

SARTORIS: HOW TO READ IT

By TADATOSHI SAITO*

Needless to say, *Sartoris* (1929), William Faulkner's third novel, stands at the entrance of his "mythical kingdom," marking the starting point of the famed *Yoknapatawpha Saga*. He himself says in his often quoted remarks, "Beginning with *Sartoris* I discovered that my own little postage stamp of native soil was worth writing about and that I would never live long enough to exhaust it, and that by sublimating the actual into the apocryphal I would have complete liberty to use whatever talent I might have to its absolute top. It opened up a gold mine of other people, so I created a cosmos of my own."¹ And when he was asked whether there was a particular order in which his works should be read, Faulkner said, "Probably to begin with a book called *Sartoris* that has the germ of my apocrypha in it. A lot of the characters are postulated in that book. I'd say that's a good one to begin with."²

Now "apocrypha" is, in its literal sense, "a group of 14 books, not considered canonical, included in the Septuagint and the Vulgate as part of the Old Testament, but usually omitted from Protestant editions of the Bible" [Random House Dictionary], and if what Faulkner calls "the actual" is meant to be the objective history of the South of America including the history of his own family and is likened to the canon of the Old Testament, that is, the chronicle of the ancient Israelite, then the world of his imagination into which "the actual" is to be sublimated can be properly called his "apocrypha"—his version of the history of the South.

When Faulkner thought, following the advice of Sherwood Anderson, his senior as a writer, of writing about his "own little postage stamp of native soil" which lies between the hills of north Mississippi, was it not the epic of the ancient Israelite recorded in the Old Testament that was topmost in his mind as a model to work on? This is nothing new, since it seems that most Americans, who have no national myth of their own, have appropriated the Old Testament as a kind of substitute. But it should be noted that while he was working on *Flags in the Dust* which was to be *Sartoris*, he was also working on "Father Abraham," a novel which was fated to be unfinished.

As we all know, Abraham is the founder of the ancient Hebrew nation. Though he led most of his life in Ur of the Chaldees, "by faith Abraham, when he was called to go out into a place which he should after receive for an inheritance, obeyed; and he went out, not knowing whither he went" [Hebrews 11:8] and became "a father of many nations" [Genesis 17:4]. Faulkner, who was working on "Father Abraham," might have finished up *Sartoris* as a chapter of his apocrypha, in which Colonel William C. Faulkner, his legendary great-grandfather, would assume the role similar to that of Abraham. As it was, Faulkner's apocrypha at its early stage was divided into *Sartoris* and "Father Abraham," and *Sartoris* failed to be a new story of Abraham while "Father Abraham" was, as Michael Millgate

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¹ Malcolm Cowley (ed.), *Writers at Work*, p. 141.

² Frederick L. Gwynn and Joseph L. Blotner (ed.), *Faulkner in the University*, p. 285.

pointed out,³ suspended till it was resumed in *The Hamlet* (1940) as a story of the upstart Snopeses.

One wonders why it was that *Sartoris*, which had the germ of Faulkner's apocrypha in it, failed to be his new story of Abraham. The reasonable answer one can possibly find is that Faulkner may have sensed a crisis coming over the South of America while he was working on *Sartoris*. This sense of crisis is what he shared with the intellectuals in the South who feared that the principles of industrialized life in the North were encroaching the South over the period from around the end of World War I through the late 1920's and were threatening to destroy the traditional life style of the South based on agrarianism. The glorious tradition of the South which the Sartoris family—it is modelled on Faulkner's—helped to sustain is now on the verge of destruction, and the Sartoris family, which at the end of *Sartoris* consists only of an old lady who, though undaunted, does not have many years to live and a young widow with a suckling, cannot look forward to Abraham's blessings. This is why Faulkner was to present the story of the greedy Snopeses as a new story of Abraham in his apocrypha while regarding their appearance on the scene with bitter feelings. All he could do in *Sartoris*, therefore, was to record in a book form the world which was doomed to destruction, and it was impossible for him to describe either directly or indirectly the opposition of the Sartorises and the Snopeses in *Sartoris*, because they were not evenly matched. It is true that one of the Snopeses cuts his sinister figure in *Sartoris*, but he is, as it were, an ominous star in the darkening skies—an omen of misfortune in a drama of usurpation.

Some critics, who pretend to know all about *Sartoris* and other later works of Faulkner's try to read in *Sartoris* a juxtaposition of the story of the Sartorises and that of the Snopeses, but to do so is to go too far, and just as Moses was allowed to see only "the back parts" of the Lord [Cf. Exodus 33:23], one can see only retrospectively that there has been a certain pattern in Faulkner's works as a whole. It may be interesting to recall here the remarks made four decades ago by George O'Donnell who first pointed out that the theme of Faulkner's works as a whole appeared in *Sartoris*. He said:

In *Sartoris*, which was published before *The Unvanquished* but which follows it in historical sequence, the conflict is between young Bayard Sartoris (the grandson of the Bayard Sartoris who was a youth in *The Unvanquished*) and the Snopes world of the 1920's. ...Young Bayard's brother, John, has been killed in a war; but *it is clear that it was a Snopes war and not a Sartoris war*. ...The Snopes world has done more than oppose the Sartorises. It has weakened them internally (as it weakened Rosa Millard) in using them for its advantage; it has made them self-conscious, queer, psychologically tortured. Bayard Sartoris has something of the traditional instinct for noble and disinterested action, under a vital ethical code. But the strength is so warped internally by the psychological effects of the Snopes world upon it, and it is so alien to the habitual actions of

³ Cf. Michael Millgate, *The Achievement of William Faulkner*, p. 24 and pp. 180-181.

that world, that it can only manifest itself in meaningless violence, ending in self-destruction.⁴ [*Italics mine.*]

George O'Donnell may have been right in some ways, but it is one thing to see *Sartoris* in the perspective of Faulkner's whole works, and it is quite another to read and evaluate it on its own terms. *Sartoris* is not necessarily a transitional work, and one might as well read it in connection with its preceding works at most.

Michael Millgate, among other critics, clearly regards *Sartoris* as having developed directly from *Soldiers' Pay* (1926), Faulkner's first novel.⁵ This is understandable, because both works treat of soldiers who return home after the end of World War I, though one of them is physically wounded and the other mentally wounded, and also treat of their immediate relatives and friends who receive them with different reactions. Ernest Hemingway, who had been badly wounded in a battle, wrote a short story entitled "Soldier's Home" (1925) in which a young man, while not physically wounded, returns home belatedly and feels himself isolated even from his mother. On the other hand, Faulkner, who neither took part in a battle nor was wounded, described in *Soldiers' Pay* a fatally wounded soldier who returns home as a living corpse, so to speak, and is unable to recognize even his *fiancée*.

The returned soldier in Hemingway's story, who feels disillusioned and cannot pray to God any more, undoubtedly belongs to "the lost generation," but he feels disillusioned perhaps because he is too late in coming home to receive a hero's welcome. In contrast, "soldiers' pay" in Faulkner's works is too dear: the soldiers are forced to sacrifice too much. Whence does this difference come? Every one will agree that what makes this difference is the fact that Faulkner's soldiers come from the South of America. If the South is a chivalrous society, as it is often said to be, where courage and politeness have been prized as positive virtues, how can its soldiers return home shamelessly without having any experience of fighting a battle or without having any wound inflicted on them? Faulkner may have been pathologically ashamed that he returned home as an ex-soldier, neither having participated in a battle nor having got wounded, and may have had to punish in his stead his fictional characters [his alter egos] sadistically both in *Soldiers's Pay* and in *Sartoris*. [Incidentally this sense of shame of Faulkner's reminds us of what the hero of *The Red Badge of Courage* (1895) by Stephen Crane must have felt because he did not have "the red badge of courage" (i. e. a wound inflicted in a battle) on him.] If so, a story of a soldier who returns home wounded from a war or a story of an ex-soldier who is ashamed of having no wound on him can be told as a story which is *par excellence* peculiar to the South of America.

Michael Millgate has also made it clear that the extant manuscripts of *Flags in the Dust*, the earlier version of *Sartoris*, [part of them, handwritten; the rest, typewritten] start by describing Evelyn [later, John] Sartoris who is serving in the Royal Air Force stationed in France.⁶ Evelyn [John] Sartoris flies off in a badly-equipped fighter, tearing himself from his twin brother, young Bayard, who is also serving in the Royal Air Force, and gets killed in a dogfight with German warplanes. Young Bayard feels responsible for his brother's death, even though he does not have to, and returns home furtively as if fearing to meet

⁴ Frederick J. Hoffman and Olga W. Vickery (ed.), *William Faulkner: Two Decades of Criticism*, pp. 50-51.

⁵ Cf. Michael Millgate, *op. cit.* p. 76.

⁶ Cf. *Ibid.* pp. 81-82.

his blood relatives. He is not physically wounded but is obsessed with a strong if groundless sense of guilt. This ex-soldier who failed to be killed in a battle or is spiritually dead already cannot find solace even in his native place and seeks a proper place to die in, driven by a violent impulse of self-destruction. [In this connection, it should be noted that the name "Bayard" means a gentleman of great courage and honor, and derives from the knight the Chevalier Bayard (1473–1524), who was "sans peur et sans reproche." The name spelled with a small letter, however, also means a stupid or blindly reckless person.⁷]

Furthermore, there appears together with young Bayard in *Sartoris* Horace Benbow, another ex-soldier, who reminds us of Faulkner himself more vividly than young Bayard. Horace Benbow is a delicate, artistic type of youth and is sent to the front by the Y.M.C.A. Now the Y.M.C.A. runs canteens in the army, and so Horace never participates in a battle and is despised by those soldiers who have fought battles. When he returns home, he brings back a glass-blowing machine, of all things, with him. *Flags in the Dust*, as we all know, has been cut short by about one fourth to be *Sartoris*, with the result that many passages about Horace Benbow have been deleted. And so *Sartoris* has little to say about the unnatural relationship between Horace and Narcissa his sister and an organic relation, as there ought to have been one, between the story of young Bayard and that of Horace Benbow has been lost sight of. Nevertheless, we may safely assume that *Sartoris* was conceived primarily as a story of two ex-soldiers.

Sartoris, as it stands, opens with a scene in which two old men—old man Falls and old Bayard—who are both hard of hearing talk with each other about John Sartoris [old Bayard's long-deceased father] in an office of the bank which the latter manages as president. A colored coachman drives up to the bank to pick up old Bayard at about the time that he expects the business of the bank will be over and informs old Bayard that his grandson has come home from the military service. Old man Falls has visited old Bayard, because he wanted to hand over to his friend a pipe left by the late John Sartoris. Almost always, when old man Falls comes to see old Bayard, the ghost of John Sartoris comes with him and dominates his son's office for a while.

As usual, old man Falls had brought John Sartoris into the room with him, had walked the three miles in from the county Poor Farm, fetching, like an odor, like the clean dusty smell of his faded overalls, the spirit of the dead man into that room where the dead man's son sat and where the two of them, pauper and banker, would sit for a half an hour in the company of him who had passed beyond death and then returned.

Freed as he was of time and flesh, he was a far more palpable presence than either of the two old men who sat shouting periodically in one another's deafness while the business of the bank went forward in the next room and people in the adjoining stores on either side listened to the indistinguishable uproar of their voices coming through the walls. He was far more palpable than the two old men cemented

⁷ Harry Runyan, *A Faulkner Glossary*, p. 142.

by a common deafness to a dead period and so drawn thin by the slow attenuation of days; even now, although old man Falls had departed to tramp the three miles back to that which he now called home, John Sartoris seemed to loom still in the room, above and about his son, with his bearded, hawklike face, so that as old Bayard sat with his crossed feet propped against the corner of the hearth, holding the pipe in his hand, it seemed to him that he could hear his father's breathing even, as though that other were so much more palpable than mere transiently articulated clay as to even penetrate into the uttermost citadel of silence in which his son lived.⁸

This is a symbolic presentation of the fact that John Sartoris the legendary forefather is still wielding a vast influence on the Sartoris family. Young Bayard comes home to fall under this influence of his great-grandfather's and he cannot hope to free himself from it. Nor can he get rid of his sense of responsibility for his brother's death. He is, so to speak, under the double influence of two John Sartorises and feels constrained to break away from it. This is why he tries to manage an unbroken stallion, drives a car with a motor too powerful for a country road, and finally flies a faulty airplane as test pilot at the expense of his own life. While driving the car recklessly with his grandfather beside him, he accidentally overturns it and his grandfather is killed in the accident. [Actually the accident causes the heart attack which kills old Bayard.] Young Bayard's sense of guilt is all the more deepened, and he has no other choice but to hasten his own death, not to speak of returning to his wife Narcissa.

Now it is Miss Jenny [Virginia Du Pre], old Bayard's sister, who tries to prevent young Bayard from destroying himself and takes every possible measure to hold him in the tradition of the Sartoris family. She does not hesitate to call the police, for example, to ask them to take care of him while he stays away from home, and she arranges for the marriage of young Bayard and Narcissa Benbow. It is, however, because he feels burdened with the tradition of the Sartoris family that he tries to break away, and therefore it is ironical, indeed, that Miss Jenny helps to sustain the very tradition that is threatening to crush young Bayard. In this connection, we might as well remember that the tradition of the Sartoris family is concerned with another Bayard Sartoris, Miss Jenny's brother, as well as with John Sartoris the forefather and that part of the tradition at least is Miss Jenny's creation, because

... It was she [Miss Jenny] who told them of the manner of Bayard Sartoris' death prior to the second battle of Manassas. She had told the story many times since (at eighty she still told it, on occasions usually inopportune) and as she grew older the tale itself grew richer and richer, taking on a mellow splendor like wine; until *what had been a hare-brained prank of two heedless and reckless boys wild with their own youth had become a gallant and finely tragical focal point*

⁸ William Faulkner, *Sartoris* (Random House), pp. 1-2.

*to which the history of the race had been raised from out the old miasmatic swamps of spiritual sloth by two angels valiantly fallen and strayed, altering the course of human events and purging the souls of men.*⁹ [Italics mine.]

Interestingly enough, this passage—the italicized part, to be precise—sheds much light on how the actual has been sublimated into the apocryphal in Faulkner's works and it seems as if Faulkner himself were making a comment on the secret of his creative imagination.

At any rate, Miss Jenny fails to prevent young Bayard from destroying himself—the men of the Sartoris family are not meant to die a natural death after all—but she does succeed in getting him and Narcissa married and having her give birth to a boy. And so Miss Jenny is not completely defeated, though her flags may have been trodden in the dust. She can still talk about her lost game. Whether Narcissa's boy is named John or Benbow, the fact remains that he is a Sartoris, and a Sartoris must be prepared to play the game both glamorous and disastrous.

...Narcissa played quietly on, her white dress with its black ribbon at the waist vaguely luminous in the dusk, with a hushed sheen like wax. Jasmine drifted; the sparrows were still now, and Miss Jenny talked on in twilight about little Johnny while Narcissa played with rapt inattention, as though she were not listening. Then, without ceasing and without turning her head, she said:

"He isn't John. He's Benbow Sartoris."

"What?"

"His name is Benbow Sartoris," she repeated.

Miss Jenny sat quite still for a moment. In the next room Elnora moved about, laying the table for supper. "And do you think that'll do any good?" Miss Jenny demanded. "Do you think you can change one of 'em with a name?"

The music went on in the dusk softly; the dusk was peopled with ghosts of glamorous and old disastrous things. And if they were just glamorous enough, there was sure to be a Sartoris in them, and then they were sure to be disastrous. Pawns. But the Player, and the game He plays... He must have a name for His pawns, though. 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, like silver pennons downrushing at sunset, or a dying fall of horns along the road to Roncevaux.¹⁰

⁹ *Ibid.* p. 9.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 379–380.

In the last analysis, one is tempted to say that *Sartoris* is Miss Jenny's story, but the fact is that it is a story of five or six strands loosely banded together, and it can be said to be inconclusive as a work of art. Furthermore, we can now compare *Sartoris* with *Flags in the Dust*, but it is doubtful whether we can still say that *Sartoris* is inconclusive precisely because it is the abridged version of *Flags in the Dust*. As Mickael Millgate says, *Sartoris* is "open to a number of criticisms which would not have been made if the work had appeared as originally written; and the fact that Faulkner seems to have resisted any temptation to make alternative use, in a short story or in another novel, of material deleted from *Flags in the Dust*, perhaps suggests that he may always have retained the hope that the novel would eventually appear in a form approximating more closely to the *Flags in the Dust* type-script."¹¹ But the very fact that Faulkner did not make use, in any form, of material deleted from *Flags in the Dust* also suggests that he may have considered *Sartoris*, though unwillingly, as a finished work and may have expected it to be read as such.

Sartoris is a rich, if uneven, work of art. Its action covers a period of only a little more than a year from the early spring of 1919 when young Bayard returns home through the later part of June the next year, but the sense of the Southern past pervades it throughout. One is constantly made aware of the changes of seasons by its references to the scent of flowers and plants as well as to the topography of the South. About 65 characters make their appearance on the scene and constitute a little cosmos. Old Bayard, president of the Sartoris bank, is on familiar terms with old man Falls, a pauper, and the Sartoris people and the Negroes who have served them for a long time are enjoying intimate relations as if they make up a large family. [It is regrettable, however, that almost all of these Negroes are described as stereotypes.] It may be that Faulkner wanted to record in his apocrypha the good old Southern society which was rapidly breaking up in face of the industrialization of America, and no one will deny that he has succeeded considerably.

Among other things which remain to be said about *Sartoris* is its structure as a kind of detective story. For example, it takes quite a time for young Bayard to make his appearance before us after we are told through Simon's report about the fact that he has returned home from the war. [Young Bayard found it difficult to return home at once after he got off the train because of his sense of guilt, and it seems that he has been to the cemetery where John Sartoris the forefather is buried in order to report on his return.] An unidentified man creeps to Narcissa's room over the roofs. Byron Snopes who has been sending obscene letters to Narcissa, using an alias, breaks into the house of the Benbows when they are not at home, retrieves his letters and makes off with Narcissa's underwear on top of that.

Finally, *Sartoris* is a novel produced by William Faulkner the poet. He sometimes surprises us by using in *Sartoris* a variety of affected expressions that remind us of the verses by John Keats (1795-1821), a romantic poet of England. One may find it hard not to get sick of his rhetorical and bombastic style, but such a style is one of those things which are characteristic of an ambitious young writer. *Sartoris* was published with the dedication: "To Sherwood Anderson through whose kindness I was first published, with the belief that this book will give him no reason to regret that fact."¹² Anderson probably found no reason to be disappointed at *Sartoris*, nor do we find any reason to disregard *Sartoris* because it is not one of Faulkner's major works.

¹¹ Michael Millgate, *op. cit.*, p. 85.

¹² William Faulkner, *Sartoris* (Random House), "flyleaf."