

## SARTORIS: GERM OF THE APOCALYPSE

QUESTIONER: "Do you think that there's a particular order in which your works should be read?"

FAULKNER: "Begin with a book called *Sartoris*. That has the germ of my apocrypha in it. A lot of characters are postulated in that book."<sup>1</sup>

Few readers come to Faulkner's novels through *Sartoris*, which is just as well because it is not a particularly good book. Furthermore, and also happily, criticism has moved from dividing all Faulkner's characters into Snopeses or Sartorises. We have come to see that there is that of Snopes in every man, so it is no longer necessary to read the novel because it postulates the two clans—not that it really does much with the Snopes. It is interesting to see the embryo V. K. Suratt (Ratliff to be), Byron Snopes, the MacCallums, and the Sartorises themselves. It is, however, fascinating to consider "the germ of [his] apocrypha," whatever he meant by that. He might have meant that this work is the seed from which grew his unauthorized testament. Not a bad phrase, then, in Faulkner's mocking, self-belittling voice. Yet even as mockery, it is hard to see much sense in it. Why should he consider himself outside American literature, or any literature?

I suspect a *lapsus linguae*. He meant to say "the germ of my apocalypse," the germ of his prophetic revelation. This seems a far more characteristic phrase, in the manner of the Nobel Prize Address: man "will prevail," the "last ding-dong of doom," and so forth. I am in no danger of being authoritatively contradicted at any rate, and I think I can find such a germ in *Sartoris* (1929).

Most critics who have dealt with this book have been tempted to fit it into an overall scheme of Snopesism or the South;<sup>2</sup> it is possible to spend a quiet morning reading about the novel without finding a word on its main story—the love of Bayard and Narcissa. *Sartoris* is a romantic melodrama, a descendant of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. By looking at the allusions to *Hamlet*, overlooked by skewed attention to the novel, we can see something of structure, characterization, and thematic content. We can also understand why there

should be a kinship between William Faulkner and William Shakespeare. Then, I think, we will have caught the germ.

The foliage of *Sartoris* is lush, and it may be helpful to give a brief synopsis of the main story. The book opens with a ghost. "As usual, old man Falls had brought John Sartoris into the room with him" to see Colonel Bayard the present commanding officer of the clan (p. 27). John Sartoris was the family's founder who was gunned down. Part One centres on the return of young Bayard from the first world war, in which his brother was killed. We also meet Narcissa, a friend of Colonel Bayard's Aunt Jenny (Virginia Du Pres, widowed younger sister of Colonel John). In Part Two we discover that Narcissa's scurvy secret suitor, Byron Snopes, is sending her obscure messages of his affection. The act ends, however, with young Bayard, who has fallen off a horse, serenading her. In Part Three, after Narcy's brother, Horace, returns from non-combatant war duty, she gets her chance at Bayard while acting as his nurse. He is convalescing from the fall, complicated by the drunken serenading. Byron climbs into Narcy's empty room for a "soft garment" to take with him. He then robs Colonel Sartoris' bank and leaves town. (So much for the Snopes in this novel.) Narcy's *rapprochement* with Bayard is the turning point of the story. Part Four prepares the conclusion: the couple are married, Narcissa is pregnant, old Bayard is dead of a heart attack suffered while young Bayard was trying to bring the car out of a skid. Bayard flees to the MacCallums, a backwoods family. He never returns. In Part Five he dies in an airplane crash. The Negro servant, Simon, dies in a brothel. Bayard's heir is born to Narcissa. Miss Jenny considers an epilogue for the history of the family: "Well, it was the last one, at last, gathered in solemn conclave about the dying reverberation of their arrogant lusts, their dust moldering quietly beneath the pagan symbols of their vain-glory and the carven gestures of it in enduring stone; and she remembered something Narcissa had said once, about a world without men, and wondered if therein lay peaceful avenues and dwellings thatched with quiet; and she didn't know" (p. 314). As a dramatization of her thoughts, we are left on the last page with the peace of Narcissa and the child.

The structure of the novel is dramatic multiple sub-plots ranged below the main story. There is Byron's interest in Narcissa. There is Horace's disastrous love affair, paralleled to his sister's. Simon is involved in financial dealings which parody those of Colonel Sartoris' bank. There are the manoeuvres of professional and amateur medical men to remove the wen from the Colonel's face. The subsidiary material almost takes over at times, as does

the past, narrated by Miss Jenny and old man Falls. Except for the continuing sense that this generation of Sartoris is beholden to past generations, the structure is not peculiarly *Hamlet's*—after all *Hamlet* is not primarily the love story of the Prince and Ophelia. The five-part division, however, with the turning point in the third act, the emergence of a new ruler at the end, and a movement from disorder to order, is Shakespearean.

The tip-off to the relations with *Hamlet* is in the characters. Simon, for example, is a Polonius, a politic fool and meddler. "‘Damn Simon, sir,’ young Bayard shouted. ‘Who set him to watching me?’" (p. 59). From time to time Simon lectures on polite behaviour. Here he speaks to the ghost of John Sartoris about the motor car: "‘Ye’ own son, yo’ own twin grandson, ridin’ right up in yo’ face in a contraption like dat," he continued, "and you lettin’ ’um do it. You bad ez dey is. You jes’ got ter lay down de law ter ’um, Marse John; wid all dese foreign wars en sich de young folks is growed away fum de correck behaviour; dey don’t know how ter conduct deyselves in de gent’mun way" (pp. 112-13). Polonius, of course, gave a few precepts on how to conduct oneself in a gentlemanly way, equally hypocritical: "Give thy thoughts no tongue, / Nor any unproportioned thought his act. . . ." (I.iii. 59-60).<sup>3</sup> Simon, like Polonius, dies in a lady’s bedroom, perhaps behind the arras.

Horace is an Horatio—the names are cognate. Hamlet envied Horatio’s calm acceptance and sympathy. As Bayard’s future brother-in-law, Horace might have become a steadying influence.

"Poor old Bayard. Rotten luck they have. Funny family. Always going to wars, and always getting killed. And young Bayard’s [first] wife died, you wrote me."

"Yes. But he’s here. He’s got a racing automobile and he spends all his time tearing around the country in it. We are expecting every day to hear he’s killed himself in it . . ." [said Nancy].

"Poor devil," Horace said . . . (p. 153).

No relationship is established between the two men. Horace becomes a Keatsian poet and glassblower instead. Nor does the lack of friendship appear to be relevant. That is, we can’t say, if only Bayard had had his Horatio. The allusion exists in the name and in the potential only.

The analogues are more meaningful when we approach the two main characters. Narcissa, as her name suggests, is frequently associated with flowers (see pp. 65-70; 81; 233; 237-238). She sends jonquils and other narcissi to her

brother (p. 300); we are reminded of Ophelia's mad scene. Like Ophelia, Narcissa is mistreated by a suitor preoccupied with his own problems. She receives letters—even if from another suitor. Ophelia may have been pregnant while sinking into the river; Narcissa is pregnant while sinking into her marriage. (Of course, we must attempt to read *Hamlet* as Faulkner may have done.)

Her mythological forebear, Narcissus shared Ophelia's affinity for water, and Narcy displays her wet roots. "I've been crying," [Narcissa] said in a sad whisper that savored of its own loneliness and its sorrow. At the tall mirror beside the parlor door she stood and peered at her dim reflection, touching her eyes with her finger tips" (p. 216). Or again, "she had lost all account of time other than as a dark unhurrying stream into which she gazed until the mesmerism of water conjured the water itself away" (p. 217). Marrying Bayard is a kind of plunge, of attaching herself to the murky Sartoris doom. She is a widow the day her child is born. Her immediate problems are solved only at the expense of her husband's life.

Yet Narcissa is more of a masochist than a narcissist. In the play, Ophelia appears as a trapped, pathetic figure. Narcy makes her own decisions, although influenced by Miss Jenny, and brings on her own suffering. She is not particularly intelligent; furthermore her relationship with her brother is unnaturally close. We are meant, it would appear, to find her more sympathetic and Ophelia-like than she turns out to be.

Bayard is a Hamlet, haunted by the death not of his father but of his brother. Names are again significant. For example, his grandfather is haunted by *his* father. The two ghosts share one name, John Sartoris, belonging to a railroad-builder politician shot by Redlaw in 1876 and to an aviator killed in action in 1918. Miss Jenny, on the other hand, is haunted by the Confederate soldier, Bayard, just as Narcy is haunted by young Bayard. John haunts Bayard, Bayard haunts the womenfolk. The corollary to this formula, in the history of the Sartorises, is that both the Johns and the Bayards die senseless, violent deaths. Narcissa has an intimation of the ghost of name when "she could discern the dark shape of that doom which she had incurred, standing beside her chair, waiting" for her child to be born (p. 299). She tries to mitigate the fate by breaking the John-Bayard thread, calling the child Benbow Sartoris after her own family name.

As in the play, title is also important. "This is I, / Hamlet the Dane" pronounces the northerner, signifying himself as heir to the throne, and leaping into Ophelia's grave (V. i. 244-45). Sartoris is a title indicating hereditary

rule of a region. Since young Bayard is headed for an early death, the question of succession is basic to the novel as to the play. The ghosts also represent title.

Both Shakespeare's and Faulkner's stories have one foot in the past. The ghost is symbolic of a new generation's legacy. Old Hamlet calls his son to revenge. John Sartoris also wants revenge, of a different sort, the kind in which conscience forces Bayard to hurt others and himself. When Hamlet kills the King, he does so on the spur of the moment, in the lather of a duel, almost accidentally. Bayard does away with his grandfather without premeditation, in the heat of a skid, accidentally.

The grandfather is not a usurper; Bayard bears him no grudge. Shakespeare, as a dramatist, projects Hamlet's interior conflicts on to other characters: Claudius, Gertrude, Ophelia. Bayard is not given outward, visible projections. His struggle remains interior, yet he lashes out just as Hamlet does. Like Hamlet, he is an instrument of his inheritance. The difference is not as radical as it first appears. It's partly a matter of orientation: Faulkner is content to deal with an individual without human foes. We might at least have expected Byron and Bayard to have words about Narcy.

For both Hamlet and Bayard a primary issue is suicide. Hamlet's contemplation of suicide includes his revenge on his uncle, the King, certain to be suicidal. Bayard gestures his "to be or not to be" at the MacCallums where "he touched something . . . chill and tubular and upright, and his hand slid down it and then he stood for a moment in the icy pitch darkness with the shotgun in his hands, and as he stood so, his numb fingers fumbling at the breech, he remembered the box of shells on the wooden box on which the lamp sat" (p. 273). He does not shoot, but his career is full of similar incidents. He rides a wild horse, drives a wild car, and finally dies in a crackpot inventor's airplane, on a par at last with his brother's foolhardiness. Although his grandfather's death is added to his sense of guilt for his brother's death, which he tried to prevent, we do not sense an accumulation which is finally too much for Bayard. It simply takes time to find an accident both appropriate and fatal. Hamlet's tests of his step-father's guilt, like Bayard's earlier wild deeds, can be seen as irrelevant, simply postponing the end. No accumulation of evidence finally compels Hamlet to act.

The relationship between Bayard and Hamlet, however, extends only so far. As Sartre has noted, Faulkner's characters do not tend to articulate their thoughts. They give us gestures rather than words. They keep secrets.<sup>4</sup> An inarticulate Hamlet is a strange mutation. Instead of the finest and most re-

vealing talk to delay the end, Faulkner gives us a series of futile gestures. Most of what we assume to be Bayard's thoughts are based on our involvement in his bizarre situations. Faulkner avails himself of neither the dramatist's technique of projecting conflicts on other characters nor the novelist's of intensively analyzing their thoughts. Shakespeare, through soliloquies, manages both. Yet Bayard is a compelling, if distant, character.

We cannot imagine *Hamlet* played by *Sartoris* rules. A love story with a masochist for a heroine and an inarticulate hero; an Horatio who is not a friend of the hero; a revenge play without villains. *Sartoris* has its own strengths, many of which lie outside its relationship to the play: its evocation of history, its descriptive power, its story line. Faulkner's use of allusions and myth—not including the ones he creates—is apt to be momentary. He excels in the inventions of his own tales, perhaps generated by his reading: the Mac-Callum sequence, the automobile rides, the comic byplays. He catches his readers up in events so that they fill out his characters for him. In Shakespeare's play the problem is more of interpretation than inflation.

The overall movement of the novel, however, is characteristic of *Hamlet*. We go from chaos to quiet, from destruction to regeneration, from a world "Of carnal, bloody, and unnatural acts, / Of accidental judgments, casual slaughters, / Of deaths put on by cunning and forced cause. . . ." (*Hamlet* V. ii. 370-73) to these musings toward the end of *Sartoris*: "But perhaps *Sartoris* is the game itself—a game outmoded and played with pawns shaped too late and to an old dead pattern, and of which the Player Himself is a little wearied. For there is death in the sound of it, and a glamorous fatality. . ." (p. 317). *Sartoris* symbolizes disorder—glamorous as that may be. The book moves from two wars—which seem to have been invented for *Sartoris* to die in—from murder and casual death, to a mother and child. The child, at that, has been named not John or Bayard but Benbow.

The victor is not doom, fatality, the Player, or the *Sartoris* name. At the birth of the child, Simon says "Yessuh, de little marster done arrive en de ole times comin' back'" (p. 307). Simon is wrong. Even Miss Jenny is not there is death in the sound of it, and a glamorous fatality. . ." (p. 317). But "beyond the window evening was a windless lilac dream, foster dam of quietude and peace" (p. 318). The authorial voice speaks at the end, sounding like Horace Benbow, ruler of his clan, in his "Grecian Urn" period. Benbow, symbolizing peace, wins the game. The love story of Narcissa and Bayard matches peace against violence; the resolution is similar to the sense of

order that *Hamlet* works towards and Fortinbras personifies. The wars are over; the troublemakers have departed.

Shakespeare's England had had its domestic and foreign wars. William Faulkner, writing in America after the Civil War and the first American international entanglement, made the great Elizabethan theme of order his own. Herein lies the real kinship between the novel and the play.

Disorder to order is perhaps the only important theme in *Sartoris*, but it is there. Nor will it take a detailed analysis to establish that this theme is central to other Yoknapatawpha works, is indeed Faulkner's "apocalypse". For example, we recall the final scene in *The Sound and the Fury*, when the Negro servant, showing off, tries to take Ben around the statue in the centre of town in the wrong direction. Ben howls. So his brother, Jason, embarrassed again, straightens the situation. "In that pair of symbolic actions which conclude the tale, the instinctive responses of the idiot Ben to order-giving, in preference to chaos-giving, provide a fitting end to Faulkner's dialectical handling of themes and techniques throughout *The Sound and the Fury*".<sup>5</sup>

As a general background to the entire Yoknapatawpha sequence is the change in social order, from the old, aristocratic, slave-holding, essentially rural South, to the modern world. The set of stories in *Go Down, Moses* provide examples of how the land and the people most closely connected with it must adjust. As in *The Sound and the Fury*, the questions raised by the changes are moral ones. Only ironically is Jason, the immoral man, forced by his fear of how things look to bring order back to Ben's world. The lessons of the disappearing wilderness in such stories as "The Bear" are not simply nostalgic; they concern how to create a moral man.

The quest for order can also be seen to be an artistic matter, as in *Absalom, Absalom!* Quentin's and Shreve's creation of the story of Thomas Sutpen, collecting known facts and projecting into blank spaces, is a process of artistically ordering, not only a story, but also a chaotic creature. It is like painting Sutpen on a vase. He is captured, complete, still, by the end of the novel. Art and morality are, in fact, closely related through the concept of order.

It is possible, as well, to work through the trilogy, seeing chaotic forces unleashed, like wild horses, or greed, or lust, in *The Hamlet*, and following through *The Town*, where these forces remain in conflict, to the ordered if less interesting conclusion of *The Mansion*. The Varners have disappeared. Gavin Stevens and V. K. Ratliff, both in their sixties, seem to have reached a voluntary retirement from their meddling. Flem Snopes, the unleasher of *The Hamlet*,

is dead; his assassin, Mink Snopes, has settled his scores and is feeling a great kinship with mother earth. The constellations march in accustomed order at the end of *The Mansion*. "Only [Mink] located the right stars at that moment, he was not laying exactly right since a man must face the east to lay down; walk west but when you lay down, face the exact east. So he moved, shifted a little and now he was exactly right and he was free now. . . ."<sup>6</sup> So the trilogy ends, as Mink comes into proper relationship with the universe.

The thematic movement from chaos to order provides, better than any other single idea, the grand scheme of Faulkner's life work, its relation to the universe. This can be matched with his stated subject: the human heart in conflict with itself. Conflict is chaotic. The heart must come to terms with itself. Shakespeare was perhaps more interested in political order. Following through Faulkner's works, from *Sartoris* on, we watch individuals striving towards peace and harmony, against the background of shifting society, by relieving their essential inner conflicts. (The satyr play, *The Relievers*, which follows *The Mansion*, unsettles the order as did its Greek counterpart, to affirm it.) Although Faulkner dramatizes his concept in humorous, cruel, and sometimes downright cynical ways, he seems to have remained confident that order would prevail. That is to say, his manipulations, as artist, tend to that great end. He was a latter-day Elizabethan.

#### NOTES

1. Frederick L. Gynn and Joseph L. Blotner, eds., *Faulkner in the University* (University of Virginia Press, 1959), 285.
2. Robert Cantwell's introduction to the Signet edition, 1953, limits itself largely to *Sartoris* as an introduction to Yoknapatawpha County and the author's grandfather. Page references to *Sartoris* in this paper are to that Signet edition.
3. References to *Hamlet* are from the Pelican edition (ed. Willard Farnam, 1957).
4. "William Faulkner's *Sartoris*", in *Literary and Philosophical Essays* (trans. Annette Michelson, Criterion Books, 1955), passim.
5. Lawrance Thompson, *William Faulkner: An Introduction and Interpretation* (Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1967), 47.
6. William Faulkner, *The Mansion* (Random House, 1959), 435.