernism, among other things, is a strategy whereby the work of art invites and solicits its commodification, but does so in a way that it becomes a commodity of a special sort," one addressed to a "corpus of critics and educated readers," is particularly apt to the seemingly antithetical strands of Faulkner's work during his best and most prolific period.⁸ He was working to captivate what he perceived to be two distinct audiences. The demands of both impelled him and helped form him as a modernist. As Theodor W. Adorno observed, "Modern art does not thrive in the Elysian fields beyond commodity but is, rather, strengthened by way of the experience of commodity."⁹ Faulkner's *Sanctuary* stands as a demonstration. Indeed, novels like *Sanctuary* and (for different reasons) *Pylon* (1935) do more than suggest a strain in Faulkner's attempts to bifurcate his output.¹⁰ Ironically, in the case...

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Mason Golden is an independent scholar. He received a BA from Columbia University and an MA from Goldsmiths College. He has recently produced articles, published and forthcoming, on Friedrich Nietzsche’s reading of Ralph Waldo Emerson. This article is part of a larger work on William Faulkner’s novel *If I Forget Thee, Jerusalem*.



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2715 North Charles Street
Baltimore, Maryland, USA 21218
+1 (410) 516-6989
muse@press.jhu.edu



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Fluid Currency: Money and Art in Faulkner's If I Forget Thee, Jerusalem, poet instinctively felt the advantages of real oral execution of those verses in which the concept of political conflict simulates discrete rock-n-roll of the 50's.

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