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HAMILTON BASSO
(1904 - 1964)
The Making Of A Novelist

Ham later confided in me, in open candor, that as a youth his dream was to be one day written about at book-length in American Literature. “Then I scaled my hopes down to a chapter,” he said. “Then to a paragraph. Now I’d settle for a footnote.”

“Oh, for God’s sake,” I said then, and clairvoyantly enough. A solid oeuvre stands clearly on the shelf, and a scholar is writing a book.
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Acknowledgments

The composition of “Hamilton Basso (1904-1964): The Making of a Novelist” was made possible by the financial support of the Catholic University of Nijmegen, The Netherlands, the United States Government and the Thomas Wolfe Society: a grant from the University of Nijmegen, a Fulbright Fellowship and the William B. Wisdom Award greatly facilitated my research in the various rare book, manuscript and research libraries in the United States.

To the libraries and librarians who assisted me in my research I extend my thanks: Beinecke Library at Yale University, New Haven; Harvey S. Firestone Library at Princeton University, Princeton; Houghton Library at Harvard University, Cambridge; Newberry Library, Chicago; Howard Tilton Library at Tulane University, New Orleans; Patterson Van Pelt Library at the University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia; Wilson Library at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill; Fletcher Library at Arizona State University-West, Phoenix and the University Library at the Catholic University of Nijmegen, The Netherlands.

While many people have contributed to this critical biography, I want to single out those individuals whose backing has been instrumental to the completion of this study.

Of those who have known Hamilton Basso personally and who have so willingly shared their memories with me, I want to thank Keith Basso, Hamilton Basso’s son; the late Mary McCrady-Basso, his sister; the late Cleanth Brooks and the late Peter de Vries. I could not have done any justice to the “man behind the writing,” if I had not been able to meet and interview Etolia S. Basso, Hamilton Basso’s widow. She answered my never-ending questions, made helpful suggestions, showed me letters and welcomed me many times in her home. She is a very special woman and she has become a very dear friend.
While "Basso scholars" are a non-existent breed, Joseph Millichap is one of the few experts with whom I could discuss Basso in detail. His informative letters, as well as his 1979 book, *Hamilton Basso* (Boston: Twayne), have been very useful. Others, who took a deep interest in my subject, were Aldo Magi, editor of the *Thomas Wolfe Review* and David Madden, writer and critic.

As I was traveling through the United States in 1991 and 1992, I enjoyed a great deal of hospitality from family and friends. They made my travel truly memorable and alleviated the loneliness I felt while I was on the road. I would like to remember especially Bonnie Bertram, John and Ann Burrows, Angela, John and Tony Calabro, Daphne Ebskamp, Dale Edmonds, Paul Fischer, Monique and Eric Foster, Cookie and Lester Gross, Janet and Peter Harckham, Christian and Michelle Kirsebom, Ingrid and Mary Lohr, Bud and Dot Lake, Chris and Gretchen Lake, Bonnie and Jack MacDonald, Marion and Jack McQuade, Kevin and Debbie McQuade and Robin and Jan McQuade. I am especially indebted to the warm hospitality the Holland family offered me (repeatedly) in their beautiful home in Winchester, Massachusetts; being true to their name, they provided me with a "Holland" away from home. thank you Alice, Dick, Henry, Sandy and Matthew.

While my former professors at the English Department of Leiden University, The Netherlands, followed my progress with interest and encouraged me during some of my weaker moments, I want to mention Cedric Barfoot and Tjebbe Westendorp especially.

I have really appreciated the infinite support and praise I received from dear colleagues across the Atlantic: John Calabro's funny letters always reassured me and so did those by Susan Davidsmeyer, Matthew Holland and Jerry Rosen. I feel especially fortunate to have met and befriended Richard Kennedy, Professor Emeritus at Temple University; he has been very generous with good advice and many letters of reference.

Of my colleagues at Nijmegen, Hans Bak, Jaap van der Bent, Emily Embree, Manan Janssen and Frank van Meurs come to mind immediately; Hans and Manan have been
invaluable proofreaders, Jaap helped me rewrite my Dutch summary, Emily’s e-mail was a true lifeline and Frank’s loyal support was indispensable.

Believing that research and teaching are forever linked, I would like to thank the groups of students I had in Nijmegen in the spring semesters of 1993 and 1994, as well as the students I taught at Glendale Community College in Phoenix in the spring semester of 1995. Their enthusiasm has been a great inspiration for my research and writing.

My advisor, colleague and friend, Ger Janssens, has taught me that patience is indeed a virtue; I am grateful for his expert advice, his knowledgeable insights, his dedication, his encouragement, his enthusiasm, his promptness and his fine sense of humor.

My proofreader and dear friend, Matthew Holland, has been invaluable in giving last-minute comments and advice. I hope this study will inspire him to finish his Ph.D dissertation, a work which will far outshine mine.

My family has been particularly supportive and I want to thank them for being such wonderful company: thank you Laurine, Paul, Matthijs, Laurine Jr., Tim, Ellen, Arthur, Daan, Olivier, Minke, Marc, Julia, Marjke and last but not least, mom and dad; I will always remember the financial and emotional support you gave me.

Finally, I want to dedicate this book to my biggest fan and husband, Jonathan Lake. He has always been there for me, on the road, at home and abroad. He has shared my little successes and he has seen my tears. I could not have finished this work without his unconditional love and affection.

Denver, August 1995

Inez Hollander Lake
Introduction

At the time of his death in 1964, Hamilton Basso was a celebrated author. He received a lengthy obituary in the *New York Times* and, ten years earlier, his best known novel, *The View From Pompey’s Head* (1954), survived the *New York Times* best-seller list for forty weeks. The book was translated into seven languages and considered popular enough to be converted into a Braille version. In 1995, however, the name Hamilton Basso has left few traces in the public memory. In the thirty-one years since his death only two works have been written on this Southern novelist; one is an unpublished Ph.D. dissertation by Clarence Ikerd and the other is a volume in the Twayne series by Joseph Millichap.¹ Both works appeared in the seventies and nothing of any substance has been written about Basso since.

For a comprehensive assessment of Hamilton Basso’s life and oeuvre I will resort to a biographical method in which records such as letters, diaries and interviews with relatives and friends may illustrate, explain and reinforce the literary work. In view of Basso’s neglect, this seems the most rewarding approach to take. In order to determine whether and where Basso belongs in the American canon, I will compare his oeuvre to the work of his American and Southern contemporaries.

The first chapter is a combined portrait of Basso’s New Orleans childhood and his beginnings as an artist, it provides the reader with the biographical framework of a young Louisiana writer who was so fortunate as to be included in New Orleans’s vibrant literary scene of the nineteen-twenties.² Since Basso’s first novel, *Relics and Angels* (1929), is in many ways the seedbed for his later novels, the second chapter will be a comprehensive analysis of this work. Contrary to the shallow interpretations of the novel by Clarence Ikerd


² Part of this chapter was used for a contribution to Richard S. Kennedy’s book on literary New Orleans, to be published by Louisiana State University Press in 1995.
and Joseph Millichap, the work gains a new and original dimension when studied within the literary contexts of American fiction of the twenties and the Southern Renascence. As a product of its time, *Relics and Angels* also manifests a modernist influence: notwithstanding his later reputation as a Southern realist, Basso experimented with modernism in his early work. This is especially noticeable in the prose-poem "Rain on Aspidistra," a piece that was published in *transition*. The second chapter will be rounded off with a close reading of this intriguing poem.

Like the first chapter, the third chapter will be partly biographical, giving an impression of the writer's life in the North Carolina mountains, where he and his newly wedded wife, Etolia Simmons Basso, had moved to lead a more frugal life in the trying years of the Great Depression. Living in Pisgah Forest, Basso met and befriended F. Scott Fitzgerald, who had moved into Asheville's Grove Park Inn to be closer to his hospitalized wife, Zelda. In the summer of 1937, Thomas Wolfe had landed there as well and lived in a cabin near Oteen. In chapter III, I will survey Basso's literary (and *New Republic*) criticism, which forms an indispensable background for the study of his novels. Of Basso's *New Republic* years, his correspondence with Malcolm Cowley and Matthew Josephson is highlighted as it features his growing disenchantment with radical politics and rabid intellectuals. Inclined to follow a path of careful moderation, something which was inherent to his isolation in the mountains, Basso exhibited a profound distrust of Communism, Marxism and political dogmatism in general.

To understand Basso's place in the Southern Renascence and his lasting importance as a Southern writer, chapter IV is pivotal: Basso's recurring Southern theme involves the conflict his heroes have with their home environment and with themselves. Like no other writer of the Southern Renascence, Basso surveyed the problems, emotional and otherwise, that a Southerner is confronted with when he leaves and returns home. Though Thomas Wolfe has received most, if not all, credit for this motif, Basso analyzed the theme more often, more thoroughly and less sentimentally. The novels written in the thirties form an excellent basis for this discussion. Other Renascence themes, which link Basso to Southern writers rather than set him apart, are his interest in the Old South versus the New South, the small town versus the
big city, black emancipation, the family identity of the Southern protagonist, the plight of the middle class family and corrupt Southern politics.

Though they were never reprinted, the books Basso wrote in the thirties are the novels for which he should be remembered. His later novels are less stimulating from a literary point of view but were more popular with the public. The last two chapters will describe his development from a serious Southern novelist to a commercial craftsman and writer of best-sellers. Basso's mixed oeuvre, which ranges from literary novel to best-seller, also explains his obscurity today. As his later potboilers drew most attention, Basso was quickly discarded as a mere bellettrist. One of the purposes of this study is to show that, as opposed to the later novels, the forgotten novels of the thirties incorporate the key to a re-assessment and rediscovery of Basso's merit as a Southern author.

Finally, to justify this dissertation on what is generally perceived as a marginal author of the American canon, I quote Arlin Turner who pleaded for the rediscovery of neglected authors:

Literary history cannot chart only the highest peaks of achievement and let them stand as isolated, unexplained phenomena, like mountain summits above an expanse of clouds. The highest mountains grow from the lesser mountains around them and lean on them — and, to expand the same figure — at times shifts in the supporting earth alter the relative or absolute heights of the mountains. Herein lies a lesser but perhaps a sufficient justification for studying authors of the second or third or fourth rank.³

The study of a “lesser” author can be stimulating and innovative if it leads to a broader perspective on the literary landscape. Furthermore, through the analysis of “secondary” authors, like Basso, one may glean a better understanding of more complex and canonical contemporaries, such as William Faulkner. The reading of a marginal author will not only facilitate the reader’s comprehension of literature, the study of a neglected author can also lead to fascinating discoveries in literary history. To give an example, the files of forgotten authors have often been overlooked and in Basso’s case, his files have led to new information about Thomas Wolfe. The prime objective of this study, however, does not lie so much in the question whether it is justified to analyze a borderline novelist as in the answer to the question why we should try and read Hamilton Basso again.
The development of artistic determination in the soul of a young man is often slow and strange. Although it stirs within him when he is yet a child, growing as he grows, he does not become conscious of it until many years have passed.

Hamilton Basso, “A Momentary Digression”
Chapter I: New Orleans Beginnings

1. A Small Boy Sits on a Long Wharf

When Jonathan Daniels toured the South in 1937, he described Louisiana as a "Caribbean republic" whose hard Anglo-Saxon tradition had been "softened by pleasant and relaxing Latin ways". New Orleans may be seen as the epitome of this hybrid of Latin and Anglo-Saxon cultures. With a Creole heritage that is French and Catholic rather than Anglo-Saxon and Protestant, New Orleans may even be called one of America's most un-American cities. Located amidst swamps, the town has seen many wet winters, floods, hurricanes and yellow fever epidemics. Yet because of its architectural uniqueness, ethnic diversity and enticing atmosphere, the city has always remained the jewel of the deep South. Before it was discovered by the tourist industry, New Orleans lay undisturbed on the outer bayous of Louisiana, slumbering in the aftermath of the Civil War and untouched by the woes of industrialization. Impoverished by the burdensome Reconstruction years, the elegant French Quarter had deteriorated into a slum of crime and prostitution and although there was little to remind the visitor of the city's rich colonial past, the place had an unequivocal charm which Charles D. Warner captured when ambling downtown on an early Sunday morning in 1887:

... in the balconies and on the mouldering window-ledges flowers bloomed, and in the decaying courts climbing-roses mingled their perfume with the orange; the shops were open; ladies tripped along from early mass or to early market; there was a twittering in the square and in the sweet old gardens; caged birds sang and screamed the songs of South America and the tropics; the language heard on all sides was French . . . Nothing could be more shabby than the

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streets, ill-paved, with undulating sidewalks, and open gutters, little
canals in which the cat became the companion of the crawfish, and
the vegetable in decay sought in vain a current to oblivion.⁵

Warner seems to have been acutely aware of the split nature of the town; juxtaposing the
picturesque and dirty detail, he was enchanted by what he called this “thriftless, battered,
stained and lazy old place.”⁶ It was here, in the heart of the French Quarter, that the subject of
this study, Joseph Hamilton Basso, was born on September 5, 1904.

Hamilton Basso was the only son of Dominick Basso and Louise Calamari. While his
paternal great-grandfather had emigrated from Genoa to dodge the draft, Basso’s maternal
grandparents, Nathale and Antoinette Calamari, were also Italian and came to the New World
when their daughter, Louise, was only three years old. Both devout Catholics, Nathale and
Antoinette had once considered joining holy orders, something they chose to forget about the
moment they became infatuated with each other. Hamilton was not oblivious to their
fascination with monastic life in his first novel, Relics and Angels (1929), the hero’s
grandmother becomes a pious nun after her failed marriage.

While Basso characterized his family background as “Mediterranean, Catholic [and] still
essentially European,” the family belonged to the New Orleans middle class which Joe Taylor
describes as varying in degree of wealth “but as a whole . . . literate, conservative, religious,
and economically ambitious.”⁷ Hamilton’s grandfather, Joseph Basso, had established a little
shoe factory in their house on Decatur Street, located between Barracks Street and Hospital

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⁵ Charles D. Warner, “Sui Generis,” The World From Jackson Square, A New Orleans

⁶ Warner, 308.

Street. Once the French Opera arrived in the 1880s, the family company specialized in shoes for the stage.

The opera did not only sustain the family financially. As true Italian-Americans, the Bassos also had emotional ties with the opera. As a youth, Dominick ran away from home and tried to become an opera singer. This having failed, he played and sang opera endlessly during the weekends, much to the annoyance of Hamilton and his younger sister, Mary.\(^8\) Apart from these matinees at home, Hamilton had to stomach more opera when his grandfather dragged him to the opera house where the boy would sleep rather than sit through the performances. But if not swayed by the music, Hamilton, or “Ham” as he was soon to be called by family and friends, was nonetheless enthralled by the colorful opera stories which one of the cobblers at the factory told him while making shoes for the different performances. One day, the cobbler told him the story of Faust and, greatly intrigued by this epic of the devil, Ham persuaded his grandfather to take him to see “Faust.” Contrary to the child’s great expectations, the operatic devil “couldn’t have frightened a sick cat,” the cobbler’s shoes being “the best part of the show.”\(^9\) Though obviously not smitten by opera, Hamilton did develop a taste for music. Growing up in the city of jazz, he became very fond of its music. He was an outstanding dancer, which may explain why his early stories are filled with dance and jazz music.

Hamilton’s childhood in the Quarter was particularly carefree and idyllic. In fact, the house on Decatur Street may have had a few things in common with the house that one of Basso’s heroes, Jason Kent, grows up in and describes as “a rather wonderful old house” situated on “a rather wonderful street. From the attic window you could see the rooftops for miles—... most of the nations of Europe had managed to crowd into that one block.”\(^10\) The Bassos’

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8 Mary Basso McCrady, interview, 1 February 1992, New Orleans.


10 Hamilton Basso, Days Before Lent (New York: Scribner’s, 1939) 38.
house opened unto an inner courtyard, which, lush with vegetation, was an excellent site for games. One day when the yard had become a little too confining, Ham sneaked into the adjoining courtyard to peep in on the next-door neighbor who was a poet. The boy’s first encounter with this specimen from the literary world turned out to be a disappointing experience: the so-called “poet” was a man in suspenders who, with a notepad in his lap and a fat cigar in his mouth, loafed for about an hour. Many years after this uneventful meeting with the poet, Basso noted that it had had its value since it taught him that “poetry can’t be humed and that a poet may well be a bald-headed man in suspenders, smoking a cigar.”

But there was more to Hamilton’s childhood than the pleasant place he called home. The boy’s indulgent father was an affectionate man who liked to surprise his children with extraordinary pets such as alligators and pigs. Also, when he found out that his son had picked up the habit of hanging out in the Quarter’s seedy billiard rooms, he bought a pool table and had it placed in the small dining room. Dominick liked to take his children on various outings. On one of these trips, he and Ham were rowed back home by a black fisherman. Ham remembered the trip as only a child would remember it: oars splashing in the lake, little fingers trailing through the water and an arrival home well after midnight. Of this midnight excursion, he further recalled that they could “have come back on the Canal Street ferry but my father never even thought of it. It was in fact, unthinkable. He was in his shirtsleeves and in those days a New Orleans gentleman never appeared in public in his shirtsleeves.” It is interesting that Basso saw his father as an upper middle-class gentleman. Though the family was unmistakably middle class, Basso seemed to have thought they were of higher standing. In his

11 Hamilton Basso, “A New Orleans Childhood: The House on Decatur Street,” *New Yorker*, 9 October 1954: 94. This story is remarkably similar to Orlando’s first encounter with a poet who is equally “fat, shabby” and reluctant to put pen to paper. Like the young Basso, Orlando asks: “Was this a poet? Was he writing poetry?” Virginia Woolf, *Orlando* (1928; London: Granada, 1983) 14.

novels he would do the same, that is, his heroes are usually upgraded to the upper middle class or Southern “aristocracy.”

Dominick also liked to take his children to the park: once there, he and Mary would make flower-petal bracelets and clover chains long enough to encircle a city block, while Ham listened to the stories of Confederate veterans who were sitting on the park’s benches. The veterans’ stories stirred up an appetite for Southern history in the boy which was further enhanced by the stories that his father told him on their walks through the historical Quarter. Basso’s love of Southern history manifests itself in many of his works, from his biography of Civil War General, P.G T. Beauregard, to his penultimate novel, *The Light Infantry Ball* (1959).

Besides taking time off to play with his children, Dominick taught Ham and Mary that life was not merely fun and games. Endowed with a strong sense of justice and exhibiting a genuine compassion for other people, Basso’s father was a shining example of altruism and tolerance. One of his lifelong friends was a Jew, who ran a jewelry shop in the Quarter. As children, they had been in school together and since Dominick’s friend had a hard time fending for himself, Dominick defended him with his fists. Fairness, treating people with respect, whatever their color, race or background was high on the list of proper conduct in the Basso household. Basso’s novels reveal that he was equally sensitive to justice, which, in the Southern context of the twenties and thirties, was still a rather precarious reality for the black Southerner.

In contrast to his wife, who was an ardent Catholic, Dominick was a freemason and extremely anti-clerical. The latter trait Hamilton inherited from his father. Even though “he swung the holy smoke” as an altar boy, Basso would not embrace the faith and, in later life, stopped attending Church altogether, with the exception of one visit, on Armistice Day in 1945. In Basso’s early and unpublished oeuvre one retracts a strong anti-clerical element which also surfaces, albeit rather ambiguously, in his debut novel.

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13 Etolia S. Basso, interview, 8 January 1992, Tempe.
Unlike his father, Dominick was a "terrible businessman." 14 Faced with the management of the shoe company in 1917, when Joseph Basso died, Dominick did not succeed his father but sold the family business, an incident which would be recounted in Basso's first novel. Curiously, Dominick did not, as one would expect, seek a different career but remained a shoe broker and salesman all his life. Hamilton saw this as a distinctive weakness and, in his criticism of his father, he gradually dreamed up an ideal image of his grandfather, whom, in terms of personal ambition and inclination, he came to idolize:

--it was never questioned in my grandfather's house that the scholar and the dedicated public servant were worthier and more admirable than the banker and the businessman. My father's father was one of the latter. He owned a small shoe factory and a few pieces of property that I wish we still had. But his ambition for my father was that he should be a college professor. I think he must have been hurt and disappointed when my father went off in an entirely different direction, and into the first failures that I suppose I have been trying to make up for--. 15

Elsewhere Basso confirms his warm feelings for his grandfather whom he clearly saw as an example: "I liked [grandfather] very much and he liked me and we would often go on little excursions together. So, at a time when I was highly impressionable, it was inevitable that I should be greatly influenced by him."16 Fictional evidence of this remarkable grandfather-

14 Mary Basso McCrady, interview, 1 February 1992, New Orleans.

15 Hamilton Basso, letter to Edmund Wilson, 15 June 1958, Hamilton Basso Collection, Beinecke Library, New Haven.

grandson relationship can be found in an unpublished story where we are introduced to a small boy who is sitting beside his grandfather on a long New Orleans wharf. The grandfather turns out to be an enchanting *raconteur*, who stimulates and stirs the child's fancy. He passes on his gift of the gab and fairy-tale world by giving “the eyes of his imagination to the small boy who was sitting by his side.” Although we should be wary of linking fiction to biographical fact, a writer's first stories and his first novel are inclined to be, as Leon Edel notes, “more transparently autobiographical than his later work.” Thus, the quoted passage, where a deliberate, and almost ceremonial bequeathal takes place, may truthfully reflect Basso's grandfather fixation, something which is coincidentally reinforced by the fact that the boy was named after his grandfather. Worship of the grandfather figure is a common trait of Basso's novels. When reading them in succession, one detects a pattern of a grandson who tends to identify with his usually heroic grandfather. The father, on the other hand, is anti-heroic and sometimes absent altogether. In our discussion of the novels we will explore this further.

Hamilton's mother was a vivacious and “tiny little thing.” When taking out her baby son in a little buggy, people would come up to her, offer her a nickel and tell her to “buy something for her little brother.” Dedicated to her family, Louise was a conventional kind of woman and a true “homemaker.” She was very popular in the Quarter where she knew everybody, the prostitutes not excluded. Anybody who was ill or had the blues called upon Louise. Like a


19 Basso's first name was “Joseph.”

20 Mary Basso McCrady, interview, 1 February 1992, New Orleans.

21 Ibid.
good Italian mother, she doted on her son, a devotion which came out in her careful ironing and laying out of the white linen suits Ham wore to school. Although she was a very devout woman, her faith had a pragmatic edge to it. According to Keith, Hamilton Basso’s only son, “she had a very informal relationship with God, referring to Him as if He ran the grocery store next door.” In addition, her piety went only so far as convenience would allow: in the winter she preferred Episcopalian Mass because the Episcopalians had central heating and the Catholics did not.

The Bassos lived in the Quarter until they moved to the New Orleans suburbs after Joseph’s death in 1917. Mary Basso McCrady only remembered her grandfather’s funeral by the hat she wore. Hamilton, on the other hand, evoked the sad occasion in an early story, entitled “A Burial.” Witnessing the burial of a young friend, the story’s hero, Quimby, felt “like a child. Once before, when his grandfather had died, he had been in a house that was quiet with the knowledge of death. He was then a child, and now, in this new realization, he had become a child again.”

There is a picture from circa 1917 in which we see Mary Basso dressed in white, squinting against the sunlight; next to her stands her brother, his arm, slightly possessive and stiff, wrapped around her shoulder. He seems short for his age and appears to be an attractive boy with raven-black brilliantined hair that is combed back with prepubescent flair; his eyes are dark and his nose seems a little too big for his small face. He is dressed in a dark blazer that is too tight around the shoulders, and plus fours that go ballooning around his short legs. His face and air are confident, determined, gentlemanly and perhaps even a little dandyish, a peculiarity that cannot be seen as typical of Ham’s later personality.


23 Etolia S. Basso, interview, 3 January 1991, Tempe.

As a child Hamilton roamed around the French Quarter, where he knew all the shop owners, who, like his parents and grandparents, lived on the second floor above their shops. Another favorite city haunt was the New Orleans port with its wharves. We encounter Basso's love for the waterfront in two pieces. In the first piece, an autobiographical sketch which was never published, Basso describes the sensation he felt as a boy, when lying awake, he heard the "whistles of the boats as they nosed cautiously through the fog." In the daytime he would walk along the wharves and, while the "smell of sugar and tar and coffee crept into his nostrils," enjoy the hustle and bustle of harbor activities.  

A similar impression of the waterfront is given in *Cinnamon Seed* (1934), Basso's second novel; here we find the young hero, Dekker Blackheath, wander about the same wharves that Basso must have ambled along when he was a child.

The sun was shining on the river and there were many ships. He walked down the wharves reading the names of the ships, but all the names were strange and he saw none of the sailors he knew. He knew many sailors and even a captain, Mr. Gundersonn, and one of the sailors, Mr. O'Callahan, had a man-o'-war foaming across his chest into a brush of stiff red hair. He watched the negroes loading lumber on the *Apprentice*, seating himself on a hogshead in the midst of the clatter of hand-trucks and shouting negro voices and negro bodies shining in the sun, and he was reminded of an old ambition to some day become a sailor and go to foreign places and see foreign things and fall in love with a beautiful foreign woman. He had no desire, however, to have a man-o'-war foaming across his chest.

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26 Hamilton Basso, *Cinnamon Seed* (New York: Scribner's, 1934) 6-7.
Basso clearly shared Dekker’s fascination with foreign places: in later life, he would board the freighters he knew from his childhood and sail all over the world for travelogues commissioned by magazines such as *Holiday* and *Life*.

A middle-class family with middle-class interests, the Bassos did not have serious intellectual ambitions. For books Hamilton went across the street where he borrowed copies from a very generous book shop owner. But Ham’s earliest literary interest was not a mere matter of books. As a young boy even, he had written countless Peter Rabbit stones, one of which was published in the local newspaper. He also won a Daughters of the Confederacy Medal for an essay about Confederate General Mouton.

Hamilton’s access to books and the stories his father and grandfather told him undoubtedly helped shape his story-telling talent. Being a creative child, he liked to draw, had pet names for everybody, called his sister “Stump-Jumper” and told story after story to family and friends. His creativity with language became even more apparent when, in the eighth grade, he became champion orator of his class. Later in life, Basso would often be remembered for his power of speech. Thus we read in one of the Tulane yearbooks, *Jambalaya*, that he was an oratorical celebrity: an entry of 1924 tells us that “J. Hamilton Basso and Leon Cahn completely submerged the representatives of Vanderbilt and came home bearing a unanimous victory over the Nashville school.” Furthermore, Peter de Vries, friend and fellow writer on the *New Yorker*, recalls how Basso’s gregariousness was apparent in his “ready fluent speech,” and

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27 One day, Hamilton’s father came upon a crowd in Canal Street. Pushing his way through, he saw his son and Ham’s little clarinet-playing friend, Pinkie, at the pavilion: while Pinkie played his tunes, Ham eloquently persuaded the crowd to buy more war-bonds. That very same day the sale of war-bonds reached a record high. (Mary Basso McCrady, interview, 1 February 1992, New Orleans).

28 *Jambalaya* (New Orleans: Tulane student body, 1924) 331.
“the give-and-take in conversation, whether one-on-one or at a party, which he often dominated.”

Basso’s harmonious and happy childhood may be attributed to his parents’ loving attention and the extraordinary locale of New Orleans. In addition to having a lasting effect on Basso’s imagination, the town would be fundamental to his literary career: serving as the backdrop in three of his novels, New Orleans was also the setting where Basso met a number of writers who encouraged him and helped him publish his first novel.

We have virtually no information with relation to Basso’s adolescent years. All we know is that he graduated from Warren Eastings High school in 1922. The same year he entered Tulane University, where, in accordance with his father’s wishes, he pursued a law degree.\textsuperscript{30} Leafing through the Tulane yearbooks of the time, one will discover, besides boblines and Charleston dresses, that though Hamilton seems to have been a quiet student at first, occasionally appearing as a listed member of a debating or drama club, he gradually gained stature among friends and foes.

Grandly situated in the Garden District, the Tulane Campus was the playground for many of Basso’s immature pranks. These ranged from nailing professors’ erasers to the floor to arranging a jazz serenade to be played underneath the Dean’s window. Though not a favorite student with his professors, Basso became tremendously popular with his fellow students when, in mid-winter, he stripped to his shorts and dove, out of sheer jocosity, in the Audubon Park lagoon.

Charles Dufour, Basso’s friend, later boasted that he and Basso were finally expelled from college. However, Basso declared that he dropped out voluntarily because he could not picture himself a lawyer. In a newspaper article of 1954, he was to blame New Orleans for his renouncement of the law: with the city being such “a social place,” Basso was convinced that something “like the law” was “apt to get in the way.”\textsuperscript{31} Whatever the circumstances of his premature departure, he had left an indelible impression on Tulane, becoming the editor-in-chief of the \textit{Jambalaya} of 1925. This yearbook contains stories, which reveal the same sophomoric humor of Basso’s pranks, and shows witty drawings by his hand. Overall, it is

\textsuperscript{30} The law program started at the undergraduate level.

difficult to distil Basso’s contributions from this issue as most pieces appeared unsigned. Nevertheless, the yearbook was considered so unique that Basso was placed in the Tulane Hall of Fame in the *Jambalaya* of 1926. Underneath Basso’s picture, which shows a short young man with dark hair, a beaming smile and a wrinkled suit too short in the sleeves, we read:

J. HAMILTON BASSO

Because, as editor-in-chief of the 1925 *Jambalaya* he has given Tulane the greatest annual she has had. Because his volume was the first in the history of the *Jambalaya* to ever receive national recognition for excellence. Because he has distinguished himself as a writer by his great imaginative style. And finally because he has been elected to the Kappa Delta Phi, that honor than which there can be no greater bestowed upon a Tulanian by his fellow students.

However promising Basso seemed to his fellow Tulanians, his decision to shelve his law studies one month before graduation appears to have been rashly irrational. Evidently, his ambitions lay elsewhere. Baffling his father, who had already arranged a position for him in a New Orleans law firm, he was ready to pursue the true passion of his life, the Muse of Literature.32

Already during his law school semesters, Basso had traded in his lectures for the smoke-filled rooms of New Orleans’s literary community. In the French Quarter, then still known as a prostitution quarter, the Louisianan writer, Lyle Saxon, had started a literary “salon” as early as

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32 In a 1954 interview with the *Saturday Review of Literature*, Basso said that the hope for a legal career began with his grandfather, who had a good friend in a law firm: “I could see myself graduating, joining the firm, spending my life there. Everything just seemed so darn final to me, and I wasn’t even twenty.” (Robert Cantwell, “A Southerner Returns,” *Saturday Review of Literature*, 23 October 1954: 15).
1919. Saxon predicted that “in the trail of artists,” who had already settled there in the war years, “would come the writers and soon we would boast of our own Place D’Armes as New York does her Washington Square.” By 1922, Lyle Saxon’s prediction had come true. The Quarter saw the opening of photographers’ studios and bohemian tearooms and one year earlier, John McClure, Julius Weis Friend and Albert Goldstein had founded New Orleans’s first literary magazine, the *Double Dealer*. Attracting many artists for whom Paris was too far and Greenwich Village too expensive, New Orleans offered a reasonable alternative. Depicting the city as a “Creole version of the Left Bank,” Basso wrote many years after he had left the Big Easy. “If I never much hankered after Paris in the 1920s it was because . . . I had Paris in my own backyard.”

James Feibleman, who was one year younger than Basso and who also frequented the *Double Dealer* hang-outs, described the city as a “literary center” where, despite Prohibition, “Liquor was cheap and plentiful”; with its “sensually pleasant and socially tolerant atmosphere,” the Quarter formed an ideal enclave for bohemians and hangers-on. Regardless of, and perhaps due to the Quarter’s derelict state, the neighborhood had a captivating charm which Sherwood Anderson, who was one of the older and more established writers on the *Double Dealer*, laid down in his story “A Meeting South”:

> We walked slowly . . . through many streets of the Old Town,  
> Negro women laughing all around us in the dusk, shadows  
> playing over old buildings, children with their shrill cries dodging

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in and out of hallways. . . . Families were sitting down to dinner
within full sight of the street— all doors and windows open. A
man and his wife quarreled in Italian. In a patio back of an old
building a Negress sang a French song. 36

Anderson’s account shows once more that New Orleans bore, and bears, more resemblance
to a Mediterranean city than an American, or Southern city. The scene’s easygoing atmosphere
is remarkable and may be seen as the hallmark of the Double Dealer group for, despite the
editors’ resolute literary ambitions, the magazine was not adverse to an element of fun. Or, as
the editors wrote in their first issue: “A skit, a jest, a jingle, making no pretense to the name of
literature, is . . . a more honorable display of ink than a literary failure.”37 Basso underlined
the Double Dealer stance: “We were not a literary clique, we were not a movement, and God
knows we were not a school . . . what held us together was a mutual friendliness and good­
will.”38 It is in this spint also that the group gathered at the Pelican Bookshop in Royal Street
after closing-hours. The shades would be drawn, wine was produced and sitting down with a
salami and some bread, the group would have their “tea.” It was a happy hour most of all and
not, as we would perhaps be ready to believe, an intellectual hour.39

36 Sherwood Anderson, “A Meeting South,” The World From Jackson Square, A New Orleans

37 Double Dealer, March 1921: 83.

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39 Etolia S. Basso, interview, 3 January 1991, Tempe. Royal Street would later be
described by Basso as a “good part of town. It was old and broken-down and not even the
imitation artists and Bohemians could spoil it. They had done their best to spoil it but
somehow or other . . . the Quarter managed to absorb all its invaders and come off relatively
unscarred.” Hamilton Basso, Days Before Lent (New York: Scribner’s, 1939) 59.
Contrary to the apparent frivolity of these *Double Dealer* impressions, we should not underestimate the importance of this publication. Fred Hobson claims that Southern magazines like the New Orleans *Double Dealer* and the Arkansas *Reviewer* emerged as important rebuttals to H.L. Mencken's invective that the South had turned into a "Sahara of the Bozart."40 In reply to Mencken's Dixie bashing, the editors avowed that Southern culture did exist and endowed their efforts with a considerable degree of self-importance by subtitling the *Double Dealer* a "National Magazine of the South." In their repudiation of certain Southern stigmas, they further stated that it was "high time . . . for some doughty, clear-visioned pen man to emerge from the sodden marshes of Southern literature." All "sick to death of the treacly sentimentality with which our well-intentioned lady fictioneers regale us," the editors claimed that the old traditions and the Confederacy should no longer be on Southerners' minds: "A stoned realm of dreams, lassitude, pleasure, chivalry and the Nigger no longer exists."41

It is important to realize that the *Double Dealer* influenced the young Basso at a time when he had only begun forming his own opinions of Southern literature: accordingly, Basso still thought in terms of the *Double Dealer* when he wrote that he wanted to depart from Dixie's "romantic . . . emotionalism" and tell about a South that was to be different from Julia Peterkin's and Lyle Saxon's "pretty wallpaper" versions.42 Likewise, his continued insistence on wanting to capture the "essential reality of the South" and his desire "to get rid of all the old sentimental truck and explain, by using facts instead of poetry, what has happened here in the South and why this romantic conception is so untrue" go back to the rhetoric and founding principles of the magazine.43


41 *Double Dealer*, June 1921: 2.

42 Hamilton Basso, letter to Maxwell Perkins, 1 February 1930, Scribner's Archives, Princeton.

43 Hamilton Basso, letters to Maxwell Perkins, 1 February 1930; 30 November 1931; 13 August 1932, Scribner's Archives, Princeton.
Besides leaving a mark on Basso’s early poetics, the *Double Dealer* had a catalytic influence on the Southern Renascence. Although the magazine was constantly short of funds and struggled to survive, Fred Hobson notes that the magazine “urged a critical examination of Southern tradition, and in doing so infused young writers centered in New Orleans (including Faulkner) with a sense of excitement and new purpose concerning the possibilities of Southern literature.” Despite the magazine’s initial regional orientation, by 1922 it had turned to the national scene, and in tune with the modernist Zeitgeist, started to publish experimental fiction by writers such as William Faulkner, Ernest Hemingway, Jean Toomer and Thornton Wilder. Basso thought the opportunity to experiment one of the merits of this little magazine. His own inclination towards experimentation, especially noticeable in his early work and first novel, may have stemmed from the *Double Dealer* too.

Finally, Frances Bowen Durrett ranks the magazine “as one of the most important organs for the development of struggling artists during the period [of the] Southern literary renascence.” She has computed that of the 293 contributors to this magazine, 55 were sufficiently prominent to make *Who’s Who in America* thirty years after the *Double Dealer* had first been published. From (relatively) established writers like Sherwood Anderson and Ernest Hemingway, to writers like Hamilton Basso and William Faulkner, who owed their very first publications to the *Double Dealer*, the magazine attracted a wide variety of authors and artists.

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44 Hobson, 48.

45 Hamilton Basso, letter to Frances Bowen Durrett, 20 July 1952, Hamilton Basso Collection, Beinecke Library, New Haven.

It was "fun," Basso wrote, and "something to be in on . . . It was a kind of cross between student days in Paris in the 1890's, and the Jazz age of the U.S. in the 1920's."\textsuperscript{47}

Bowen Durrett places Sherwood Anderson at the hub of the magazine and draws a rather flattering portrait of him: "His hospitality was without bounds, as was also his lack of social discrimination. No one was too dull or too conceited or too undesirable to be interesting. He was never hurried but listened endlessly to anyone who sought him out, and demonstrated a genius for smoothing out human snarls."\textsuperscript{48} Anderson's contemporaries give a somewhat different picture. William Spratling, at the time a young architecture professor at Tulane University, writes how Anderson was not at all interested in a young Mississippian "squirt" named William Faulkner.\textsuperscript{49} Although Faulkner and Anderson would halfway mend their initial and mutually felt animosity, the two would remain at odds with each other especially when either one wanted to be the center of attention; Spratling writes that Anderson could not stand it when Faulkner "spoke out of turn or distracted Sherwood's listeners."\textsuperscript{50}

To give another example of Anderson's smugness, one may cite a story told by Spratling, who, together with William Faulkner, offered Anderson a little book of caricatures entitled \textit{Sherwood Anderson and Other Famous Creoles} (1926):

\begin{quote}
I [i.e. Spratling] made the drawings of all the "artful and crafty ones" in our group, Faulkner did the editing. We paid to have this thin little book of caricature--a spoof at Sherwood--printed . . . Though certainly not literature, it may now be considered a
\end{quote}

\begin{notes}
\item[47] Hamilton Basso, letter to Frances Bowen Durrett, 20 July 1952, Hamilton Basso Collection, Beinecke Library, New Haven.
\item[48] \textit{Reality and Myth}, 222-223.
\item[50] Ibid.
\end{notes}
sort of mirror of our scene in New Orleans.

When it arrived from the press, we very proudly visited Sherwood that evening and handed him his copy. He turned it over, looking inside, scowled and said, "I don’t think it’s very funny." Sherwood was taking himself very seriously at that time. He had recently been referred to by a critic as the "Dean of American Literature."

Among the rather benign caricatures, we find a dazzling portrait of Hamilton Basso dancing the Charleston with the Muse. The picture’s caption reads: "A happy conception of the artist, the significance of which has slipped his mind in the interval. Picture has to do with superiority of agile heels over the keenest brain in captivating that elusive female, success." Clearly, this alludes to Basso’s dancing talent as well as his serious literary ambitions.

Hamilton Basso’s relationship with Sherwood Anderson seems to have been a trifle ambivalent. As one of the youngest members of the *Double Dealer* group, Basso naturally looked up to the peremptory personality of Anderson, at whose feet he, literally, liked to sit. Consequently, in his early career, he acclaimed Anderson. Also, in correspondence with the *Winesburg* author, he envisioned Anderson to be the model leader of an "Intellectual Party," which Basso had thought up in a mood of young idealism. In another and rather humbling letter Basso reveals endearingly: "I couldn’t be more deeply devoted to you . . . I owe you a

51 Spratling, 28-29.


53 Hamilton Basso, letter to Sherwood Anderson, 6 August 1931, Sherwood Anderson Collection, Newberry Library, Chicago.
debt that I can never even hope to repay.”

In later years he was to omit the superlatives. For example, upon visiting the “glamor-starved” countryside of Kansas, he recorded that he was reminded of Anderson who, in his own “clumsy, groping, fumbling way” was after “a kind of glamor” Mockingly, he added in his diary: “If I lived in Haddam (Kansas), I don’t think I’d ever dream about characters in Winesburg . . .; I’d dream about Rita Hayworth.”

Basso’s gradual reconsideration of Anderson’s art and personality coincided with the downward curve of the latter’s reputation. In a letter to Thomas Wolfe, Basso actually regretted Anderson’s fading fame. Influenced by Anderson himself, he observed that younger writers showed ingratitude where they ought to have shown indebtedness. To Basso, Anderson was one of the older American writers who “invented the tools,” handed them down and then found that the younger generation had become “more expert in using them.”

At the same time, Basso was, like Hemingway and Faulkner, unrelenting in his criticism of the former Dean of American Letters: musing how some writers become their own characters, he described Anderson as “one of those half-articulate, muggy-minded people that turn up in Winesburg.” He depreciated his former mentor further in a letter to Elizabeth Nowell where he attributed a quarrel Thomas Wolfe and Anderson had had in the past to the latter’s “streak of malice” which, occasionally, turned him into a “trouble-maker.” Yet in the same letter, he admits squarely that Anderson “too is dead now, and was kind of generous to me back in the


old days in New Orleans, and I wouldn't want to injure him in any way. The blunt truth of the matter is that all literary men are apt to be extremely disagreeable at times, and that's all there is to it."  

Besides Basso's relationship with Sherwood Anderson, he was relatively close to William Faulkner. He was first introduced to the Mississippian in 1924 when he and Faulkner were dinner guests of the Andersons. What he remembered best of that evening was not only Faulkner's gentlemanliness, which surfaced in his "beautiful manners, his soft speech," and "his controlled intensity," but also his, not so gentlemanly, "astonishing capacity for hard drink." Although neither Basso nor Faulkner had published any major work at this point, Basso felt, on account of his young age, that, in Faulkner's company, he had been "admitted to the ball park by mistake." He felt particularly wet behind the ears when he discussed literature with Faulkner: while Faulkner had most of the modernists (Verlaine, Eliot, Pound and Joyce) under his belt, Basso was still struggling with Conrad and Melville. He also noticed their different Southern background: while Basso identified with a Mediterranean, Catholic and European tradition, Faulkner's hinterland was "much less diluted, sui generis, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant, and, as it were, more land-locked, turned inward upon itself." This difference triggered many a conversation between the two writers who would sometimes go for long walks on the wharves. Their friendship intensified when they went flying together with the "Gates Flying Circus." This Circus of reckless aviators, flying rickety planes, was a novelty in town. Since Basso served as a feature writer on the New Orleans Times-Picayune and was therefore considered to be "the least expensive" and most "expendable" of the paper's

58 Hamilton Basso, letter to Elizabeth Nowell, 27 April 1949, Hamilton Basso Collection, Beinecke Library, New Haven.


60 Saturday Review, 28 July 1962: 12.
journalists, he was sent out by his city editor to report on the spectacle. Faulkner, who had a lifelong fascination with aviation, accompanied Basso on these flights. "Nobody else in our crowd had gone looping-the-loop in a bucket seat and open cockpit over the Mississippi River," Basso later observed 61

After Basso left New Orleans and Faulkner returned to Oxford, Mississippi, the two lost touch but years later ran into each other again on a New York bound train. The two men greeted each other as people who shared some fond memories but also as "two provincials" who found comfort in each other's company en route to that "large, unfamiliar city." 62 Many years after this chance encounter, Basso approached Faulkner and asked him if he could interview him for a New Yorker profile. Faulkner, who valued his privacy, answered "Oh hell no!" and told Basso he would be welcome to visit but that interviews would be out of the question 63

When Faulkner died in 1962, Basso wrote a sympathetic obituary in the Saturday Review. Recalling their New Orleans days, he admitted that Faulkner's oeuvre was too complex for him; he attributed this to Faulkner's modernist techniques and mythologization of the South, which was not, in Basso's eyes, the South but "Faulkner's vision of the South . . . Those who read him as a 'realistic' novelist might just as well read Dante as a Baedeker to the nether regions, and Milton as a Michelin going in the opposite direction." 64 Notwithstanding this droll criticism, which reveals Basso's penchant for a more straightforward and realistic mode,

61 Ibid.

62 Ibid.


he respected Faulkner's work highly, and whereas his praise for Anderson would peter out over the years, his admiration for Faulkner continued to grow.

A last but not unimportant contact was the Louisianan writer, Lyle Saxon. Basso’s senior by thirteen years, Saxon was, like Anderson, a father figure for young and struggling artists; proof of this can be found in a letter in which Basso thanked Saxon for helping his brother-in-law, the painter, John McCrady: “Your belief in his stuff has helped him immensely-- just as your belief, and your great encouragement, have always helped me.”65 Cathy Chance Harvey claims that one of her interviewees told her that Basso was a “sad kind of person” and that Saxon would “keep him bucked up.”66 Although we should probably question Harvey’s assumption that the older writer kept Basso “bucked up long after he left Louisiana,” it is true that Saxon’s support was generous and never wavered. In a Herald Tribune book review of Basso’s Courthouse Square (1936), Saxon was even so magnanimous as to argue that the novel placed Basso “among the significant writers of the South” and incorporated “the fine fulfillment of the promise given in his earlier books.”67

Conversely, Saxon’s benevolence was not always reciprocated by Basso; when it was his turn to write a complimentary review of Saxon’s only novel, Children of Strangers (1937), he produced a very flat-sounding review in which he made fun of Saxon’s expert knowledge of Louisiana: “Mr. Lyle Saxon . . . knows more about Louisiana than many people know about their apartments.”68 Although Basso apologized for the review with a very ingratiating letter in

65 Hamilton Basso, letter to Lyle Saxon, 29 November 1937, Hamilton Basso Collection, Tulane U, New Orleans.


which he told Saxon that the *New Republic* had cut one third of the piece without notifying him, one may question Basso’s sincerity. Not only did Basso dislike Saxon’s flighty plantation idylls, he was not very forthcoming either when he described Saxon to Thomas Wolfe as “a sort of the Ward McAllister of the New Orleans intellectual circles and not such a bad guy if you don’t expect too much maybe a little old ladyish”\(^{69}\)

Basso’s ambivalence may be ascribed to the fact that Saxon was a relative outsider to the *Double Dealer* circle. Although the group feigned a spirit of camaraderie and mutual encouragement, which Faulkner described as a fellowship of art and Oliver LaFarge endorsed with his claim that “when one of us achieved anything at all, however slight, the others were delighted and I think everyone took new courage,” Harvey insists that there was no such bonding and that the formation of cliques of those who came from New Orleans and those who came from out of town was inevitable. “the inner circle of the *Double Dealer*, composed of members of established New Orleans families, was not always open to outsiders. For example, although Saxon served on the magazine’s staff for seven months, he was not close to founder Julius Friend.”\(^{70}\) As a New Orleans and Quarter native, Basso was part of the literary community. Surely this explains why his first publications, two mediocre poems, appeared in

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At the outset of his career Basso may have thought that he had more talent as a poet than as a writer of prose. The early pieces that he wrote in New York are mostly poems too and when Basso tried to interest a publisher, he showed his poetry first and his prose second. As for his *Double Dealer* poems, since they are far from literary masterpieces and bear no relation to his importance as a novelist, we will not go into them here.

A more titillating piece of about the same time, giving a good impression of Basso's strolls around the Quarter when he was a reporter, is the short story, "I Can’t Dance." The narrative, which marvelously conveys the French Quarter atmosphere on a hot summer night, is the kind of story that would have appealed to the *Double Dealer*: rather than presenting a glorious and romantic Old South, the story is set in the contemporary South which figures as a seedy decor of sensuality and decay. Macolm, the hero, is a young newspaper man who wanders past a "speakeasy" in the Quarter’s red-light district. "Speakeasies," the narrator tells us, are "wild and wicked places... bagnios where naked women sang and danced their own peculiar dance."

Walking down the street, Macolm is caught in a dilemma: though immensely curious about the goings-on in the speakeasy, his curiosity is checked by the thought of his forthcoming marriage to the saintly Katherine. When he finally summons up the courage to enter a speakeasy, he is accosted by the husky voice of a prostitute who invites him to her place instead. He declines her offer with an embarrassed and apologetic "I just want to talk to you" and is bawled out. A second prostitute approaches him yet finding out that her potential customer is a cheapskate who merely wants to talk, she ridicules him and tells him to hurry home to his "Mamma." Ashamed, Macolm walks down the street, past the prostitutes who

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73 "I Can’t Dance," 127.
"began to vile [sic], scattering him with filth. Once or twice he winced, their obscenity so extreme, but he continued on his way, never looking up, thinking of penance and the price one paid for sin.”74

Humiliated by the streetwalkers, Macolm passes the last house where a black prostitute sits on the dilapidated steps of her porch. In contrast to the offensive white women, who prefer a quick buck to a small gesture of fellowship, this black girl invites Macolm to sit down next to her and tell her what is on his mind:

Brown as an autumn leaf, brown as a cane-stalk in the dust of a country road. She raised her arms and her arms were like dark shadows upon the yellow brightness of the room. Kindness dripped from her voice. Her words were thick and sweet as the syrup ground from cane. Hungry for kindness, he stopped. It was the last house on the street. The cries and the laughter had died away. The street was quiet and dark again.

“What yo’ want ter talk about. Cum sit on de steps. Us’ll talk ertil the moon goes down.”75

Macolm welcomes this token of sympathy but as his desire to see the naked dances lingers on in his mind, he spoils the serenity of the moment. He gives the girl a dollar bill and asks her to dance for him. Throwing off her clothes, the girl sways her body from side to side while humming a jazz song. This does not satisfy Macolm who asks her why she does not dance.

74 "I Can’t Dance," 131.

75 Ibid.
The story ends with her self-conscious "I can’t dance, Mister... I ain’t never danced before. I jist can’t dance".

Unlike most of Basso’s early and sophomoric compositions, "I Can’t Dance" is a well-written and carefully composed story. Powerful and straightforward, the narrative does not rely on sentimentality or melodrama, which is an occasional weakness of Basso’s early work. Moreover, its realistically drawn local color characters carry the action convincingly to the story’s unanticipated ending and leave the reader with something to think about.

In fact, the story is very similar to a fragment in Thomas Wolfe’s *Look Homeward, Angel* (1929). Although the two pieces can be read as intertexts of each other, since both publications go back to 1929, it is improbable that either text influenced the other. In *Look Homeward, Angel* we read how the young protagonist, Eugene, is sent out to collect money from the various newspaper subscribers. His route takes him to “Niggertown,” a segregated part of Altamont. Here Eugene calls on a black prostitute, named Ella. Unable to pay the bill, Ella hints that she might settle the bill otherwise. Eugene, who appears shy and awkward, then asks her to dance for him.

As in Basso’s story, the scene is imbued with overtones of white male supremacy. Although both Macolm and Eugene are conspicuously immature, exhibiting a puerile and naughty hunger for sensuality, they assume airs of white supremacy and “experience”: while Macolm has the woman dance for him and tells her bluntly that she cannot dance, Eugene just orders the woman around, tells her to take off her clothes and yells hystercially that she should dance. While both men are equally unsympathetic in their sleazy treatment of the two women, Macolm’s bad manners are a little more disguised especially when one compares them to Eugene’s obstreperous and racist “Get-’way-nigger. Get-’way.”

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76 “I Can’t Dance,” 132.


78 *Look Homeward, Angel*, 325.
the black prostitute seems more sympathetic than Wolfe's: whereas the New Orleans hooker is a beautiful, slender and truly compassionate girl, Ella is fat and intimidating; once she starts dancing for Eugene, she turns into a "devouring" creature who smothers the boy in her embrace, whirls him around "like a chip" and grips "his slender arms round like bracelets." Escaping from her flabby arms and shabby apartment, Eugene dashes out and does not stop running until he has reached the town square from where he looks back on Niggertown which, with its "rich, jungle-wild" "laughter," stands out in all its demonic otherworldliness.

As opposed to Basso's story, the scene in Wolfe's novel illustrates that Eugene, who represents white man in general, is an alien in the exotic world of Niggertown; it is a world he does not know nor understands and the incident goes to show that the abyss between blacks and whites was still wide at the time that Wolfe was writing. This is further aggravated by the narrator's use of black stereotypes; Ella's naiveté, her black mamma qualities along with what Eugene perceives as her diabolic quality, turn her into a type rather than a human being of flesh and blood. In Basso's story, on the other hand, the prostitute has very few stereotypical traits. Although she is extremely sensual, she is never diminished into a black archetype. On the contrary, her characterization bears more resemblance to the characters the African-American writer, Jean Toomer, created in *Cane* (1923). In passing, one should also note that whereas in Wolfe's story the black and white parts of town are worlds apart, in Basso's story, black and white people live in the same neighborhood and seem to be on speaking terms with each other. Not only do black prostitutes go about their business on the same street as white whores, the conversation between Macolm and the black girl seems indicative of the more relaxed atmosphere of race relations in New Orleans.

In addition to writing short fictional pieces and poems, which he attempted to sell to magazines and newspapers, Basso busied himself with journalism. Although he never spoke highly of his early newspaper work, remembering it as "space rate journalism" and a "short unhappy time on the late night shift," his journalism did enhance his appetite for writing and
gave rise to the dream to run his own newspaper business. He proposed to realize this fantasy when leaving New Orleans in the thirties. However, after having consulted Sherwood Anderson, who had started a newspaper in Marion, Virginia, Basso came to the conclusion that he did not have sufficient funds to launch such an enterprise. Etolia Basso denies this and believes that her husband’s newspaper ambitions were “just talk.” Nonetheless, Basso’s reporting taught him that journalism came relatively easy to him, and in later life it would always be something to fall back on.

Despite the good times Basso had in New Orleans, he understood that the Crescent City was by no means the literary Mecca of the United States. Any man of his day and age knew that if he wanted to become a serious writer, he should either go to Paris and blend in with the expatriate crowd while trying to get published in one of the little magazines issued from the Left Bank, or rent a garret in the heart of Greenwich Village and try to interest a New York publisher. Opting for the latter, Basso departed for New York on June 7th, 1926. Apparently, he had a job lined up for him at the New York newspaper, *The Sun*, which had been arranged by Lyle Saxon. From his correspondence with Anderson, however, we know that employment eluded him for months.

Basso dramatized his trip from New Orleans to New York City as a spiritual journey from childhood to adulthood: leaving home meant cutting ties and saying farewell to the carefree days of childhood and adolescence. In Basso’s life and oeuvre, journeys usually take on a sentimental air. Just as the narrator of *Courthouse Square* (1936) records upon his hero’s journey home that he “was not old but so much of youth had already gone,” so did Basso observe upon his outward bound journey that, with his twenty-second birthday coming up, his boyhood was essentially over:

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80 Etolia S. Basso, interview, 3 January 1991, Tempe.
New York City, Oct. 30th, 1926: I write with the approach of my twenty-second birthday staring into my face. My boyhood is over. By the turn of the wheel I am a man. A great man has written “There comes a time in every young man’s life when he first takes a backward view of life.”

I have known that moment. It came, I think, when I stood on the deck of the steamer that bore me from New Orleans. My previous years seemed to float past me like the plume of the funnels smoke. Beyond the conflicting emotions of parting I saw my whole past life.

Never a great optimist at heart, Basso experienced his journey rather dolefully. With an Italian sense for drama, he wrote Sherwood Anderson on the eve of his departure: “Tomorrow the young man departs for the guillotine” Half-in earnest and half-jokingly, he also asked Anderson if he could light some candles for the “innocent” who was about to set foot “abroad.” The next morning, still slightly nervous but also excited, Basso boarded his steamer to New York City.

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When Basso arrived in Greenwich Village in 1926, the Village's lively artistic climate was already past its apogee. No longer was it the site of the militant *Masses* or of Mabel Dodge's and Margaret Anderson's literary *salons*. The Golden Boy of the Village and poet-radical, John Reed, had died in Moscow, the *Little Review* had suspended publication and many of the earlier artists, who created that exceptional Village atmosphere, had moved elsewhere. In a last attempt to resuscitate the days of yore, the New York aesthetes tried to resurrect magazines of arts such as they had known in Paris. However, the old maverick spirit was tapering off to make room for the discovery of the Village by the public at large: crowds of people poured in and rather than practising or discussing art, they came for cocktails, good dinners and the special ambience. When Basso disembarked his steamer from New Orleans, the place was rapidly changing from a center of bohemia to a miniature entertainment center for lost artists, fad followers and dilettantes. With the Jazz Age in full swing, Greenwich Village became the embodiment of a pre-Depression paradise of decadent hedonism:

While the rest of the nation tried to escape reality in a mad whirl of spending and Charleston dancing, the Village did precisely the same--only more so... In all sections of the Village natives and Bohemians had grasped the opportunity to make money by flaunting the Prohibition... Probably the world will never again see the sort of frenzy that swirled and eddied among the diverse Village joints. No less than the uptowners in search of excitement or the Bohemians out for a good time, the intelligentsia fell under the spell of mad hysteria. Still nursing the belief that older generations had let them down, and that the future was empty of hope, they drank, made promiscuous love, and danced...
In contrast to this drunken revelry, Basso’s experiences in Gotham were soberly Spartan. In letters to Sherwood Anderson, he complains of loneliness, listlessness, illness and a general sense of uprootedness. Alone and lost, the young provincial from the Louisiana bayous whined that it “gets lonely as hell up here. Sometimes I just walk and walk and walk- trying to make myself become part of things.”

Lyle Saxon, who happened to be in New York City at the same time, had similar impressions of the metropolis. Writing about swarming masses, noisy traffic and subway entrances that “belch up thousands of people from underground at every corner,” he commented that life in Greenwich Village was not “as romantic” as it sounded. Basso’s and Saxon’s discomfort with the big bad city may be attributed to the fact that they both came from the protected world of *Double Dealer* coziness; in New Orleans they had known the artistic community inside out but in New York they were without friends, without family and, in Basso’s case, soon, without money. Catherine Harvey notes further that Saxon’s perturbation may also have been triggered by his aversion to the commercialization of the Village, a development which he feared for his beloved Quarter too. Basso’s worries, on the other hand, were more personal and immediate.

Unable to find decent employment and too proud to come running home, Basso took on menial jobs such as trucking freight and working in a department store. At the same time, he

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83 Hamilton Basso, letter to Sherwood Anderson, 22 June 1926, Sherwood Anderson Collection, Newberry Library, Chicago.

84 Harvey, 207-208.

85 Ibid.
tried to approach a publisher with references from Edmund Wilson, whom he knew from New
Orleans, and Sherwood Anderson. Having but sparse documentation regarding Basso’s life in
the Village, we manage to glean some impressions from a few letters to Anderson and a
handful of diary notes. From his correspondence with Anderson we know that Basso was
working on a novel which he intended to send off to a publisher. However, always diffident
about his work, he delayed mailing it. While asking Anderson for a letter of introduction on
July 8th, 1926, two weeks later, on July 22nd, Basso was reluctant to mail his manuscript as
he had found some “really bad parts.” Swings of mood, oscillating between confidence, doubt
and dejection, typify his starting out as a novelist. Questioning the legitimacy of his vocation,
Basso depicted himself as the prototypical struggling young writer who tried to keep his head
above water:

Three years of life pass smoothly. Old haunts change, old faces fade,
old names are forgotten. The young man grows older. In a few years
he will no longer be young. The wind whistles through his sleeves
and there is bread and butter to be earned. Clothes and bread and butter
do not come easily to a poet. He must seek a more substantial means of
livelihood.86

Weltering in self-pity, Basso liked to play up a sense of urban loneliness, a sentiment which
reverberates in the writings of the lost generation: “Throughout the day, mingling with crowds
of people, he has felt lonely and desolate. Though he has rubbed shoulders with hundreds of
men and women he seems to be living in a remote world that is not the sphere they inhabit.”87

86 Hamilton Basso, “An Epilogue,” ts., Hamilton Basso Collection, Beinecke Library, New
Haven, n. pag.

87 Hamilton Basso, Untitled, ts., Hamilton Basso Collection, Beinecke Library, New Haven,
n. pag.
One does not have to go far to find the same young man and the same cityscape in the work of Basso's contemporaries. While F. Scott Fitzgerald reminisces in "My Lost City" how drab his life in New York City was before he made his roaring debut in the literary world, one of John Dos Passos's heroes roams a similar landscape of despair: "The young man walks fast by himself through the crowd that thins into the night streets; feet are tired from hours of walking; eyes greedy for warm curve of faces... At night, head swimming with wants, he walks by himself alone." The image of a young man lost in a dehumanized and urban reality is especially poignant in one of Basso's poems:

I know that somewhere
Past sky-scrapers
Past subways
Past the thunder of wheels
There is silence

I know that somewhere
Quiet women
With quiet eyes
Are folding
And putting things in chests

Men are coming home
Blessedly weary
After a day in the fields

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Happy in the bounty that they have

... 

I know that somewhere
These things exist
And yet I sit here
My head in my hands
Dark and unhappy. 89

The poem seems to have been engendered by Basso’s homesickness, a longing for a familiar face and a desire for a sense of community. The tension between home, here portrayed as a kind of pastoral myth, and the big city of “sky-scrapers,” “subways” and “thundering wheels,” returns more explicitly in Basso’s novels, Courthouse Square (1936) and The View From Pompey’s Head (1954).

But homesickness was not the sole source of Basso’s melancholy. His loneliness was undoubtedly exacerbated by his stubborn refusal to immerse himself in New York’s literary scene. In a revealing diary fragment, he condemns the modernist “disease” and wishes no part of it:

All the young men suffer from the same disease. Everything we write is symptomatic of the current world and disorder. It’s so easy to get lost. My friends in Paris, Jolas and the rest of them, call them Surrealists, issue proclamations saying that the revolution of the word is an accomplished fact and promptly lose themselves, following their savior in the impossibilities of an unsound theory... on the

other side, I find my other friends, Saxon, Lafarge, Bradford etc. selling art on the streets. A few young men, Matthew Josephson, Bill Faulkner, Edmund Wilson are really plowing a field. Basso could not relate to any of his fellow artists: “I suppose I’ve never liked groups or cliques and find it a sort of fierce necessity to walk alone.” His claim to independence, often causing unwanted loneliness, prevails in his life and work. While Basso complained in later life that “I write, I suppose, out of this loneliness I always feel in New York . . . and the awareness that, among people who write books and paint pictures I have so few friends,” in his third novel, David Barondess, the hero, tells the reader that it is “better to get off in your own room and be your own self and do your own work.” It may be for this reason also that David, like Basso in 1926, “tried to become part of the literary life but it did not work out very well.”

Basso shared his dislike of the Village with Thomas Wolfe who, like his alter ego, George Webber, also denounced New York bohemia. In You Can’t Go Home Again (1940), George does not want to have anything to do with either the “phony passions, and six-months-long religions of fools, joiners and fashion-apes” or the “franky-panky, seldesey-weldesey, cowley-wowley, tatsey-watesy hicksy-picksy, wilsoney-pilsoney, jolasy-wolasy, steiny-weeny, goldy-woldly, sneer-puss fellows.” Though forced to play along at first, Basso, Wolfe and their heroes soon tired of the pretense of the artistic crowd. Their Southern provincialism, which

90 Hamilton Basso, letter to Sherwood Anderson, n.d, Sherwood Anderson Collection, Newberry Library, Chicago


92 Courthouse Square, 28.

may have been accentuated by the metropolitan context of New York City, can be seen as characteristic of Southerners of their generation. C. Hugh Holman suggests that the Southerner, once he arrives in the city, is a provincial *par excellence*: "When the Southerner has gone to the metropolis, when he has felt the strong pull of the cultural and intellectual forces concentrated in the big city, it has been to what was in many respects to him a foreign land." 94 Basso, Wolfe and their heroes, David and George, find out gradually that the city is a land of broken promises and, although they moved to the city in the hope of gaining professional and personal recognition, they return to their hometowns disillusioned. Holman further believes that because the Southerner views the city as a foreign, and sometimes hostile, reality, he remains an outsider, a provincial and mere "sojourner." 95

Basso's feelings of "homelessness" were probably intensified by his rejection of starry-eyed artists and New York intellectuals. Although an intellectual himself, he resented the breed that acted intellectually for intellectuality's sake:

The inhabitants of the Village are not so bad or not so original as one has been led to believe. I see them every night when I go into "Hubert's Cafeteria" about twelve o'clock for a cup of coffee. They sit around the somewhat greasy tables reading and talking. Some of them have the expected long hair but a great number of them are as closely-tonsured as I. It is impossible for me to believe although I would like to, that they are worth very much. They seem generally to be of the most shallow and sterile types, talking about cleverness


95 Holman, 166.
Basso's 1926 observations and frustrations would be vented by David Barondess, who tells us that "there was nearly always a party where you met writers and painters and radicals and whole crowds of people who wanted to be painters and radicals and publishers." Like his fictional brother, Basso was appalled by would-be artists and presumptuous intellectuals. These antipathies would culminate in his correspondence with his intellectual peers, Matthew Josephson and Malcolm Cowley, an episode which we will return to in the third chapter.

In the end, Basso's disillusionment with the Village and anxiety over joblessness became so chafing that he began to pen apocalyptic visions of despair: in the story called "Holiday," the world is portrayed as an "evil" and "greedy woman," while in the poem, "A Spatial Arrangement," the world has become a "Patronymic spider" which likes to swallow screaming man with its "distended abdomen." These horrific images are the products of a despondent mind. Aware of his son's discontent and financial difficulties, Basso's father finally persuaded him to come home. By the winter of 1926, Basso had returned to New Orleans, revisiting the quarters of the moribund *Double Dealer*.

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97 *Courthouse Square*, 28.
iv. You Can't Go Home Again: Basso's Return to New Orleans

Basso's sojourn in New York City amounted to less than half a year and not, as Clarence Ikerd claims, two years.98 About thirteen years after his New York experience, Basso described his episode in the metropolis as "an oyster" that to his "hurt astonishment wouldn't open."99 Of his return to New Orleans we have no actual records, but Etolia Basso remembers that Basso came home depressed and disappointed.100 Edmund Wilson must have sensed his friend's discomfort as he responded to one of Basso's letters with "I can see how New Orleans would get on your nerves, but would give anything to be able to go there myself."101

The best impression of Basso's feelings upon his return home is provided by an insightful letter he sent to former Double Dealer member, Eugene Jolas. Jolas published it in his little magazine, transition.102 Besides being a sharp critique on the gentrification of the Quarter, the letter conveys a sense of alienation which is typical of someone who has lost touch with his hometown. Dismayed by the commercialization of the Quarter (Saxon's fear had indeed been valid), Basso felt weaned from his former habitat. He was especially repulsed by the clique of

98 Clarence Frye Ikerd, "Hamilton Basso: A Critical Biography," diss., U of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1974, 10. For a verificaton of this, one should consult Basso's correspondence with Sherwood Anderson: we know that he sailed for New York City on June 7th, 1926; he must have arrived in Manhattan about a week later. His first letter to Anderson is dated June 22nd, 1926; his last letter October 24th, 1926. As we know now, Basso was plagued by unemployment, illness and depression. He left soon after his last letter, which means that he had been in New York for about five months.


100 Etolia S. Basso, interview, 4 May 1992, Tempe.


artists, who, drawn by the reputation of the fading Double Dealer, sat around in book shops, swapping ideas: "They make me feel as though I ought to hurry home and take a bath," Basso told Jolas. Repelled by any form of artistic exhibitionism, he was self-effacing about his own literary ambitions. Challenging John McClure, who defended the poet John Fineran because of his young age, Basso believed that youth should never be "an excuse for poor poetry." He added that though he himself felt the process of youth "very keenly," he would "vomit" if anybody told him that he was "a promising young writer." Conceivably, Basso's ranting and raving at the Quarter's crowd arose from the rancors he had developed in New York. Simultaneously, one should see his disappointment in the light of the Quarter's changing climate. Like Basso, Roark Bradford observed in a letter to Lyle Saxon that "Too many country boys and girls are coming in to be Bohemians and immorality lacks that calm, professional dignity it held in the corrupt era prior to 1927."

Shortly after Basso returned from New York City, he was hired again by the New Orleans Times-Picayune. While doing most of his shifts at night, he tried to do some serious writing of his own in the daytime. However, since his night shifts and busy social life were not very conducive to creative writing, Basso decided he needed a room of his own to get pen to paper:


104 Ibid.

105 Harvey, 208. Despite the embittered and pessimistic tone of Basso's letter, his gloom and doom are reversed when, in the closing paragraph, he speaks of his hope for a new generation of writers. These sentiments are not far removed from Alfred Kazin's: Basso's wish for new writers who would not be crippled by affectation but who would come from more ordinary backgrounds, making their living in factories, or like himself, by writing "obits for newspapers and ads for ladies' underwear," anticipates the rise of proletarian literature of the thirties. Likewise, in Starting Out in the Thirties (1962; London: Secker, 1966), Alfred Kazin writes how thirties' writers, rather than being the products of literary salons, were to come from more proletarian backgrounds, that is, from immigrant classes, as well as from the streets, factories and farms.
in a letter to a friend, he inquired after a cabin in the countryside of Louisiana. Looking forward to having time off and finishing a novel he had been composing since 1926, Basso joked that his sociable temperament might not be a suitable foundation for the isolation a writer has to endure: "I am essentially a creature of civilization, with a penchant for debutantes or part debutantes who smell nice, jazz, booze and all the other awful, awful vices." Basso expected that by the summertime he would have saved enough money “to bide off a year or so.” This plan failed: *Relics and Angels* (1929), Basso’s debut novel, was not completed in the Louisiana countryside, but on Grande Isle in 1928. While it is true that Basso depended on his job with the *Picayune*, his loitering in New Orleans in 1927 and 1928 could best be explained by his falling in love with a woman named Etoha Simmons.

Ham and Etoha, or Toto, had both attended Tulane, yet they knew each other only vaguely from parties. This changed when Toto started working for the Pelican Bookshop in Royal Street, which was also one of the *DoubleDealer* locations. According to Toto, she and Ham became friends very gradually. Although she was attracted to his good looks, his white linen suits and maroon ties, romance was slow to unfold. However, when Ham returned from New York, they met again and “became very good friends.”

Toto was the only daughter of a well-to-do St. Louis family. Her father, Roger Simmons, was a U.S. diplomat who became a national hero after he had witnessed the October Revolution and survived a Moscow prison. Upon his return to the United States in 1918, he and his family moved to New Orleans where he became very prosperous in the lumber business. Etoha attended Newcomb, the women’s college at Tulane, and graduated in 1926, the year that Basso dropped out. From the Tulane yearbooks we know that she was an active young woman, taking part in many clubs and sports events. Clarence Ikerd also notes that she

106 Hamilton Basso, letter to Eugene Matrange, 22 April 1927, Hamilton Basso Collection, Tulane U, New Orleans.

107 Etoha S. Basso, interview, 3 January 1991, Tempe.
was a renowned New Orleans belle, who had many suitors. One of them was Hamilton Basso. He finally proposed to her during a romantic dinner at Gallatoire's, one of New Orleans's famous restaurants. Toto's parents were not pleased with the prospect of giving away their daughter to a struggling young writer. Or, as Toto herself remembered in her customary deadpan manner: "They did not think much of it."

The two wedded in the summer of 1930. Because Ham was Catholic and Toto Protestant, they avoided the ado of New Orleans and chose the quiet countryside of North Carolina. The wedding was held outdoors in the beautiful garden of Toto's friends, Mr. and Mrs. Henry Carriere. The announcement in the *Times-Picayune*, stating that Ham and Toto's wedding was going to be "one of the very interesting out-of-town nuptials of the early summer," indicates that they were a popular New Orleans couple. As for the wedding itself, when the bishop arrived on his horse to have the couple exchange their vows in the open air, Toto may have wondered what she was getting herself into. For, although her husband had taken on a job as a copy writer with a New Orleans' advertising agency, he really wanted to become a full-time novelist. At this point, after all, Basso's first novel, *Relics and Angels* (1929), had come out.

After the wedding, the couple moved back to New Orleans where Ham tried to write a new book as well as find another publisher. Although Macaulay, the publisher of his first novel, was ready to take on another manuscript, Basso was shopping around, sending outlines, ideas and full stories to various publishers. As early as 1927 he had approached Maxwell Perkins, the famous editor of F. Scott Fitzgerald, Ernest Hemingway and --supremely-- Thomas Wolfe. In a letter of February 1st, 1930, Basso informed Perkins that he was writing a novel which, in typical *Double Dealer* fashion, would be a radical departure from antebellum myths and

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108 Etolia Basso denies this but since she is still a very beautiful woman today, we may readily assume that Ikerd is speaking the truth.

Southern “emotionalism.” In a subsequent letter he hinted to Perkins that he had broken with Macaulay as he was tired of “laying in the same bed with Peggy Joyce, etc.” He casually mentioned that he had “chunked the manuscript of a perfectly lousy novel into the river,” and although Perkins responded to this with confusion, Basso exclaimed “What the hell! There are too many incompetents slinging ink.”

Following Edmund Wilson’s advice “to keep at it, in spite of hell,” Basso then sent Perkins the manuscript of another novel, “A Room in the Sky.” At this point, Basso worried that he would fail to publish anything after the meager success of Relics and Angels. Perkins’s response was painfully short but honest: “In spite of its unusual talent cannot think publication practicable. Deeply sorry.” Although this sounds like the typical editorial response, one must know that Perkins’s replies were usually heart-felt. Perkins was an extraordinary editor, who, more “actively than any of his colleagues... scouted the work of new authors from all corners of the country [and] sought out authors who were not just ‘safe,’ but who spoke in a new voice about the new values of the post-war world.” His genius did not merely lie in his ability to spot new talent but in his punctilious diplomacy and his genuine concern for the well-being of the novelist and his work. Some of that diplomacy and concern are already present in the letters that Perkins wrote to Basso at a time when the latter had not even been contracted

110 Hamilton Basso, letter to Maxwell Perkins, 1 February 1930, Scribner’s Archives, Princeton.

111 Hamilton Basso, letter to Maxwell Perkins, 17 May 1930, Scribner’s Archives, Princeton.


113 Maxwell Perkins, letter to Hamilton Basso, 3 June 1931, Hamilton Basso Collection, Beinecke Library, New Haven.

yet. Basso must have felt Perkins's good will and, although much of his very early work was rejected, he continued to send Perkins his writings. Thus he swallowed the editor's many excuses which ranged from "I think it is full of very very beautiful writing but really it is more a poem of some sorts than a story" to "the book was extremely well-written and the characters were well realized [but] we are in a depression, and we have to consider that aspect more than in better times." Granted, with the Depression worsening every day, Perkins had to be careful, selective and parsimonious. As for Basso's own progress, besides the fact that it was difficult to get a foot in the door at Scribner's or one of the other New York publishing houses, his full-time job as a copy-writer at the Fitzgerald Advertising Agency distracted him from doing anything substantially literary.

In the meantime, the Depression had cast its long shadow over southern shores. Following the Wall Street Crash in 1929, Basso felt the sting of the economic downswing when the advertising agency fired him in 1931. Having been the last man in, he was the first man out, and in spite of his intention to leave the company anyway, his forced departure came a year too early. Although he resented the advertising world of soups, soaps and sodas, the job gave him financial security plus the opportunity to save money for the period when he became a freelance writer. With the little savings they had, the Bassos decided to leave New Orleans and settle in the North Carolina mountains. Of course they left the city in a melancholy mood but at the same time, it was evident that Basso was urged to leave: by 1931, he denigratingly called New Orleans a "provincial backwater."

Hamilton Basso would ultimately develop a love-hate relationship with his hometown. Although he had outgrown New Orleans and would return infrequently, the city remained for him "the last place in the South where people know how to have fun. The rest of the South is

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too joylessly Anglo-Saxon.” It is perhaps not so surprising that Basso projected his mixed feelings on the characters in his books. A return home, whether it was his own homecoming or Beauregard’s or David Barondess’s, always triggered feelings of alienation and nostalgia. And although Basso left New Orleans permanently in 1932, it was emotionally difficult to sever all ties. Not until the end of his life, after he had written his last novel on the South, did Basso cut the final ties with the city of his birth. Sitting on deck of a ship that was to take him from New Orleans to Tahiti in 1958, he wrote in his diary:

I suspect I have used up my sentiment for and about New Orleans: I could go home again, but I doubt that I could stand it for long: it’s the provincialism, it’s the provincial aspirations --like so many of its sister cities in the United States, New Orleans won’t be minor league-- which was its charm and its appeal. I didn’t even much enjoy walking in the French Quarter this time, though that may have been because of the weather. I don’t think so, however. It could be that I have used up the last of my memories, and so am free of them-- in one way or another, one eventually shakes loose.118

117 Hamilton Basso, letter to Malcolm Cowley, 29 April 1940, Malcolm Cowley Collection, Newberry Library, Chicago.

CHAPTER II: Innocence and Experiment:
Relics and Angels (1929) and "Rain on Aspidistra" (1933)

Too lazy for a lawyer, too honest for a priest
What else could I be but a scribbler?
Singing of sunlight on the seas
Of sky and sun and willow trees
What else could I be but a scribbler?

Hamilton Basso, "What Else"
Chapter II: Innocence and Experiment

1. Relics and Angels (1929): A Formative Novel

When *Relics and Angels* (1929) was reviewed in the *New York Herald Tribune Review of Books*, the novel garnered little praise. In contrast to a complimentary *New Republic* review by Edmund Wilson, who lauded the book rather generously as having "grace, charm and a distinction which seem to mark the author as an artist rather than just another young man who has written a novel," the *Tribune* critic believed that *Relics and Angels* simply lacked the power to convince its reader. The same critic lambasted the novel’s poor characterization and decried the protagonist’s naiveté as plain “horse sense.” The criticism was valid and would be endorsed by Basso’s growing dislike of the book: in later life, he excluded the work from his list of publications.

The product of a beginner, *Relics and Angels* has conspicuous flaws. Besides being weak in plot and characterization, the novel is crippled by its slapdash mixture of modernism and melodrama. The novel’s imperfections may be related to the immaturity of its author, and even though Basso thought this no excuse for poor quality, as a debut, the book is still an intriguing piece of work and indispensable for an assessment of Basso’s development as a writer. Like F. Scott Fitzgerald’s “Winter Dreams” (1920), which has often been described as the seedbed for *The Great Gatsby* (1925), *Relics and Angels* can be seen as an important precursor of Basso’s later novels: that is, certain motifs and characters of the later œuvre owe their invention to *Relics and Angels*. Apart from the novel’s significant embryonic quality, as a publication of 1929 the book is very interesting in the light of the American twenties’ novel. Additionally, as an, albeit weak, contemporary of William Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury* and Thomas

Wolfe’s Look Homeward, Angel, the novel deserves some attention as a Southern Renascence work. Finally, unlike Basso’s later works, which demonstrate a predilection for realism, Relics and Angels reveals the writer’s susceptibility to modernism. Basso’s early experimental art would culminate in a prose poem, entitled “Rain on Aspidistra” (1933), which we will analyze after Relics and Angels.

The novel opens with one of Basso’s favorite conventions: we witness the homecoming of the hero, Tony Clezac, who returns to New Orleans after having lived with his grandfather in Italy for eight years. The city is never mentioned by name, yet one recognizes New Orleans by the presence of the Gulf, the bayous, the balconied streets, the gray Cathedral and the overall setting, which the narrator summarizes as looking like some “very sentimental and romantic play” (RA, 36).

Upon his arrival, Tony first visits his grandmother who entered a nunnery after her husband ran off with his mistress. In an awkward reunion, Tony tells his grandmother of grandfather’s death and of his resolve to fill the executive position at the shoe factory which the Clezacs once owned. Tony’s decision to come home and seek employment with the shoe company is largely motivated by a sense of duty: after his grandfather’s death, he is head of the family and feels obliged to sustain his younger sister, Laurine, and his spinster-aunt, Hermine. The hero’s homecoming, its tone having been set by the uncomfortable reunion with his stern but noble grandmother, is a typical Basso homecoming: the protagonist is overwhelmed by a mix of contradictory feelings. While Tony acknowledges a sense of roots as he enjoys revisiting the scenes of his childhood, he also feels alienated in a world that is no longer his own. For

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120 The attentive reader may notice autobiographical parallels. Both the Clezacs and the Bassos have European roots and both made their fortune in shoe manufacturing. Aged twenty-five (Basso’s age when he was writing the novel), Tony has, like Basso, one younger sister, is raised a Catholic and comes from New Orleans. Notice further that Tony’s grandmother, called Antoinette, resembles Basso’s, whose name was “Anette.” Like Basso, Tony is named after his grandfather whose name is “Antoine.” Lastly, while the Bassos sold their company to Steinberg, the man in charge of the Clezac company is called “Epstein.”
example, when he sees Laurine again, he finds it difficult to believe that she "was his sister. They were barricaded by hemispheres" (RA, 33-34). Tony's estrangement is further displayed in his reserve towards Laurine's fun-seeking country club friends to whom he simply cannot relate.

Before Tony is able to solve the enigma of his arrival, he meets with Julius Epstein, the new owner of the Clezac company. Epstein welcomes Tony deferentially and gives him the somewhat redundant position of second vice-president. At this point Tony's dilemma starts to take root, because although he feels the call of familial duty, he cannot warm up to business, his training having been that of a scientist. In passing, one may observe that Tony's conflict between propriety and true ambition may have resembled Basso's predicament of 1929: like Tony, Basso felt divided between the obligations of a job he held but did not like and the aspirations of a career he wanted but did not (yet) have. A similar vocational dilemma would recur in Basso's 1939 novel, *Days Before Lent*. Though the hero of this novel, Jason Kent, is considerably more mature than Tony, his choice between medical research or practice is equally complicated and reveals Basso's repeated preoccupation with the discrepancies between theory and practice, the intellectual way of life and a more pragmatic way of life.

Tony's homecoming also knows romance, a fixed ingredient of Basso's novels. His first love is the married Helen Montross who is initially flattered by Tony's loving attention, an affair being a welcome diversion from her dull middle-class life. The romance, however, turns sour when Tony proposes they elope together. Suffering from what Basso later termed "Shintoism" in his best-seller *The View From Pompey's Head* (1954), Helen refuses to give up her marriage as well as her position in society and simply ditches Tony, crocodile tears running down her face. Enter Camilla Thorne whose name emblematizes guarded innocence. Although she is attracted to the hero, she keeps him at a distance. Camilla is a favorite Basso heroine: she is beautiful, genuine, virtuous and invariably gray-eyed. Curiously though, in spite of Tony's infatuation, he cannot muster the energy or courage to court her. A third girl drifts in and out of his life at a moment of weakness. Her name is Marianne Slade and, as her last name perhaps shadows forth --as it alliterates with "slut" and "sleazy"-- she is a
nymphomaniacal working girl. Basso's portrayal of Marianne and Camilla, who clearly serve as antitypes of each other, prefigures the novelist's shallow and antonymous handling of female characters: having very little substance altogether, they are either madonnas or whores.

Tony's miserable love life is exacerbated by his unhappiness at "Forward Shoes." His misery reaches an absolute low point when he delivers a speech to the laborers. Lost in his argument, Tony pleads against consumerism and other evils of industrialized society. His listeners, who do not understand half of what he is saying, nonetheless single him out as someone loyal to their cause and go on strike. Reprimanded by the board of directors, Tony uses the occasion to quit his job. Having given up his job, he wonders whether he has done the right thing and is reminded of his grandfather's warning that one should never become a wanderer, or "gypsy in a yellow wagon." Conversely, enlightened by Camilla's advice, Tony also realizes that he must remain true to his ambition. So he writes his European mentor, Hugo Mullendorf, and asks if he can become his research assistant. As Tony attempts to solve the complications of his homecoming, which essentially revolve around his own identity crisis, the family (identity) slowly disintegrates; because while Tony intends to abandon the family and return to Italy, Aunt Hermine dies of a neglected pneumonia and Laurine marries and moves out of the house.

The novel could have ended there but the narrator confronts the hero with a rather forced reversal of fortune, when, at Laurine's wedding, Marianne brings the bad tidings of her unwanted pregnancy. Although the child is not Tony's, Marianne claims it is and requests $50 for a clandestine abortion. In shock, Tony only hears the news of the pregnancy and sees his future annihilated by an untimely marriage. After having been reimbursed $50 for his trip to Italy, he meets Marianne the next day. In an all-too-contrived incident, his dollar bills fall out of his pocket which satisfies Marianne but leaves him bewildered in the street. In a trance-like state, he wanders through the busy streets of New Orleans, sits in on a Negro tent revival and finally falls asleep. His dream reveals "the shadowy figure of the priest, a later portrait of himself" (RA, 286).
The ending is bizarre and jars with Tony's (and Basso's) anti-clerical views. As one of the novel's many inconsistencies, it can best be explained by Basso's inexperience as a novelist. Rather than taking the conclusion seriously, we should question the validity of Tony's final vision and agree with Joseph Millichap that it may be read as a metaphor for the protagonist's shouldering of a "mature responsibility." After all, it is highly improbable that someone like Tony, who sneers at "the voluptuousness of high mass, the color and the music, and the barren rigor of monastery walls" (RA, 252), would embrace the faith so emotionally in the end. Instead, we should consider the hero's epiphany within the framework of the Bildungsroman: although Tony's "education" does not lead to the realization of his vocation in life, the novel does progress towards the hero's ultimate maturity. Accordingly, Tony's vision should not be interpreted as a reconversion to the Church but as the hero's way of finding his feet again. This reading would agree with Basso's views on religion: in 1939 he told Malcolm Cowley that man's "instinct for religion" was no more than "a longing for order."

The hero's initial skepticism of the Church and his problems to fit in with society are typical of a twenties' attitude. If one surveys Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919),

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122 It may be equally difficult to believe that Basso, who in his early work writes of "scurvy monks" and depicts God as a "screeching Satyr," would favor a reconversion of his hero in his first novel (Basso, untitled poems, tss., Hamilton Basso Collection, Beinecke Library, New Haven). Incidentally, Tony's childhood experiences with the Catholic Church are very similar to those of Stephen Dedalus in James Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916): Catholicism is perceived as a religion of ritual, awe and sin. Although the Church leaves a stamp on Tony's imagination, in the end, he identifies more with his grandfather's anti-clerical views than with his aunt's zealotry. In a dinner scene that bears strong resemblance to a dinner scene in Joyce's *Portrait*, aunt Hermine's religiosity provokes grandfather's "What has God to do with food?" (RA, 16).

Sinclair Lewis’s *Main Street* (1920), *Babbitt* (1922) and Thomas Wolfe’s *Look Homeward, Angel* (1929), as well as Van Wyck Brooks’s *America’s Coming of Age* (1915) and Harold Stearns’ *Civilization in the United States* (1922), much of the twenties’ spirit may be summarized as a rebellion against the trappings of dull, middle-class and small-town America. The revolt from the village and the rise in secularization among the young are recurring twenties’ motifs and evince what Malcolm Bradbury called “the idea of a distinctive modernity of the times” as well as “the desperate novelty of a generation feeling the distinctiveness of its own conditions and searching out the emotional and moral terms of a new life, free of provincialism” and “regressiveness.”

Although Tony’s struggle is mostly a private affair, his difficult acclimatization to home and American society lie at the basis of what Bradbury describes as the twenties’ need to break away from the established order.

Tony’s defiance surfaces most prominently in the speech he delivers at the factory and in the grudge he bears against the entrepreneurial class in general and Julius Epstein in particular. Upon a first reading of the speech, which is enfeebled by Tony’s emotional rhetoric, one may be puzzled by its apparent contradictions: whereas Tony praises the machine and laborers’ skill to work with the machine, he ultimately denounces industrialized society. Echoing Henry Adams’s belief that industry has become the new religion, the machine having replaced the “statue of St. Paul and the Virgin Mary” (RA, 142), Tony seems to unnerve his own industrial optimism when he speaks out his fear of unbridled consumerism and materialism. Preaching that the “art of character . . . ethics and morality” are more “important than the art of being comfortable” (RA, 143), he warns the laborers against Henry Ford’s hollow promises of the middle-class American Dream: “If there is a need for revolt it should be against the urge of well-being. You are paid well for your services here and so you are content to remain. You want an automobile, a home, new clothes for your wives and by working in the factory those

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things are brought within your reach. You have neither time nor patience for anything else” (RA, 140).

One may understand Tony’s mixed feelings toward the machine better in the context of what Richard Pells calls the twenties’ inability to “decide whether [the machine] represented the most sophisticated achievement of the modern mind or a supreme expression of evil.” In addition, Tony’s ambivalence toward the machine may well be explained by the “Janus-faced quality” of the modernist use of the “ambiguous image”; according to Malcolm Bradbury, the machine comes to represent both “a novel vortex of energy and a destructive element.” Tony’s contradictory tirade may further be enlightened by a letter that Basso wrote to Sherwood Anderson in 1931. Citing Anderson’s belief that a machine will only “produce whatever man wants to produce,” Basso does not blame the machine so much as man’s inadequacy to deal with industrialization:

It’s man’s fault. The people who have gotten hold of the machines are such fools. Properly directed the machine will show us the way out --to communism perhaps, socialism surely. I see a planned society, some kind of social order --borrowing from the Russians-- with the machine to give man the thing he has had before: --leisure, the time to think and feel and live.  


127 Hamilton Basso, letter to Sherwood Anderson, 6 August 1931, Sherwood Anderson Collection, Newberry Library, Chicago.
This letter and Tony's speech could well be seen as a reflection of intellectuals' attacks on Babbittry in the twenties.\textsuperscript{128} At the same time, though Basso and Tony seem to have identified with the intellectual point of view of the day, they are not enamored with the intellectual milieu \textit{per se}. In a fragment that is obviously based on Basso's own experiences with the intellectual communities of New York City and New Orleans, Tony observes that the reality of the factory floor has very little in common with intellectuals' perceptions of that world:

Once, in the international company of several young men who were painters and poets, [Tony] had used certain expressions: "man becoming subjected to inorganic forces" --"the destruction of manual individuality"-- but now, with the sound of the monster crowding his ears, he never once thought of such expressions. They seemed pale and unhealthily green, nurtured in a baleful atmosphere where high-voiced youths and posing newspaper women talked and became hysterical over the things they were going to do. (RA, 140)

As we shall see in chapter III, the theme of intellectuals' inability to relate to the working class would become a \textit{leitmotif} in Basso's discussions with Malcolm Cowley and Matthew Josephson.

Tony's hatred of the establishment is also aroused by the man who is in charge of the machine, Julius Epstein. The hero's animosity is typical of the antagonism that twenties' writers and intellectuals displayed towards the entrepreneurial class. Maxwell Geismar even

\textsuperscript{128} Once the Depression hit home, Basso was to view the machine in a much darker light; in 1932, he writes how the machine "may destroy us all; leaving only empty shells to perform, in grim mockery, the functions of men." (Hamilton Basso, "Cotton Blossom," \textit{Sewanee Review} 40 (1932): 393.)
attributes literature's "failure of nerve" to the twenties' tensions between the "guiding spirit of society" (i.e. the intellectual) and "its productive forces" (i.e. the entrepreneur).  

What is disturbing about Epstein's portrait is not so much Tony's renunciation of the capitalist class as his blatant anti-Semitism. While the depiction of Epstein as the ugly Jew and archetypal cigar-smoking capitalist is more pronounced in earlier typescripts of the novel, all typescript versions share sentiments like “He was a Jew and to Antoine Jews were lower in the scale of things than the niggers who carried boxes in his factory” (RA, 51). Although anti-Semitic statements and innuendo abound in twenties' novels generally, the above quoted line, in addition to comments like "Who was this Jew to patronize him" (RA, 174), are extremely disconcerting and are a disappointing discovery with respect to Basso's later, frequent and vehement repudiation of racism. At the same time, one should ask whether it is fair to associate Tony's anti-Semitism with Basso's views. Although Tony resembles his creator vaguely, to claim that he is Basso's alter ego would be an intentional fallacy.

Epstein is in fact an amiable and generous man who welcomes Tony as a prodigal son. In contrast, the hero's conceitedness and resentment of Epstein seem very ungrateful behavior and stress Tony's intolerant and spoiled demeanor. Significantly, in two earlier typescript versions of the novel, but not in the novel itself, Tony's job resignation goes hand in hand with a painful row with Epstein. At Laurine's wedding, this is resolved by a tender reconciliation in which Tony finally acknowledges that Epstein deserves more credit for having remained such a loyal friend of the Clezacs. A similar role reversal takes place in Basso's 1959 novel, The Light Infantry Ball, in which a mulatto, who is also despised by the hero, turns out to be the savior of the family. With this kind of turn-about antipathy, one should ascribe Tony's anti-Semitic feelings to his immaturity and his inability to judge other people. This is of course also

\[129\] Maxwell Geismar, Writers in Crisis (Boston: Houghton, 1942) 277.

\[130\] Hamilton Basso, "Relics and Angels," tss., Hamilton Basso Collection, Tulane U, New Orleans.
painfully brought to light by the hero's failure to either fathom Helen's false intentions or Marianne's lie.

Though surely opposed to capitalism, Tony's social conscience lacks depth. As with most twenties' characters (and unlike most thirties' characters), Tony's contempt for society does not lead to a willingness to tackle society's problems but to a disinclination to conform to society altogether. Instead of facing the world's problems, Tony is an inward-looking character: not only is *Relics and Angels* filled with mirrors and reflecting surfaces, in the opening line of the novel we find Tony "looking into himself" (RA, 9). This narcissistic quality of the twenties' character, which is so different from the socially and politically engaged character in proletarian fiction of the thirties, has been described by Malcolm Bradbury as the twenties' character's "ethic of solitude." Suffering from self, solitude and a society from which they expatriate themselves, twenties' characters (and writers) lose themselves in a kind of social vacuum, a state which Henry Idema and Harold Steams have described as "anomic."

It is obvious that Tony has fallen victim to anomie: like Hemingway's Jake Barnes in *The Sun Also Rises* (1926), he wanders around aimlessly and is tormented with self-doubt and inertia. Restless and rootless, Tony's predicament is aggravated by feelings of alienation upon his arrival home. But his homecoming also gives him the opportunity to rid himself of his anomic condition. Or rather, Tony's homecoming is the precondition for his spiritual regeneration.

The latter is reinforced metaphorically by images of darkness, light and rebirth: that is, the hero's development and enlightenment coincide with a movement from darkness to light and

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rebirth. Thus, when Tony arrives home, he is literally plunged into darkness; visiting his grandmother, he is led, via a number of descending and narrowing staircases, to the dark heart of the monastery. Exiting from the monastery, Tony is again enveloped by darkness as “the sun was gone and the sky . . . filling with night” (RA, 23). On his way home, he meets a blind beggar, who, groping his way through the darkness, asks for a penny and makes an obscure reference to Hamlet. Like Tiresias, in T. S. Eliot’s *Waste Land* (1922), the beggar’s blindness is a “seeing blindness”: he knows more about Tony than Tony does himself. Unaware of his fate, Tony, on the other hand, may be said to be mentally blind. Contrary to the view of Joseph Millichap, who argues that the hero’s visit to his grandmother is the beginning of his rebirth in which the grandmother figures as a kind of spiritual guide, Tony’s homecoming is a descent into darkness, blindness and confusion, which is necessary and occurs prior to his personal renascence. In the same way that Tiresias employs his blindness as a way of seeing, Tony’s darkness (or blindness) is an avenue leading to introspection. However, before he starts to see the light, there is more darkness: his office is described as a “tomb” and resembles the claustrophobic Wall Street office which Herman Melville’s Bartleby inhabits. Darkness also functions as a kind of “opiate, hemlock that closed your eyes” (RA, 106) and has a pleasant connotation as it prevents Tony from seeing the painful truth.

The darkness starts to lift after Tony has had his first breakdown. Having spent a very pleasant day on an island off the Louisiana coast, he is called to the bed of the ferryman’s wife who is in labor. Having helped her deliver the child, Tony wanders off to the beach. Contemplating the trauma that a baby must suffer during childbirth, he thinks of his own mother, becomes very emotional and finally collapses on the beach. Cursing the light of the rising sun, just as a baby would curse the light upon its entrance into the world, he reproaches

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133 Joseph Millichap, *Hamilton Basso* (Boston: Twayne, 1979) 30. To illustrate Tony’s disorientation upon his arrival home, one may quote the following: “Ever since he returned, since the first day he had awkwardly searched the hospital for grandmother, everything had gone wrong” (RA, 170).
the daylight with its reminders of the truth. Like the baby, who has to descend from prenatal bliss and darkness into the reality of pain and light, Tony moves from the opiate darkness to a painful but authentic reality:

A great loneliness filled him. It was just as though he was walking a barren place. The barren place was filled with fog. He could not see . . . He wanted someone to love and someone who would understand . . . "Get away, you bastardly light," he shouted. "Get the hell away from here." . . . He could only think of birth's agony and the terror of bringing a child into this world. He began to pound the sand with his fists. He still looked at the stars. The stars had never seemed so far away. (RA, 100-101)

After this cathartic experience, Tony has truly become a new person. Realizing that his "personal salvation" is more important than anything else, he quits his job to become a scientist and, by the end of the novel, the hero looks back on his homecoming as an event that greatly contributed to his "education": "It was not to be supposed . . . that he would be able to return to that peculiar identity which he possessed upon returning to his own country. Many months had passed, there had been adventures and encounters, some discordant, some pleasant, and he had been changed" (RA, 180). Again, the novel would not have suffered greatly if the curtain had been pulled here. Instead, Tony undergoes a second crisis, which, following the climax on the beach, serves only as the incomprehensible anti-climax of the novel's finale.

While Tony is a typical navel-gazing twenties' hero, Basso's female characters have twenties' features too. Unlike the Prufrockian Tony, who is passive and indecisive, his sister, Laurine, has a mind of her own. As such, she fits in perfectly with the flappers of Fitzgerald's fiction and some of the more forceful of Hemingway's women; much more liberated than their Victorian mothers and grandmothers, these women do not recline on sofas with pale faces but exemplify the twenties' feminist: they are "tough" and truly deserve to be called "New
Women.” Having broken with their Victorian role models, they smoke and dance; they are assertive, sexually liberated and rebel against their all-too-feminine roles. Thus, while in This Side of Paradise (1919), Rosalind declares that there “used to be two kinds of kisses: first when girls were kissed and deserted; second when they were engaged. Now there’s a third kind, where the man is kissed and deserted,” in the same novel, Eleanor resents that women, notwithstanding their intelligence or ambitions, are “tied to the sinking ship of future matrimony.”

Basso’s Camilla condemns marriage in a similar fashion. Describing the institution as a “rotten thing” that did “awful things” to people and “especially to women,” Camilla does not want to get married at all (RA, 237). But she is not the only one with feminist impulses. Though a “country club queen,” Laurine shows that emancipation has not left her unaffected either: in contrast to her uptight brother, she is uninhibited, smokes, says that she is “sorry as hell,” and the secretary in Tony’s office gossips that she is “free and easy . . . It ain’t worth being good and moral these days. Men don’t want good women anymore” (RA, 170). Even the feminine Helen shows that the twenties’ woman can be calculating and unscrupulous: like a Fitzgerald heroine, she tells unashamedly that she broke up with her lover in college, because he was “too poor” (RA, 87).

Whereas women like Laurine, Camilla, Rosalind and Brett are portrayed as independent and strong figures, male characters like Tony, Amory and Jake seem to have lost some of their masculinity. The subversion of these traditional role patterns results, amongst other things, in the demystification of romantic love; thus, in The Waste Land (1922), a carbuncular clerk copulates with his bored typist, love having come down to the level of trivial routine.

Likewise, in the twenties’ novel, love and sexuality are no longer dark and mysterious forces but dreary and sham commodities: Lady Brett in The Sun Also Rises (1926), Rosalind in This Side of Paradise (1920), Carol Kendicott in Main Street (1920), Daisy Buchanan in The Great Gatsby (1925), Margot Dowling and Mary French in The Big Money (1936) and Helen in

Relics and Angels do not seek romance but get involved with men to enjoy diversion, convenience, money or improvement of social status. Tony's deplorable love life can be blamed on the twenties' atrophy of romance. While Helen makes love to Tony because she wants attention, Tony makes love to Marianne because he is bored and Camilla, the woman who has an authentic and romantic love potential for Tony, does not want to get involved for reasons mentioned above.

Discussing Relics and Angels from a twenties' perspective, we have touched upon some of the novel's focal points but our analysis of the novel would be incomplete were we to disregard the novel's Southern qualities. Granted, both Clarence Ikerd and Joseph Millichap have argued against a classification of the book as a Southern novel, yet upon a closer look, one finds some important Southern elements that reverberate in Basso's later work and the works of his contemporaries.

One of the most significant Southern features of Basso's debut is the protagonist's sense of a family identity. Southern historians and critics have elaborated on this notion. C. Vann Woodward argues that whereas a Hemingway hero is usually deprived of any familial or cultural context and thus finds himself, like a character out of Edgar Allan Poe, "alone with his problems, in the wilderness or with God," the Southern hero is usually burdened with a familial and historical past; that is, he is not "alone in the wilderness, at sea or in the bull ring [but] an inextricable part of a living history and community, attached and determined in a thousand ways by other wills and destinies of people he has only heard about."135 C. Hugh Holman claims that the idea of the family identity goes back to the agrarian origins of Southern society: "in every agrarian culture there is a strong sense of family solidarity; kinship means much; and the family Bibles with their records of births and deaths, like the great ledgers in Faulkner's 'The Bear,' are repositories in miniature of the history of a place, a region, and of

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According to M.E. Bradford, the Southern hero has such an engrained sense of duty toward his family and society that he is essentially part of a "corporate identity," that is, he does not have so much an individuality of his own but is part of a familial and cultural identity. Consequently, a Southern hero with a corporate identity represents rather than is, or, as the narrator of Relics and Angels clarifies: "No man can lead his life independently of all other men. Life is not simple like that. History is a fabric woven from the lives of all the men who ever lived" (RA, 42). Unlike the "urban cosmopolites" of twenties' fiction, who, according to Malcolm Bradbury, are "freed from their economic and moral roots, and so permitted to explore the pleasures of time," Tony Clezac is checked by familial, cultural and historical restraints. In fact, Tony needs both society and family as touchstones and consolidating forces of his identity and, to recover his true identity, he must return home. As in Thomas Wolfe's Look Homeward, Angel (1929), the hero's confrontation with (and subsequent rejection of) the home (identity) is intertwined with the substantiation of the hero's personal identity.

What is more, Tony's remarkable relationship with his grandfather, which is not dissimilar to Basso's relationship with his own grandfather, shows that his behavior is inherited and very much determined by his forebear. Not only is Tony proud to be called a gentleman, just like his grandfather, his emulation of the pater familias goes so far that, against the background of grandfather's adulterous affair, running off with Helen seems a perfectly justified act. In Basso's later novels the grandfather takes on legendary proportions, and becomes an almost


inimitable example for the hero. Bertram Wyatt-Brown explains that this is a Southern phenomenon, the veneration of forefathers coming out of a “genetic foundation that provided sons with inspiration but also the formidable challenge of living up to almost mythological heroes from the family.”

Besides the hero’s exaggerated identification with his grandfather, Tony’s affinity with the corporate identity of his family manifests itself in his sensitivity towards family obligations, responsibility and respectability. The latter has to do with the notion of Southern honor. Being very concerned about the family’s reputation, Tony initially attempts to save the family name by returning to the shoe company. It is there, as well as in the old Clezac house, that the family portraits “gazed dolefully” (RA, 30) down at him as if trying to remind him of the family duties. Tony’s family solidarity does not only hang like an albatross around his neck, he also realizes that being true to one’s family involves a life of “sham” (RA, 259) and “subterfuge” (RA, 228), for saving the family identity means sacrificing one’s own.

Besides the hero’s realization that he may not be able to keep the family legacy alive, there are obvious signs that Tony has come too late: the Clezac house is already moribund. While the house is generally described as a scene of death, where the curtains hang motionless, the garden is withering, the banana leaves are “torn like old clothes,” no bird is singing and the fountain is broken, Epstein notices how “a germ of decay had gotten in the Clezac family... They were not on the verge of ruin but the infected spot was widening” (RA, 52). Tony also observes that the “final signal of a fading house” (RA, 167) and the “sense of man’s defeat hung like a pall in every room” (RA, 187). And yet, even after Tony has eventually reconciled himself with the fact that with Hermine’s death, his departure and Laurine’s moving out of the house, the end of the Clezac era has come, he cannot help feeling nostalgic. Clearly, with the house, the family identity has disintegrated too:

He loved the house. It contained Clezac lives whose ghosts, living in the plaster of the walls would soon be disturbed. Another name would make it theirs, there would be alterations and repairs, and all the things they had built, the things they cherished and admired, the colors they had selected and the wood they had bought, would be gone. (RA, 250-251)

Until the end of the novel, Tony remains conscious of the family identity: at Laurine’s wedding, he withdraws to the library to take a guilt-ridden look at the family portraits: “He felt as though he should tell them how sorry he was that everything had happened” (RA, 252).

The decline of the Clezac family, that is, the downfall of an old Southern family and fading out of an old order, is a prevalent theme in various Southern Renascence writings. Or, as Richard Gray has written in his *Literature of Memory*:

During the 1920s, the years when people like William Faulkner, Thomas Wolfe and Robert Penn Warren were beginning to write and examine their regional environment, the South was at last acknowledging the death of its traditional way of life, based on the small farm and the great plantation, and recognizing its absorption into the strange new world of industrialism and advanced capitalism.¹⁴⁰

Basso saw this motif of change as symptomatic of the New South. Like the two sisters in his unpublished novelette “The Ladies of the Land,” the Blackheaths in *Cinnamon Seed* (1934) and the Barondesses in *Courthouse Square* (1936), the Clezacs have been replaced by a new

Besides being a *Bildungsroman*, Basso's first novel may be classified as a novel of manners, which, according to James Tuttleton, tends to focus on "classes which have existed briefly or during transitional periods when one group is in the process of decay while another is rising to supplant it." Since Southern society has always been especially conscious of class and manners, the Southern novel may be a novel of manners par excellence. In *Relics and Angels*, the reader is certainly made aware of class differences that exist between the genteel world of the Clezacs, the money-grubbing world of the Epsteins and the lower working-class milieu of the Slades. In Basso's later novels such class distinctions would persist, the protagonist's family usually occupying an island of enlightened thought amidst a sea of up-and-coming white trash. Basso may be called a J.P. Marquand of the South, for not only did he, like Marquand, use the flashback as a recurring novelistic device, he also mocked and criticized the ways of the South, just as Marquand made fun of New England society.

But a novel may not fully classify as "Southern" if it disregards the black experience. Unlike the black characters in Basso's thirties' novels, the black characters in *Relics and Angels* play a minor part. Living in the shadow of their white employers, they are discreetly present yet more tuned into the family's affairs than the family itself is aware of: "Colored folk are like that. They come into a white family, knowing all their secrets, all their joys and sorrows and ills. Then at night they go home again, to the cluttered house lit by candles and lamps, and lead their own lives, the whites know nothing what goes on" (RA, 217). In spite of their marginal and anonymous presence in the novel, they have strong identities of their own and whenever the narrator brings them to the foreground, the prose attains a lyrical and incantational mode that reminds the reader of Jean Toomer's *Cane* (1923):

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--Dream, brown mother, dream. Let your worshipping thoughts drift over the cane fields, into the dusky sky. Let them become of the redness of the rising moon and of the rustles of leaves of cane. What your dreams are, I know not. That knowledge is denied me. But dream them, whatever they may be. Be drunk with them.

--Your nipples will soon be rid of his gnawing. The dust of the road lose the marks of his feet. He will be gone and forgetting

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--Dream, brown mother, dream. Always and always. Until you die. Never open your eyes. Your dreams would be spilled. Were I cruel I would spill them. They would be spilled like the milk that drips from the corners of his greedy mouth.

--I would say: That babe of yours, do you know what he will be? A low down buck nigger, stinking of sweat, his hands broken to the shape of a scythe. He will be consumed with brute passions. He will sing songs. White men will beat him. With whips sometimes, with words and looks more often. Even, I, unwittingly, will beat him.

--He will get into a brawl with a white man. The white man's throat will choke with blood and your babe will throw the knife in the road. He will take to the swamps. Men and dogs will hunt him. Mosquitoes will torture his flesh. The miasma of the swamps will rise about him. He will be beset with primitive fears. Devils and demons will yell at him. He will try to escape.

--White men will see him dashing across a road. Dogs will howl after him, bring him to earth. After that the end will be swift and
frightful.

Only once in his life will he know tenderness. A brown girl will love him. They will go to the clearing where the canefield ends.

Crickets will sing. The wind will whisper to them (RA, 121-123)

The Toomeresque flavor, which has been enhanced by simple sentences, repetitions, dreamlike impressionism, poetic local color but also the awareness of the ill fate of the black Southerner, may have been purely coincidental. But then, Basso may have been familiar with Jean Toomer’s writings since some of Cane’s stories and poems had appeared in the Double Dealer of 1923. By 1926, Basso was writing in the same vein and showed an interest in a similar subject matter. Like Toomer, he affirmed the African-American identity in a positive way and rather than typecasting the black character as a jolly old simpleton, a potential rapist of white women or a benevolent black mamma, he portrayed his fellow Southerners as people whose emotions were genuine and whose rural lives bordered on the pastoral. Toomer achieved the same in Cane by setting off black rural life against the dystopia of the urban and white North East. While both writers acknowledged the abuse of blacks and their exposure to constant surges of violence, they also inferred that the rural way of life and blacks’ closeness to the soil was to be preferred to the uprootedness of city life. To strengthen the claim that Basso may have been influenced by Toomer’s unique style, one should compare the following passages, the first by Toomer and the second, an early and unpublished piece by Basso:

A pianist slips into the pit and improvises jazz. The walls awake. Arms of the girls, and their limbs, which . . . jazz, jazz . . . by lifting up their tight street skirts they set free, jab the air and clog the floor in the rhythm to the music . . . they press John towards a center of physical ecstasy . . .

The glitter and color of stacked scenes, the gilt and brass and crimson of the house, converge towards a center of physical ecstasy. John’s feet and torso and his blood press in . . . The walls press in singing.
Flesh of a throbbing body, they press close to John and Dorris. They close them in. John’s heart beats intensely against her dancing body. Walls press his mind within his heart. . . . Mind pulls him upward into dream. Dorris dances. . . . John dreams.143

Jazz surging, jazz pounding, jazz breaking on the walls. Walls becoming soaked with jazz.

Feet scraping, heels pounding, drums rolling, cornets mouthing

. . .

Hey! Hey! Shake that thing! Rattle those cans! Hands clap.

Feet stamp. Voices shout.

. . .

Aimee, black eyes shining, becomes part of Quimby.

Slender, nigger-girl hips, swing next to his. Firm nigger-girl breasts, crush upon him. Jazz jumbles words in his brain.

She hums the music but Quimby does not hear her. He is lost in a field of cane.144

Progressing from entrancing jazz rhythms to the rhythms of seduction, these passages are remarkably similar. Basso’s “Nocturne” seems to have been inspired by Toomer’s “Theater” and “Carma” in which the uninhibited Carma is seen dancing in pagan ritual. In “Nocturne,” we encounter the same ritual and while “Carma” opens with “Wind is in the cane. Come along/

Cane leaves swaying, rusty with talk,/ Scratching choruses above the guinea’s hawk,/ Wind is


in the cane. Come along,” Basso’s piece closes with “Cane rustles in the moonlight. Wind sings to it. Cane rustles and grows and is broken.”

Basso’s use of flashbacks in his first novel are a trademark of his fiction and underscore the Southerner’s preoccupation with the past. In addition, Relics and Angels is remarkable for its unadorned and detached style. The novel’s simple, declarative sentences and its straightforward dialogue may actually remind the reader of Hemingway’s prose. It is not improbable that Basso was influenced by Hemingway: Dan Piper claims that, while the first reviews of Hemingway’s work go back to 1923, “by 1929 he was already exercising considerable stylistic influences on such writers as Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler and John O’Hara.” At the same time, one could ascribe Basso’s austere and paratactic style to Sherwood Anderson’s influence. Not only was Anderson an exemplary author for many twenties’ writers, he had personally stimulated Basso in New Orleans. Another influential writer is James Joyce whose novel, The Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man (1916), influenced Thomas Wolfe’s Look Homeward, Angel, Jean Toomer’s Cane, and Basso’s Relics and Angels. However much Basso may have shared with his modernist contemporaries, his experimental style is not always successful in the sense that Hemingway’s

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145 Toomer, 16; Basso, n.pag.

146 In Basso’s second novel he would also use flashbacks, a device he admits borrowing from the movies (Hamilton Basso, letter to Maxwell Perkins, 11 July 1933, Scribner’s Archives, Princeton). Later, Basso declared that his use of the flashback derived from Joseph Conrad’s fiction: “It was Conrad, [Basso] says gratefully, who introduced him to the possibilities of the flashback, of which he himself is a modern master.” (John K. Hutchens, “The Architect of Pompey’s Head,” New York Herald Tribune Book Review, 31 October 1954: 3).


style is. Whereas Hemingway succeeds in employing what some critics have called an “anti-
style,” which is especially powerful in its understatement, Basso’s simplicity interferes with
the narrative’s implied tragedy. To put it differently, Tony’s self-dramatization and the
melodrama of the forced and unanticipated epiphanies are incongruous with the novel’s sober
style.

A similar conflict of style and content is created by the narrator’s stream of consciousness
technique: Tony’s “thought flows” do not necessarily warrant the reader’s closer involvement
with the hero. On the contrary, the hero’s motives are too obscure, his behavior is too erratic
and his acts are too unpredictable to win the reader over. This is also what turns Relics and
Angels into a mediocre novel, because regardless of its many twenties’ insights, Southern
Renascence motifs and modernist style, the book never rises above the level of apprentice
work. But as a formative work, it deserves some attention, for it clearly shadows forth some of
the themes and characters of Basso’s thirties’ works. In the later novels, we will find the same
troubled and homeward bound protagonist, the same sense of family identity, the same society
in transition, the same local color and the same unfulfilled romance. However, despite Basso’s
tenacious use of similar characters, themes and settings, his style would change and depart
from a modernist base to a more straightforward realism. Whereas the thirties’ novels show
very little trace of Basso’s early experimentation, the prose poem “Rain on Aspidistra”(1933)
does. As Basso’s last experimental exercise, the piece serves as a good antithetical departure
point for the novelist’s realist phase.
Since "Rain on Aspidistra" is the only published piece in which Basso is extremely experimental in the modernist sense of the word, it seems worthwhile to reproduce the poem in full and submit it to a close reading. The piece is written in a stream-of-consciousness flow and the dream visions and logic are typical of *transition*, the magazine in which it appeared. As a literary device, the dream had not only gained a new status in art, but with the added perspective of Sigmund Freud's *Traumdeutung*, the dream came to stand for a "paradigm of the whole Weltbild in which reality and unreality, logic and fantasy, the banal and the sublime form an indissoluble and inexplicable unity." Because of its dreamlike quality, the work has a strong surrealist flavor and resembles what Eugene Jolas, founder of *transition*, defined as a "paramyth," which is "a kind of epic wonder tale giving an organic synthesis of the individual and universal unconscious, the dream, the daydream, the mystic vision."

As in *The Waste Land*, the reader is presented with a number of different scenes and different stages in history. Reality is broken up into a fragmented blur of fact and fiction and normality has turned into absurdity. This has an extremely disorienting effect on the reader whose groping for meaning is blocked by a number of defamiliarization techniques: the reader encounters foreign words, misspellings, unexpected turns of phrase, different and arbitrary typologies, uncalled for capitalization of letters, neologisms, illogical transitions and swift shifts in time and setting. Moreover, when Basso was writing this piece he had just finished his book on Civil War General, P.G.T. Beauregard, and random details of the biography are

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woven into the discourse. In fact, the most important clue to the text is that the poem's decor is the Civil War:

1 Gruelbubbling, the tightthroated protests not mine, the independent resentment of a laryngeal sphincter undaunted by their will-imposing een which, accomplishing an escape from calcium strictures wave merry tendrils of silver-splattered fire, a dank still pool suspended beneath the spongy engineering of identical lungs.

5 segments of small-many-mouthed-sucking detect
the trickle of moisture in air-sacs while eyes
truantlike return while he shakes his bald and
gleaming and unfamiliar heed. Nicht wahr?

I am suddenly in flight, heel leaden laden, sought by fiery silver-splatter and the

10 weeping echoes of fear (the galvanized beard of St. Vincent de Paul) a grayslithery scurry into the mouthlike bubbles of restless discontent.

The sheer dark wall is eloquent and I detect familiar shapes and forms, young ambitions and determinations abandoned stillborn, caught flooted in the seashapened rook in all their young and helpless suffering.

15 I remember the vortices of young designs, the river of skulls and blood, all the slithering fish opening their thorny mouths to murmur patriotic songs.

Protest is futility, the Omnipotent Will is a shuttery succession of stars and bars (Dixie, pianissimo, beyond the capitol hill) I sink peacefully into the dilkwarm sea

Without immediately knowing what is happening and where this is taking place, we may list the following details. The speaker is already introduced in the first line and appears again in line nine where we find him "in flight." However, we do not know what or whom he is
fleeing. Instead, the reader sees a chaos of limbs and organs. Of these, organs relating to the mouth predominate: “tightthroated,” “laryngeal sphincter,” “segments of small-manymouthed-sucking,” “mouthlike bubbles,” and the “thorny mouths” of the fish. Even the dark wall, mentioned in line twelve, seems to have a mouth as it appears to be “eloquent.” As if incorporated in a hellscape of Hieronymus Bosch, this plethora of mouths forms a haunting image; the mouths protest, suck, “murmur” and they are, possibly, responsible for the “weeping echoes of fear.” Amidst this “gruelbubbling” cacophony, a young man is trying to escape. If we link this prose poem to the Civil War, this could be a battlefield, the young man’s flight resembling the frantic escape of the hero in Stephen Crane’s classic, *The Red Badge of Courage* (1895). Taking the battlefield as our framework, we understand why there is a rough-and-tumble of limbs, organs, voices and a “river of skulls and blood.” The thorny-mouthed fish which sing “patriotic songs” resemble piranhas and add to the preposterous atmosphere of the battlefield massacre.

As for the speaker, one may wonder whether the young man is really running: the death imagery, the futile protests and the mention of the “Omnipotent Will” actually seem to indicate that the young man is not so much flying as dying for his country. This is confirmed by his peaceful sinking “into the dilkwarm sea,” which alludes to his descent into the womb of death. That the young man finds his death on the battlefield can also be deduced from the speaker’s reference to the “young ambitions and determinations abandoned stillborn,” in addition to “the vortices of young designs,” which, juxtaposed to the “river of skulls and blood,” refer to all the other young men whose untimely death is the result of a devastating war.

What makes this fragment particularly disorienting are phrases like “he shakes his bald and gleaming and unfamiliar heed” (one expects “head”) and “shapes and forms” “caught flooted” (instead of “flooded”) “in the seashapened rook” (the reader anticipates “seashaped rock”). More confusion has been achieved by obscure references such as, for example, “the galvanized beard of St. Vincent de Paul” (he was a patron saint of the poor and destitute), and *Waste Land* echoes such as “Nicht wahr?” (Eliot’s “echt deutsch”) and “restless discontent” (Eliot’s “season of discontent”). Leaving these details unresolved, let us return to the prose poem:
Secret polyparian forms brush my face with kataplectic arms.
Secret polyphagous anemones lash my body with electric fire.
Secret polymorphous monsters lift me gently through the aperture that bears the
mark of Satan’s hoove, his gentle, wise, sensitive face peering like a companycurious
child.

He is a gentleman and I like him. He has the look of a Southerner. He is a linguist
and speaks ten languages. He speaks hissingly with an Alabama drawl.
“Even then I must have interpreters,” he says.
“That’s easy to understand,” I say, “I can understand that.”
He offers me a position but I decline.

“You must not misunderstand me,” I say, “I am entirely in sympathy with what
you are doing. I would like to help you in your inspired work. Despite the growth
of atheism, which my good friend the Bishop of Blune denies, imagine that,
imagine denying the growth of atheism, the man is a menace to society he lives to
DENY, he denies that black aphids and red spiders have attacked my garden and
that my favorite frog was startled by an iMACulate CONCEPTION the man is a
chronier he is but what, what were we saying, it was about the bishop of blUTE
or was it the bIsHOP of Tulbe he baptized me didn’t you know, upon my tender
head the divine significance of his watery hand.”

Descending into the unknown, the speaker is transported through a hellfire and a
polymorphous jungle. Then, having been lifted up through an opening that has the mark of the
devil, the speaker meets Satan, who, like his Miltonic counterpart, is strangely seductive and
charming. But the portrait of the devil is also absurd and inconsistent: he is a Southern
gentleman with “an Alabama drawl,” which connotes backwardness. This is in strange
contradiction with his ability to speak ten languages. To add to the folly of this description, we
learn that, despite his multi-lingual skills, Satan needs interpreters, a statement which is vague as it has no clear referent within the text.

Equally vague and fantastic is the conversation that follows. After the speaker has declined some devilish job, he tells Satan of the Bishop of Blune, or is his name “bLUTE” or “Tulbe?”

As is typical of a modernist text, the reader’s desire for definitiveness is never satisfied. Or, as Clive Scott argues, “one of the fundamental qualities of the prose poem is its ability to retain its accidental nature, its uncontrollable novelty.” In this way, “Rain on Aspidistra” is “as often as not a gradual thwarting or suppression of narration.”

Though we may explain the “growth of atheism,” which the bishop denies, as a side-effect of people’s disillusionment with war, we can make neither head nor tail of the bishop’s subsequent denial that insects were attacking his garden and that the immaculate conception startled his favorite frog. However, the anti-clerical tone of this Alice-in-Wonderland fragment resonates with Basso’s aversion to the Catholic Church.

Simultaneously, the speaker’s disclosure that he was baptized by the bishop infers his own (and Basso’s) Catholic upbringing.

Here we are interrupted by a Bluendged Victoria (even to her liquid chin she resembles Our Late and Great and Glorious Queen) she darts out a flavforked tongue to demand if I, with the ignorance of the Young, expect His EXCELLENcy remember even the birth of all his potential subjects much less their christenings, the very Idea. But his eXellenCy who is a GENTLEMAN if nothing else, plants his hoove upon her soluble rump and she becomes an irate mauve shadow which interrupting a ray of bass light directed upon a photo-electric cell, becomes a sampler, Done By Twinkle, age 2, GOD BLAST OUR HAPPY HOME.

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The conversation is momentarily interrupted by a draconian version of Queen Victoria. Haughtily, she asks whether the speaker expects the devil to know the “birth of all his potential subjects.” Before the speaker can answer, Satan, although allegedly a gentleman, makes her dissolve in air by sucking his “hoove” in her “soluble rump.” Victoria’s transformation into a sampler, which has the shape of a drawing made by a two year old, followed by the phrase “GOD BLAST OUR HAPPY HOME,” is vague and therefore difficult to explain.

“I have always admired that sentiment,” he says, “offering me his hydrostatic tail to spark a cigarette which I accept gratefully from an offering shade, “Now what were we saying before we were so rudely interrupted.”

The devil resumes the conversation and offers his tail so that the speaker can light a cigarette which he received from a shade, (which confirms that we are in Hades’ empire indeed). Yet the reader may be puzzled by the fact that the inverted commas of (the first) “offering” have not been closed; though the commas seem to imply the devil’s resumed speech, they in fact precede a piece of narrated action. The puzzle continues with the following lines:

50 I hasten to explain but I am a ragged volume of Sidney’s Aphorisms, (pages 94-95 et seq.) “It has been sayed that the abolition of duelling would multiply affronts and that the Messiah of the Gospel manifests this one and the Prophet of the Groan the other. From these vues it will be weadily ganted that mltry & nvl veterans esteem their vertues and be frndly wthout faciætes.”

55 This disturbs me for I am no militarist and my present incarceration cannot be reconciled with the fluid nature of my mind which slips across the rocks of Toxaway and drifts through the French Broad Valley splashing across the waterwheels resentful of the puny skill of man which
captures my own swirling strength so that wishes may
rise like Pandora’s evils from wishing bibles of enormous ugliness.

After Victoria’s metamorphosis, the speaker is transformed into a book of Aphorisms composed by Sidney, who is most likely Sir Philip Sidney, the sixteenth-century poet, statesman and battlefield hero. Quoting from the volume which the speaker has become, we find, besides an aphorism on duelling, the faith ridiculed for a second time. This is followed by the italicized thoughts of the speaker. Constricted to his rigid shape, that is, the “incarceration” of a book, the “fluid nature” of the “mind” is hampered. The desire of the mind to flow freely over rocks, valleys and rivers needs no further explanation. However, the “wishes” which “rise like Pandora’s evils from wishing bibles of enormous ugliness” give rise to the question: what are wishing bibles and how do they relate to Pandora’s evils? The opening of Pandora’s Box, which finished the Golden Age, may be analogous to the occurrence of the Civil War, which also brought on the end of the Golden Age of the prospering antebellum South. As a matter of fact, the following fragment takes us back to the South and shows the Civil War battlefield once again:

So I struggle to free myself and command an army of albino worms to organize an attack upon the hinges. They push slowly forward, like Halleck after Shiloh, erecting parallels and mounting field pieces. The hinges are greatly brave, they have taken the sacred Hinge oath, Death before DisHonor. The siege lasts for seventeen weeks and then the hinges retreat during the night taking away all their stores, ammunition, cannon and supplies. It is a great Hinge victory, but Jefferson Davis, weeping on Varina’s shoulder, assumes command of the army which is immediately suffocated by Ben Butler’s smell.
After wrestling himself free from his book form, the speaker takes up the command of some fantastic army and the ensuing battle between albino worms and hinges is almost Swiftian in its satire. After a siege of weeks, the hinges retreat and win by retreating (just as Beauregard won [lives] by retreating from Shiloh). The references to the Civil War (Shiloh being Shiloh, the weeping Jefferson Davis and the stinking Benjamin Butler) are the obvious residue of Beauregard, The Great Creole (1933). Jefferson Davis, the Confederate President, who, in Basso’s biography, is portrayed as the objectionable antagonist of the sympathetic Beauregard, is here depicted as a weakling who weeps on his wife’s shoulder and whose army collapses under the smell of Butler. Butler’s “smell” goes back to Basso’s biography too: in Beauregard, Benjamin Butler occupied New Orleans and left “a memory like a stench” on the city after he was removed from command as “even the insensitive North was offended by his smell.”

With these overt references the piece is indeed a Civil War poem. Yet, one must note that it is not a conventional ode to bravery, a eulogy of dead soldiers or a tribute to Confederate heroes but a mockery of battle heroics.

I am rejoicingly free but have lost all awareness of my former identity. I wander on the mountains, which I love, listening to the sounds of the waterfalls. The sun sets, striking the rocks with bronze, and beyond the sun is the glacial purity of the sky. Little houstonias glow like starsplinters between the rocks of Carthaginian bronze. Somewhere a bird sings, dropping notes into the utter quiet and they resolve themselves into bright metaphors which fall into the rhododendrons with the sound of fragile bells. I pick them up and they are very beautiful and I put them by for a leaner time.

I climb the mountain, reaching the glacial coldness of the sky, little rocks are loosened and fall like nuggets of hail, but the path becomes the attic stairs of my old home and in the attic Jeb Stuart waits for his horse to be shod. He is brushing

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the plume of his hat and his sash brightens the attic like a golden comet

The first paragraph of this passage is a purple patch in which the soul, having lost its corporeality, rejoices in the mountainous beauty of paradise. Could the soul have ascended from hell to heaven? The movement is certainly upward as the speaker, or soul, climbs the mountain onto the “attic stairs.” This poetic description, which does not have any of the absurd logic of the preceding fragments, can be associated with Basso’s enthusiasm for the mountains. In 1933, when this was written, the Bassos had just moved to the mountains where they enjoyed the scenery. It is no coincidence that the described landscape of waterfalls, beautiful sunsets and glacial serenity resembles the setting of Pisgah Forest where the Bassos lived. The “French Broad Valley” is the valley of Pisgah Forest, the French Broad being the river that runs through parts of North Carolina and Tennessee.

The description of the landscape is followed by a more fantastic passage in which the soul encounters Confederate General, Jeb Stuart. Stuart, who was in Beauregard’s army and who was supposedly a paragon of Southern courtesy, is here portrayed as a rather glamorous figure, his sash shining “like a golden comet.” In the next passage we discover that Stuart is preparing for death:

“I am going to die tomorrow,” he says.

“Tell me,” I say, “What kind of person was Jefferson Davis?”

He laughs, and his booming laughter reaches the frozen ears of the piquets and they are inspired by his tremendous laughter and raid the Federal camp and bring in General Grant in his full dress uniform. He smells of hides and his coat is unbuttoned and he is very drunk. The piquets take off his full dress uniform and robe him in a faded wrapper and General Grant dances a minuet while Longstreet combs his beard and recalls amateur theatricals in Mexico.
Apparently, the speaker is not interested in hearing about death. Instead, he wants to know what Davis was really like. This, too, can be explained by the Beauregard biography. While writing this book, Basso must have wondered whether it was justified to depict Davis as a stubborn President who clashed frequently with Beauregard; in the light of Basso’s desire for historical truth, the speaker’s question is not altogether absurd. But the question is not answered, or rather, answered by laughter which may be interpreted as Stuart’s contempt for Davis. The laughter triggers a raid by a card game on the Yankee camp. Incidentally, notice that, in this piece, the war is being waged by inanimate objects like cards and hinges, as well as by ridiculous animals such as albino worms. Rather than having the Civil War heroes stand out in acts of bravery, Basso endows them with fantastic and unheroic behavior. Thus the dipsomaniacal and shabbily dressed General Grant dances a minuet, while General James Longstreet who, like Beauregard, was a staunch anti-Davisian, combs his beard. After this jolly interlude, there is an abrupt change of scene and the reader is introduced to a female figure:

She sat in the sun, a wrinkled crone, living in the utter purity of the mountain sky, with gnarled hands that were working before she was born, a spinner in the sun, adorning prosaic cloth with the poetry of stars and moons and Saturn’s rings, of brilliant red and noble blue, descending, on the outer edges, to the Phoenician melancholy of inspired purple. She belongs to the mountains, to the clean reaches of the upper air, the bright core of her soul is rooted in the unyielding rock. She fills me with a sense of not belonging. I am of the lowlands, of the swamps, of heavy nights and relentless rain and a hungry hound baying at the red moon across the undulations of the levee.
The image of this old hag, who, with her rheumatic hands, is spinning a “prosaic cloth” which has been adorned with “poetry,” is mystifying. At the same time, considering that this is a prose poem, she may well be spinning “Rain on Aspidistra.” As someone who resembles the Alma Mater of the empire of dunces in Alexander Pope’s *Dunciad* (1728), she seems an anachronism (just as the Queen Victoria figure is an anachronism). Who is she and does her position in the mountain sky infer that she is a goddess who spins out people’s or rather, soldiers’ destinies? At the mention of this old and ugly mountain nymph, the speaker is overcome by a “sense of not belonging” for he grew up in the lowlands and swamps of Louisiana. Then we move to the waterfront of New Orleans, which is the setting of the speaker’s and Basso’s childhood:

The great river flows sullenly through the night, filling the darkness with an arrogant sound, sucking at the pilings of the wharves. The ferryboats quiver with their own exertions, ferrylights are yellow spangles spewn from grinning wheels. And within myself there are lights to be seen, hung like the Simutu lanterns at a garden fete, along the brittle ladder of my bones, and the sudden fury of volcanic fire leaping across my eyes, but here no lonely cry of river tugs nor the great Symbol, which is no symbol, since there can be nothing so terrific, so overwhelming in our modern lives.

The New Orleans setting has been internalized by the speaker, and although we may have thought that he had lost his corporeality, the mention of bones contradicts this. What the speaker means by the “great Symbol, which is no symbol,” is enigmatic; one could suggest that this refers back to the speaker’s skepticism of the Church. This would also be in accordance with the statement that there is no room for the “great Symbol” in “our modern lives.” The anti-clerical motif recurs in the passage that follows:

I creep humbly down to the willow trees and lie on my back by the river, the
river voices an arrogant sound, and watch a clumsy formation of red clouds enter like Fifi's Trained Pony Troupe upon the three-ringed sky. The Catholic education of my apprenticeship emerges from the shapelessness of experience and achieves the definiteness of a dripping priest intoning the commemoration of the dead.

Mememto etiam, Domine, famulorum, famularunque

tuarum Violet and Ivy qui nos praecesserunt cum

signo Fidei, et dormiunt in somno pacis.

He joins his hands and prays, rumguttingly, O Violet, O Ivy, outspreading his troutwhite puffy palms as he proceeds Christomnibusemper.

Again the corporeality of the speaker is brought to the reader's attention as he is creeping to the trees to lie down. What follows is a Catholic Mass held in commemoration of the dead. The ceremony is performed by a priest who is portrayed rather unsympathetically: he is "dripping," he prays "rumguttingly," and the palms of his hands are "troutwhite" and "puffy." Moreover, rather than being an actual scene, this is presented as another vision. The speaker remembers his Catholic childhood; the priest is foregrounded and subsequently ridiculed. His Latin blessing of the dead is ludicrous too. In the middle of it we find the English phrase "Violet and Ivy." While Ivy, as an evergreen, stands for immortality and, in paintings, usually crowns a skull, the Violet is a Christian symbol, commonly associated with Christ's life on earth.154 Inevitably, this commemoration of the conquered and the slain involves a resurrection, or rather, the regaining of the speaker's corporeality. The image of resurrection returns in the last lines of the poem:

And now, while empty sound signifies thunder, the red clouds, pregnant with wine and blood, are ridden by all the Confederate Generals about the ring of stars, cavorting gayly with bands of silver and blue until, outraged by the gutrumblingly graylord gray nothingness of his unctuous tone, they pour down the blessing of wine and good saints blood that beat with eventual understanding upon the taut canvas of my mind.

The empty ritual (the “empty sound” of line 121) launches the climax of the poem. While lying on his back, the speaker detects a troupe of ponies in the sky and discovers that the red clouds are ridden by “all the Confederate Generals.” The sound, signifying thunder, is the noise made by the prancing line of Generals. Although they seem to be feasting, they are really “outraged” by their commander’s “gray nothingness” (the color of his Confederate uniform) and his “unctuous tone.” This is another reference to Jefferson Davis’s bad leadership. In anger, the commanders pour down wine and blood which splash on the “canvas” of the speaker’s “mind.” The wine and blood allude to another Catholic ritual, namely that of Holy Communion. Holy Communion is of course also a precondition for resurrection and in the poem the Generals take the place of Christ and the apostles.

The poem’s action—the Generals’ pouring of blood and wine—is finally brought back to the speaker and one observes that the mind of the speaker, or composer, is “taut,” which has both a literal and figurative meaning: “taut” can mean tightly stretched or it means “stressed.” From Basso’s point of view, it is possibly the latter; at this point, he had just finished Beauregard, and as he was usually quite drained by the time he completed a book, this prose poem may be seen as the product of Basso’s overwrought imagination. “Rain on Aspidistra” is clearly an exercise in automatic writing, showing a pattern of free associations that do not connect coherently. Although one can argue that the piece’s “logic” amounts to its demythologization of both the Civil War and the Catholic Church, as a typical modernist prose poem “Rain on Aspidistra” defies interpretation and gives the reader the impression of a
"heavily cut film," an act of "sheer 'adjectivilization'" in which "description becomes decor."155

The poem’s title only becomes clear in the end: the "Rain" is the rain of "blood and wine."

"Aspidistra" is an Asian lily and house plant and since the lily is a symbol of purity, virginity and innocence, "aspidistra" may be associated with the innocence of the speaker and the youths who die on the battlefield. The latter would certainly categorize the piece as an anti-war poem.

The composition is remarkable for its experimental nature and complexity. Extremely pleased with its "wordalchimy" [sic] and referring to it as "magnificent," Eugene Jolas asked Basso if he would not contribute a similar piece when the former tried to resurrect transition in America in 1958.156 “Rain on Aspidistra” reveals that, at this point in his career, Basso was not fully convinced of the Southern realism which he would settle for in his later fiction.

Because of its apparent contrast to Basso’s later and more accessible work, “Rain on Aspidistra” is a refreshing and challenging piece.

Finally, the poem is rather unconventional from a Southern point of view. It is not a run-of-the-mill Civil War poem but in its derision of war and war heroes and in its caricature of the Church, this piece is a departure from the Civil War poetry of the Agrarians. As such, “Rain on Aspidistra” is a good introduction to Basso’s Southern “otherness” and his willful opposition to the Agrarians. In our discussion of the novels we will see this feature confirmed, setting Basso apart within the Southern Renascence.

155 Modernism, 351.

156 Eugene Jolas, letters to Hamilton Basso, 26 November 1932 and 16 April 1958; Hamilton Basso Collection, Beinecke Library, New Haven. In the 1958 letter Jolas writes: “You may have heard that I am doing Transition again –this time as a quarterly– from American soil. I was wondering if you would care to appear again with us. Maybe you have something in the line of that magnificent “Rain on Aspidistra” that we published several years ago. Something that is in the nature of a fantastic liberation and that you could not place anywhere else. Or a dream. A folktale. If you find anything like that in your archives, please let me see it.”
To recapitulate, Basso's twenties' work, which consists of a collection of unpublished pieces, some published pieces and a first novel, is the work of an apprentice. By the end of the decade, Basso was by no means a brilliant writer, but being only twenty-five, he was at the beginning of a slow but finally successful novelistic career. Gradually receiving critical recognition in the thirties, he eventually won himself a wide audience in the fifties.

For all that *Relics and Angels* and "Rain on Aspidistra" are not, they are the seedbed of Basso's later oeuvre. Also, as writings that reveal a willingness to experiment with modernism, they are of some consequence and perhaps more interesting than Basso's later potboilers. These early works reveal literary originality and the promise of a career to come. To find out how the author developed from a moderate modernist and Southern novelist to a bellettrist, Basso's thirties' history and the novels he wrote in this decade form the necessary link.
The greatest patriotism is to tell your country when it is behaving dishonourably, foolishly, viciously. The writer must be universal in sympathy and an outcast by nature: only then can he see clearly.

Gustave Flaubert
1. The View from Pisgah Forest: A Life in the Mountains

Leaving New Orleans in September of 1932, the Bassos moved into a cabin in Pisgah Forest, four miles from Brevard, North Carolina, and three quarters of a mile up the mountain. Since their monthly expenses had to be cut to less than $70, the Rich Mountain Lodge, which they rented for only $10 a month, offered a satisfactory way to economize. Basso described the cabin as "not very elegant but... comfortable" and further noted that "there is even hot water and a bath tub." 157 Shortly after having moved in, he recorded his excitement with mountain life. "We look down into the valley, there is also a river, and then on the other side of the valley the mountains go off purply into the distance, range after range of them. Cities seem cramped and noisy now, manifestations of meaningless frenzy, and the depression comes not only [sic] as some vague thing that is happening (or so we hear) in the outside world." 158

Basso was very pleased with his new mountain abode. When he was not at his desk typing, he would chop wood, do some carpentry or climb the mountains with his dog: "and then we sit on the great rocks that hang like enormous shelves from the face of the mountains and watch the little, far world beneath us... enjoying a momentary, ridiculous feeling that we have been


triumphant over Nature; while Nature tolerates us and is beautiful beyond all believing.”

Perhaps this Arcadian bliss was a trifle premature. Once the winter swept over the mountains, life became a little rockier. Soon the pipes froze and burst. Besides having to walk to the spring, which was “about two city blocks away,” Basso had to crawl underneath the cabin to do the necessary plumbing. In times of snow and ice the Bassos had to push their little Ford up the unpaved road and when that became impossible, they had to leave the car behind and carry their provisions on foot: “Our road goes straight up and once I slipped and would have kept going until I hit the valley had I not hit a laurel thicket instead.”

In spite of these rustic mishaps, the young couple did appreciate country life, and the quiet was highly conducive to Basso’s writing. Though missing the bubbly social scene of New Orleans, Basso realized that in order to be a writer one has to renounce the “real world,” which “is sometimes so much more exciting (and satisfying) than the literary world”: “you’d rather go climbing somewhere than sit down and push a typewriter,” he wrote to Lyle Saxon. A social rather than a solitary being, Basso was nonetheless delighted to devote all his time to his writing: “I feel a greater sense of permanency here than when I was writing advertising crap in an office and getting a check every two weeks.”

But independence had its price: the couple struggled to make ends meet. While Basso earned a meager $35 a month tutoring, or what he referred to as “trying to ram learning down

159 Hamilton Basso, letter to Maxwell Perkins, 20 September 1932, Scribner’s Archives, Princeton.

160 Hamilton Basso, letter to Maxwell Perkins, 12 February 1933, Scribner’s Archives, Princeton.

161 Ibid.


163 Ibid.
the throat of a not very bright child,” Toto scrambled some money together by working as a counselor in a girl’s camp, in the summertime.¹⁶⁴ Their financial straits grew worse when they lost half of their savings in a New Orleans banking crisis. Somewhat desperately, Basso told Matthew Josephson that it felt like living in a new age: “We are waiting for the Fall --Here is to the New Deal-- the New Era too. It can’t come too soon to suit me.”¹⁶⁵

Besides financial setbacks, the Bassos had to deal with the severe winters. To get away from the cold, they visited friends in “hoity-toity” Aiken, South Carolina. After having put up with the many inconveniences of Pisgah Forest, Basso admitted that it was “good . . . to experience again the decadent luxuries of high-balls, soft beds, dressing for dinner, and to know, that when bedtime came, you didn’t have to put chains on your Ford or walk 1/4 mile skyward on a slippery path.” The town of Aiken would inspire Basso for the setting of his 1935 novel, In Their Own Image. Touring South Carolina, the Bassos discovered a small coastal town by the name of Beaufort. Immediately smitten with the place, Basso described the town as “unquestionably the most alluring and charming place” he had ever seen; “it exists,” he wrote, “in its entirety, unchanged from the time ‘befo de war.’ There are birds everywhere, squirrels scamper in the streets (unpaved, save one, the street that follows the bay) . . . And so beautifully backward is the place, that we had to hunt for a gas-station.”¹⁶⁶ In Basso’s view, Beaufort, together with Savannah, Charleston and New Orleans represented the Old South and would thus form the inspirational basis for his fictional town of “Pompey’s Head.”

One may consider Basso’s retreat to the North Carolina countryside as an imperative move for his development as a writer. Like H.D. Thoreau, whom he admired and occasionally


¹⁶⁶ Hamilton Basso, letter to Roy Schwarz, 10 January 1933, Etolia S. Basso files, Tempe.
quoted, Basso needed isolation to come to a definition of his art. Like Thoreau too, whose Walden habitat detached him from the intellectual community of his day, Basso’s remote residence involved a great degree of personal and intellectual independence: away from the madding crowd and “mass of men” who “lead lives of quiet desperation,” Thoreau and Basso had to form their own opinions. In this chapter, we shall see that Basso’s intellectual individualism was an important attribute of his personality. It would set him apart from his intellectual peers and, at times, isolate him as a Southerner and Southern writer.

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Before leaving New Orleans, Basso had already initiated new writing projects. Disillusioned with the reception of *Relics and Angels* and Perkins’s rejection of the novel “A Room in the Sky,” a manuscript which appears to have been lost, he turned to non-fiction after having chanced upon a number of shoeboxes with Civil War documents in an old plantation home. Always having been an avid history student, Basso decided to write the biography of Confederate General P.G.T. Beauregard.168 With great excitement, as was customary every time he envisioned a new project, he told Matthew Josephson:

But if I could afford it, I would do a biography of our own General P.G.T. Beauregard. You think that strange? It’s really not because old P.G.T. was really an important person --especially because of what happened to him after the war. He’s very obscure now, and completely overshadowed by Lee, Jackson and others, but he has three major victories to his credit and the perfectly masterful retreat from Corinth. His fame during the war was very great. You know I suppose, the story of the Creole gentleman who, hearing somebody mention Lee said: “Lee, Lee ...
Yes, now I remember. I have heard Beauregard speak highly of him.”169

When the writing of the Beauregard biography took on a more definitive shape, Basso approached Maxwell Perkins and asked him if Scribner’s were in a “gambling mood,” for he


was "sure trying to get his head above the water." The biography would not be fictitious but "fully documented and definitive," as well as be the first full assessment of Beauregard's life, as no other biographies of the General were in existence. With his characteristic editorial reserve, Perkins replied that the project seemed original but that "the odds" were "always against a life of a figure who is not among the most compelling in the popular mind." At the same time, he clearly sensed that the young writer had to be encouraged and sent him the $100 which Basso needed to make a research trip to Charleston. Enclosing the check, Perkins insisted that the money was not meant as a pledge or advance on a possible book. Somewhat mystified by this spontaneous generosity, Basso kept in touch, informing Perkins as to how the book was progressing.

In the end the biography was accepted for publication albeit on very stiff terms. Due to the Depression, Perkins could only consent to a limited number of copies. The news of the book's publication reached Toto first, and, in her excitement and pride, she scribbled down her delight on the back of Perkins's letter:

My chest expansion has increased threefold. I'm just that proud!
Bless you baby-- it was coming to you. When I found this letter I sat a full 2 minutes on the steps before I could open it because I thought it must be a refusal, or it would have come by wire. So when I finally did, I let out an enormous whoop. A passing negro said, "One white lady sho is happy!" Now you can't say any more that

170 Hamilton Basso, letter to Maxwell Perkins, 4 November 1931, Scribner's Archives, Princeton.


172 Apparently, no more than 5000 copies were printed.
you want to do things for me-- cause you have.173

Basso himself remained fairly composed under the long-awaited news. When he sent off the final manuscript, he told Perkins that he did not care so much for success as for his integrity as an author: “I didn’t write this book to make a pile of dough. Unlike Uncle Arnold Bennett, I don’t think my manhood depends on making money by my literary efforts . . . I hope you enjoy meeting my people. I’ve had a good time getting to know them.”174

As is clear from the Beauregard outline and the comments that Basso jotted down in letters to Matthew Josephson, he wanted to write a different Civil War biography. A novelist at heart, Basso was not interested in laying out the different battles, but was fascinated most by Beauregard as an individual. Viewing the biography’s narrative in terms of a novelistic plot which was to be determined by “characters’” actions, he told Perkins he had been primarily absorbed by “personalities and their effect upon incidents-- and the effect of incidents upon personalities.”175

Basso’s objective was to show that Beauregard’s life could be seen as representative of “certain attitudes which, common to a whole slice of society, explain a certain definite change in the Southern character.”176 Depicting Beauregard as a kind of Rebel Everyman, he emphasized that the General’s life after the war, his withdrawal into a world of memories and


175 Hamilton Basso, letter to Maxwell Perkins, 1 February 1932, Scribner’s Archives, Princeton.

his quarrels with Jefferson Davis, were more indicative of the Southern character and history than Beauregard's actual battle heroics. Likewise, Basso saw Beauregard's retreat into the past as typical of the "self-defense mechanism" of some postwar Southerners, who, by retiring to their disintegrating antebellum homes, allowed "the liberated poor whites" to take the helm and give "the South its direction."\textsuperscript{177} Condemning the Agrarians for nourishing the Southern inclination to pore over the past, Basso firmly believed that one of the societal impasses of the South anno 1931 was its "queer worship of the South 'before the war'": "the more truck and nonsense I read about the South," he wrote to Matthew Josephson, "the more I feel . . . I've got to get these things of [sic] my chest."\textsuperscript{178}

Not afraid to demystify the Lost Cause mythology, Basso took up arms repeatedly against Southern traditionalists and myth-makers. Whether he actually succeeded in his revisionism and call for realism remains to be questioned, for he makes the same mistake when he indulges in portraying Beauregard's plantation childhood as stereotypically idyllic. For the moment however, it should be clear that, in line with the \textit{DoubleDealer} rhetoric, Basso at least intended to "throw as clear a light as possible upon this holy Confederacy . . . and . . . do away with the tinted illumination that has always been thrown upon it and the people who gave it its character and direction."\textsuperscript{179} In its objective to critically examine certain Southern ways and wrongs, \textit{Beauregard} can be seen as the beginning of Basso's deracination from Southern soil.

Beauregard's fame, established during the war, dwindled rapidly after his death in 1893. Overshadowed by Lee, Jackson and Grant, the Louisianan General was soon forgotten. It is difficult to determine what Beauregard's true merits, valor and historical stature are. If we are to believe Basso's premise, Beauregard was a misunderstood talent who failed to reach his full...
potential because Jefferson Davis swept all his strategies and advice under the carpet. But Basso was obviously on Beauregard’s side, his objectivity being very much swayed by what he claimed to be his “sympathies with Beauregard” (B, xii).

Civil War historians are in two minds about the Southern General. They all record his vanity, his rhetorical eloquence, his emulation of Napoleon and his bravery in battle. James McPherson argues that though Beauregard’s victories at Sumter and Manassas have been overrated, his sensible retreat from Shiloh is underrated. According to McPherson, Davis, who was extremely disgruntled when he heard of Beauregard’s retreat, replaced the Creole with Braxton Bragg. For the remainder of the war, Beauregard played second fiddle. Another historian, Clement Eaton, has a higher opinion of the General: blaming Davis for the final defeat, Eaton believes that despite Beauregard’s degradation after Shiloh, “toward the end of the war, he emerged once more as a brilliant officer in the defense of Charleston and the skillful repulse of Butler’s and Grant’s efforts to seize Petersburg.”

Robert Kean, a Beauregard contemporary and chief of the Confederate Bureau of War, pays the General the greatest compliment by saying that he preferred the letters of the Creole to those of Robert E. Lee.

For a complete picture of Beauregard, one should consult T. H. Williams’s, P.G.T. Beauregard, Napoleon in Gray (1955). Considering that this book appeared twenty-two years after Basso’s life of Beauregard, Williams’ slant is bound to be more nuanced: not only


182 T.H. Williams, P.G.T. Beauregard, Napoleon in Gray (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1955). Interestingly, Williams also wrote a biography of Huey Long, the Louisianan governor and senator whom Basso castigated in many articles and used as a source of inspiration for his Huey Long novel, Sun in Capncorn (1942).
did Williams have the advantage of better access to a wider range of information, but he could also conveniently draw from Basso’s book. Williams thought Basso’s study “interesting and full of human interest,” yet also far too negligent of “many important phases of Beauregard’s career.” 183 The latter could be attributed to Basso’s handling of the biographical method; whereas Williams aimed to write a well-documented, historically accurate and academically sound work, Basso wanted to capture “the feeling of a time and the spirit of a man” (B., xiii). As Basso explained to Perkins: “I’ve tried to do more than write a biography. I’ve attempted to make something come alive, to dig below the surface, I think, seeing it as fictively as I can” [the italics are mine]. 184 Needless to say, from a historical point of view, Williams’s book is much more objective. While Williams is very careful in his delineation of the General, Basso gets carried away by the personality of his subject.

Basso’s so-called “sympathies” with Beauregard would ultimately lead to such a coloring of the facts that his biography comes close to hagiography. Exaggerating both Davis’s administrative weaknesses and Beauregard’s underdog position, Basso presents Davis as an utterly unsympathetic and testy commander-in-chief. Beauregard, on the other hand, is portrayed as a sad victim of circumstance who was not allowed to carry out his brilliant strategies. In fact, Beauregard is made larger than life as Basso lists his patience, his Confederate patriotism, his handsome and aristocratic demeanor, his popularity with the public, his Creole mysteriousness and his powerful rhetoric. Williams adopts a much more circumspect point of view. For instance, whereas Basso sees Beauregard’s role in the Mexican War as embryonic to his fame and success in the Civil War, Williams points out that it was in the Mexican War already that Beauregard had revealed some of his weaknesses which would prove detrimental in the course of the Civil War: being a stickler for the rules of the book and

183 Williams, 334.

184 Hamilton Basso, letter to Maxwell Perkins, 27 May 1932, Scribner’s Archives, Princeton.
attaching more value to theory than practice, Beauregard would “slap together a plan without complete information of the enemy and without regard to the realities of his own resources and then in a glow of enthusiasm [would] claim that it would accomplish brilliant results.”

Where Basso very rarely questions the validity of Beauregard’s advice to Davis and Lee, Williams claims that Beauregard’s initial offensive strategy was rightly rejected because it was “full of holes.” In addition, Williams condemns Beauregard’s plan of 1864 in which he proposed that ten thousand men of Lee’s army beat Butler at Bermuda Hundred then proceed to Lee’s ranks to attack Grant on the left flank while Lee would take care of Grant’s front ranks. Whereas Basso was convinced that this strategy would have succeeded, Williams writes that it “probably would not have worked. It is doubtful if the Confederates could have accomplished two such concentrations in the time [Beauregard] envisioned. As always he ignored the vital factor of logistics. And as always, he inspired distrust by producing a design immediately after he arrived on the scene and by promising grandiose results to follow its adoption.”

Basso and Williams also disagree on the so-called “Petersburg myth.” According to Basso the following happened. When Beauregard was stationed at Petersburg with as few as 2200 men, he was attacked by general Smith’s Federal army of 40,000 men. Greatly alarmed by the Union might, Beauregard sent several reports to both Bragg and Lee, asking for assistance and warning them that Grant planned to take Richmond via Petersburg. In Basso’s opinion, Lee was too slow to move, ostensibly trivializing Beauregard’s alert. Not until a third messenger arrived at Lee’s tent, did he move to Petersburg and save the town. In Williams’s view, the myth arose when Beauregard, his friends and followers stated in their postwar writings that, all along, Beauregard had had the right instincts about Grant’s moves. In their account (and Basso’s), “Lee ignored repeated and clear warnings from Beauregard and left the latter to battle

185 Williams, 71.

186 Williams, 75.

187 Williams, 215.
at Petersburg against great odds. At the last desperate minute, Beauregard convinced Lee and saved the Confederacy."\(^{188}\) Williams debunks the Petersburg myth, arguing that Beauregard was not crystal-clear in his reports. Since Lee was unable to find out where Grant had positioned himself, he decided to hold back. In addition, Williams explains, Lee just "could not abandon the James River line until he was certain the Federals had left it."\(^{189}\) Basso, on the other hand, criticizes Lee for his apparent lethargy and praises Beauregard for accomplishing "the apparently impossible," that is, saving Richmond with so few men; yet "Mr. Davis," Basso continues, "was displeased."\(^{190}\) Clearly, Basso and Williams differ greatly in their opinions of Beauregard’s, Davis’s and Lee’s decisions in battle and, as might be expected, they also contradict one another in their rendering of these men’s portraits.

Depicting Davis as a proud politician who approved of slavery and defended the legitimacy of Manifest Destiny, Basso believed that the Confederate commander wanted to be a "militarist rather than a president."\(^{191}\) Passionate and patriotic, Davis was blinded by vanity and egotism, which, as the Civil War unfolded, were exacerbated by narrow-mindedness and intolerance. Siding with his Creole, Basso portrays Davis as an obdurate autocrat, a "dog barking" and, eventually, a weakling, who, at the end of the war cowardly takes flight in his wife’s clothes.\(^{192}\) Throughout the book Davis’ stature is minimized and ridiculed. Beauregard, on the other hand, emerges as the tragic hero.

Interestingly, where Basso demystified Davis, Allen Tate, who, as an Agrarian, was in many ways diametrically opposed to Basso, upgraded the Confederate leader in his biography,
Jefferson Davis: His Rise and Fall, A Biographical Narrative (1929). Although Tate was well aware of Davis's mistakes and blunders, he did not delineate him as a tyrannical commander but, like Basso's Beauregard, as a tragic victim of circumstance.\footnote{193} Moreover, although Tate found the Southern mythologization of Davis's importance inappropriate, he nonetheless showed a weakness for the martyr of the Lost Cause. In his poem "Elegy," Tate portrays Davis as another Orestes, who, in death, may regain the sympathy of the Southern public.\footnote{194}

Depending on what angle one takes and from whose point of view one is arguing, there is something to be said for both Davis and Beauregard. Williams, who is neither a poet, like Tate, nor a novelist, like Basso, does just that. Although Williams acknowledges that Davis was difficult and responsible for a number of critical errors, he also argues that the Confederate President was a truly intelligent man who found himself in a precarious position. Unlike Basso, Williams does not harp on Davis's mistakes but criticizes Beauregard's misbehavior instead: "Captain Beauregard displayed a testy impatience with people, especially politicians who criticized his work or tried to interfere with him."\footnote{195} Given the fact that Davis did not like to be corrected by his inferiors either, the two men "were born to clash."\footnote{196} Basso ultimately agrees with Williams, describing Beauregard's and Davis's conflict as a "clash of egos" in which both parties were to blame for their vanity, pride and desire to be the center of attention.\footnote{197}

\footnote{193} Allen Tate, Jefferson Davis: His Rise and Fall, A Biographical Narrative (New York: Minton, 1929).


\footnote{195} Williams, 41.

\footnote{196} Williams, 67.

\footnote{197} Basso ultimately reduced the Beauregard-Davis strife to a conflict of civilization and race: because of Davis's Protestant and Anglo-Saxon background he could not, Basso claims, "understand" the Creole, whose background was Latin and Catholic. (Beauregard 126; 160-161).
Finally, the two biographies are distinctly dissimilar in style. This is already obvious when one compares the books' opening pages. Where Williams is a diligent historian who relies on documentation and a careful marshalling of the facts, Basso uses footnotes very rarely. Also, like any other Civil War historian, Williams includes maps of the different battles. Basso did not want any maps: "let's not have any maps. I don't like them and they are not necessary in this book anyway." Likewise, when Williams goes into the different moves of a battle like Manassas, Basso ignores the battle altogether and only has eye for the various spectators who, with wagons, women, children and picnic baskets sit down to witness the event.

The fictional and slightly anecdotal flavor of Basso's *Beauregard* clearly accounts for the difference in style. Besides treating his subject like a character out of a novel, Basso also dramatized his narrative and built in suspense. In addition, though biographies are commonly written in the past tense, Basso frequently shifts from the past to the present tense and, to liven things up even more, interjects his narrative with short choppy sentences. At the same time, to endow the account with some degree of historical authenticity, he pastes in newspaper reports of the time. As defeat draws near, his inclination towards dramatization swells: viewing Sherman's army as a bunch of "vandals," he describes their march to the sea as the march of the bigoted mob in his unpublished novelette, "The Ladies of the Land." Also, the defeat of the South gives rise to sentimentality. Empathizing with Southern poor whites, Basso laments their many losses in a war that was not necessarily fought in their interest. Beauregard's journey home is not without bathos either: the trip to New Orleans triggers feelings of great emptiness, sadness and regret. Upon his arrival home, a crowd gathers around his horse and the tailor, who has to take the General's measurements for a civilian suit, weeps. Beauregard's

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198 Hamilton Basso, letter to Maxwell Perkins, 4 November 1932, Scribner's Archives, Princeton.

demise is equally maudlin. Retiring to his old plantation home, he lapses into narcissistic withdrawal, the memory of battle being the sorry remainder and reality of his old age:

Perhaps, as he went upstairs, the echo of Stuart’s song went softly into his darkened room, perhaps the dark was poignant with the ghosts of men in weathered gray. And perhaps, as he fell asleep, there was the past again, and the days of golden glory, when his name was a banner in the Southern sun. Or perhaps there was nothing ... only quiet and the ceasing of his heart and the peaceful coming of the end.200

Not a biography in the strictest sense of the word, 

Beauregard

is really a “docu-drama” and has a great deal in common with Allen Tate’s biography of Jefferson Davis: that is, both Basso and Tate exchanged the documentary mode for a livelier and pervasively fictional narrative in which the creation of character, atmosphere, plot and suspense outweigh historical fact. Although Basso may have thought that he had written a historical biography, 

Beauregard

is closer to fiction than fact. Clarence Ikerd goes even so far as to suggest that the book could be read as another Basso novel in which the Beauregard figure can be seen as a stereotypical Basso protagonist: “[Basso] presented Beauregard as the kind of man around which his novels are constructed, a man who feels a profound dissatisfaction with his situation or with society and is determined to establish his own worth rather than surrender to a system of values he despises.”201

However mediocre the Beauregard biography is from a late twentieth-century or a historical point of view, the book was an acclaimed success in 1933. It was praised in some twenty

200 Beauregard, 311.

reviews and made the second page of the *New York Times Book Review*. As such, the book meant a breakthrough for Basso’s career. Maxwell Perkins acknowledged this in a letter that was written upon the biography’s release: “if Beauregard has done nothing else for you it has certainly given you a degree of prestige. It is too bad, because in decent times it would have surely made you considerable money.”

It was too bad indeed, because on March 4th, 1933, the day that the book came out, all the book shops were open and the banks were closed: to avert a banking crisis, President Roosevelt had called for a bank holiday. Although the book did not bring in the “pile of dough” that Basso was not counting on anyway, *Beauregard*’s success was encouraging. After momentarily considering the composition of a Tolstoy biography in an attempt to “confound all the garret revolutionary boys,” Basso returned to the novel with renewed confidence.

In the meantime, in order to keep abreast of the bills, Basso began writing for the *New Republic*, first as a part-time correspondent and eventually as a member of its editorial staff.

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202 Maxwell Perkins, letter to Hamilton Basso, 24 March 1933, Scribner’s Archives, Princeton.

203 Hamilton Basso, letter to Maxwell Perkins, 7 July 1934, Scribner’s Archives, Princeton.

204 Writing for the *New Republic* from 1927 to 1942, Basso’s total output amounts to more than thirty book reviews, twenty articles on political and cultural affairs, ten profiles of political figures, three letters to the editor, some literary essays and one short story.
iii. Literary Criticism: Defining the South

In the early thirties Basso was most articulate about the South, his ideas having been animated by both the *Double Dealer* and his writing of *Beauregard*. He contemplated writing a book about the South to which he wanted to give the ominous title, "Death over Dixie." Countering the philosophy of the backward looking Agrarians, Basso's book was to propound the idea that the essential reality of the South did not lie in some Edenic or mythopoeic past but in a commonplace and declining present. Seeking to demystify antebellum society and expose its anti-democratic, feudalistic and xenophobic idiosyncrasies, he was primarily interested in what happened to the South after the Civil War. Convinced that the tremendous uprooting of Dixie's social stratification, from planter to poor white and slave, had a traumatic effect on the South's collective psyche, Basso argued that the region's problem was not so much its (economic) decline as its refusal to accept the new social order. It is "high time," he wrote, "to say goodbye to Dixie. The South may remain, latitude and longitude fixed, but the South is no longer Dixie... The South along with the rest of the country, moves toward a changed order. It is part of the United States now... Death hangs over Dixie." However, Basso also realized that, clutching to its "dreams of gone glory," the South did not want to be confronted with its "negro... agricultural and industrial problem," but found "release from actuality and lived again its dream of power in contemplation of things past." Impressed though he was with Basso's theory, Maxwell Perkins thought "Death Over Dixie" would be "too depressing.

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206 Basso's theory of the collapse of the hierarchical pyramid of the antebellum South is further developed in his piece on Huey Long, entitled "Huey P. Long: Kingfish, The American As Demagogue" (*Mainstream* [New York: Reynal, 1943] 179-198). Huey Long, coming from a long line of Southern Populist leaders, represented the New South, that is the South of the "liberated poor white."

207 "Death Over Dixie," n. pag.
... no one in the South would be willing to read it [for] Southerners would not want to contemplate their detention [sic].”

Together with novelists like Ellen Glasgow and T.S. Stnbling, Basso was one of the few Southern novelists who really “concerned himself with the impact of social change at various levels.” Incidentally, the socio-critical mode was virtually non-existent in Southern literature: while Louis Rubin has argued that the societal slump of the Depression did not greatly inspire or affect the work of Southern writers, John Crowe Ransom considered social realism an “imported genre” in Southern literature and condemned it as “militant liberal fiction.” Similarly, Robert Penn Warren denounced the Southern realism of a writer like T.S. Stnbling as a snobbish outlet for hick-baiting, pseudo-humanitarianism and “disordered liberalism.” Basso’s Southern realism, which the Agrarians and others may have dismissed as unnecessary Southern pessimism, is an important criterion when placing him in the Southern Renascence. In contrast to the Agrarians whose cultural ideal he castigated as “evasive idealism,” “elitism” and “isolationism,” Basso reiterated the Double Dealer claim that Southern writers should not use the hazy lens “of the plantation and aristocratic tradition,” but

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208 Maxwell Perkins, letter to Hamilton Basso, 11 January 1934, Scribner’s Archives, Princeton.


realize that the new South was “anything but picturesque” and had to be (re)presented accordingly.212

The key essay that features Basso’s love of Southern realism and sets the standard for his literary criticism in the New Republic is entitled “Letters in the South.”213 In this essay, he examines the roots of the Southern tradition, i.e. the plantation legend, and defines Southern literature as either a product of, or a departure from this tradition. This leads to a division into two groups, involving those writers who aim to preserve the tradition and those who try to demythologize it. Thus whereas the “traditionalists” or “regionalists” (the Agrarians being obviously at the core of this group) adopt the antebellum past as their fictional and poetic reality, the “realists” reject the Southern past in favor of a less exalted and more authentic postbellum present. Speaking with great respect of George Washington Cable and Ellen Glasgow, whom he names the “spiritual godfather” and “godmother” of Southern realism, Basso supported the realists, a group which includes writers such as Erskine Caldwell, William Faulkner and Thomas Wolfe. Conversely, Basso did not see any merit in the Agrarian aesthetics and found Cleanth Brooks’s argument that “only the traditionalists have any real and vital connection to the past” preposterous.214

Brooks replied to Basso’s article many years later, writing that “Mr. Hamilton Basso attempted to separate the sheep from the goats, that is the progressive writers from the traditionalists.” Teasing that “a good deal of squeezing and stretching was necessary to make the division work,” Brooks nonetheless avowed that Basso’s observation formed a central dilemma for Southern writers, that is “the Southern writer must either be white-washing the


214 “Letters in the South,” 163.
magnolia blossom or urging us to particular reform.” At the same time, he mistook Basso’s insistence on realism for a rhetoric of reform and bad publicity for the South. Or maybe he merely tried to get back at Basso for stating that the Agrarian concept was “historically incorrect,” a note on which Basso had concluded his article:

> The Southern past bears the same relation to Southern culture as does the United States Constitution to national affairs. It can be a dead weight or a living instrument. And it is a living instrument when, instead of retreating into it as if into some half-lit acropolis away from all sight and sound to the outside world, we use it to understand the South today—which is, I believe, the most important part of our inheritance.  

Irked by writers’ falsification of the antebellum past, Basso did not mean to ignore the past. On the contrary, he argued that the realists also utilized the historical imagination yet viewed the present as an evolutionary, and at times degenerated, product of the past. The Agrarians, on the other hand, seemed intent on exchanging the imperfect present with a sacrosanct past: worshiping the agrarian plantation culture of the Old South for its genteel values and paternalistic mores, they envisioned a kind of aesthetic Utopia with which they would keep the ills of industrialized society at bay. Basso considered the idea(l)s of the Vanderbilt group regressive and repulsive and mocked them as “poetic economists” who tried “to lock the barn...

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216 “Letters in the South,” 163.
door after the horse had been stolen."^{217} In a letter to Perkins, Basso sighed: “me and the agrarians stand at opposite poles and perhaps it’s me that’s nuts.”^{218}

More anti-Agrarianism(s) can be found in Basso’s *New Republic* review of W. T. Couch’s *Culture in the South* (1934), a book which he praised as an appropriate response to the Agrarian manifesto, *I’ll Take My Stand* (1930). Unlike the cultural escapism of the Agrarians, Couch did not capitalize on the ante-bellum past but zoomed in on the contemporary situation and posed the question why the South had lagged behind so much. Whereas the conventional Southern rebuttal blamed the time lag on the war and Reconstruction, Basso and Couch attributed it to Southerners’ conservatism and reluctance to overhaul the agrarian economy.\(^{219}\)

Interestingly, in a letter to Matthew Josephson of 1936, Basso speaks of his contact with Couch and his intention of assisting him with another book which was to “(1) show that the Agrarians, historically, have no thesis for their position; (2) present the so called ‘Southern Tradition’ in the fulness of its complexity; (3) to go further and show what kinds of life can be and ought to be lived in the South.”\(^{220}\) Basso would contribute an article which was to tie up “Southern letters with Southern politics.” In the piece he hoped to show that “the same social economic forces that produced writers like Faulkner, Caldwell, Wolfe etc., produced politicians like Gene Talmadge and Huey Long.” It is “high time,” he believed, “to put an end to all this silly Agrarian pretentiousness. Those guys ought to stick to poetry and novels about the Civil War.” Unfortunately, this article was never written, which does not mean that Basso

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\(^{217}\) Hamilton Basso, letters to Maxwell Perkins, 6 August 1931 and 25 December 1933, Scribner’s Archives, Princeton.

\(^{218}\) Hamilton Basso, letter to Maxwell Perkins, 7 May 1936, Scribner’s Archives, Princeton.


\(^{220}\) Hamilton Basso, letter to Matthew Josephson, 3 September 1936, Matthew Josephson Collection, Beinecke Library, New Haven.
had abandoned his crusade against Southern conservatism. Seven years after these comments were made, Basso criticized Thomas Jefferson for his agrarianism, assuming that Jefferson was well aware of the beginnings of the Industrial Revolution, Basso regretted that the "sage of Monticello" had ignored its progress. He described Jefferson's desire to maintain the agrarian society as undemocratic and myopic. Unlike Jefferson and the Agrarians, but like a disciple of the New South, the group of Chapel Hill sociologists and historians to which Basso did not belong but certainly identified with, he saw industrialization as one of the keys to the South's recuperation.

Basso's fervent anti-Agrarianism and sensitivity to Southern issues and problems motivated his *New Republic* criticism of Southern literature and the making of his own novels. To give an example, time and again (and far ahead of his time), he was resentful of authors' stereotypification of blacks and the black experience. When in his book *John Henry* (1931), Roark Bradford depicted the Negro as a bawdy, humorous and picturesque figure, Basso reminded Bradford that the Negro's plight involved poverty, hardship, illiteracy and humiliation. To Basso's mind, the black condition could not be trivialized or serve as entertainment and he regretted that Bradford, whom he knew from New Orleans, had simplified the black situation so much.

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221 In a letter to Matthew Josephson of 3 October 1936, Basso writes: "My plan of counterstating the Agrarians hit a snag ... W.T. Couch of the Chapel Hill Press had ideas for a long professional scholastic job on the history of the South since 1700 - a book that is badly needed but one which would have to be done by professors ... and one which I thought I could not devote the time required." (Matthew Josephson Collection, Beinecke Library, New Haven).


In a review of Robert Rylee’s *Dark River* (1935), Basso was again disappointed by the depiction of blacks and, writing that the African-American was too often stigmatized by the plantation inheritance of white superiority, he called for a realistic treatment of the black character, that is, “as a human being in an unfortunate and frequently intolerable environment.” 224 Even the story of African-American Angelo Herndon, who was sentenced to twenty years in prison on the basis of a statute that dated back to slavery, could not persuade Basso. The book merely triggered his hopes for a “deeply felt and deeply experienced book about our American life as it looks through a Negro’s eyes.” 225

Basso’s genuine concern for a truthful depiction of the black experience and his despair at racism in the South finally contributed to his resolve to leave the South permanently in the forties. His mother’s attempts to persuade him to come back to New Orleans were fruitless: like Anson Page, the hero of *The View From Pompey’s Head* (1954), Basso could not move back if only it were for hearing that word “nigger” again: “Here it was again, that loathsome word. Here conjured up out of nowhere by an ignorant countryman, were all the things that had caused him to leave Pompey’s Head.” 226

Although it is impossible to ascertain to what extent Basso was aware of the intensity of the Southern Renascence, he was a good spokesman for the advancement and recognition of the Southern novel. In a book review entitled “Why the Southern Novel,” Basso tells his readers that the “South is perhaps the most interesting section of the United States today” and the very “stuff” novels are made of. 227 Naturally, he is selling his own trade here and, though he does not mention anywhere that he is a novelist himself, his diplomacy suggests that he did not want


to be too harsh in his judgment of writers like himself. Knowing the damage that critics could do, he was carefully critical and generous with praise. At times, his reviews are ambivalent as they reveal a conflict of interest between Basso, the critic, and Basso, the writer. Moreover, since he associated the majority of literary critics with those “little intellectual people,” Basso could not take the profession of the literary critic seriously:

... even a good critic... is apt to depend too much on the usual critical formulas, the usual phrases and clichés, simply to get the damned day's work over with... An examination of literary criticism over the past 100 years would show, I think, that the second-rate people --the Harvey Allens and the Margaret Mitchells-- have always been tapped for Skull and Bones: while the first rate ones go along as “non-frat” men until, lo and behold, they are made honorary members --generally about the age of 60. Every writer, every artist, has to be his own critic.228

Though Basso did not refrain from expressing his aversion if a book failed to meet his standards, he was merciful and, being the Southern gentleman that he was, polite. In an editorial letter to a Mr. Whipple, who believed that criticism was meant to be tough and truthful, Basso disclosed his critical creed: “I cannot agree... that we are privileged to look down our noses... and make patronizing phrases at [writers’] expense. All of which, I understand, can be waved away by saying that I place too much importance on politeness--even in criticism.”229


Inevitably, Basso was most polite when defending his literary friends, the most noteworthy of whom were Sherwood Anderson and Thomas Wolfe. Having been one of Anderson’s pupils in New Orleans, he found it difficult to criticize his former mentor, who was steadily on his way out at the time that Basso was reviewing books for the New Republic. Basso, however, remained loyal to his old friend and wrote a flattering review of Anderson’s *Puzzled America* (1935). In spite of Gertrude Stein’s praise of the book as “one of the best books that an American has done,” many critics scorned, derided and parodied Anderson’s art. Basso, on the other hand, defended him and disapproved of the critics who had insinuated that it was not America that was puzzled but Anderson himself. Instead, Basso praised the book for its psychological realism and the writer’s endeavor to see America through the eyes of commoners. A year later Anderson published a novel, *Kit Brandon* (1936). Again Basso was asked to review the book but rather than writing a review of the novel, which, in his opinion, contained some of Anderson’s best and worst writing, he wrote an appraisal of Anderson’s significance as an American author. Calling him one of “our greatest geniuses of the short story,” Basso condemned the critics who failed to recognize that writers like Erskine Caldwell, William Faulkner, Ernest Hemingway and Thomas Wolfe were greatly indebted to the *Winesburg* author. Concluding that Anderson was still to be reckoned with, he suggested that “it might be wise for us to remember that he was one of the headmasters at school where so many of us learned our ABC’s.” Basso’s politeness, his sense of loyalty and true admiration for writers he considered superior are illustrated best in the professional and personal relationship he had with Thomas Wolfe.

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I manage to rock along, hitting my daily single, sometimes scampering like hell and stretching it into a two-base knock. It’s just that this particular game is going to last for at least 62 innings and I know that a few bobbles, letting the ball roll between my legs or giving a base on balls, will end me up on the short end. Such is literature, eh me boy? What a whore the old girl is-- and what a golden whore! She’ll sleep with anybody from Shakespeare down on to the newest boy wonder and knowing that, fully aware of what a bitch she is, we still are willing to tear out our hearts, even our guts, and lay them at her feet. Only, as you say, to have her kick us in the pants. But what’s the out? There is no out, that’s the answer. You’ve got to live your own life and you can’t fake (like the New York esthetes) and pretend something you aren’t...

The first meeting between Hamilton Basso and Thomas Wolfe in the spring of 1935 was accidental and took place in Scribner’s offices in New York City. As Southern novelists the two had quite a few things in common; one only has to think of their close relationship with Scribner’s celebrated editor, Maxwell Perkins, their love-hate relationship with the South, their passion for Tolstoy, their individualism and their ambition to, one day, write the Great American Novel.

On 11 June 1935, Basso initiated their correspondence, asking whether Wolfe would submit a short story to the New Republic. Wolfe, palpably flattered, responded positively and promised the impossible, namely that he would stick to the proposed word-limit. During the

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rest of 1935 Basso and Wolfe corresponded regularly: Basso asked where Wolfe hung out and Wolfe sent Basso postcards from Europe with news of his growing popularity in Germany. In a warm letter of 12 October 1935, Basso, for the first time, writes of his admiration for Wolfe. Praising *Look Homeward, Angel* (1929) for its sense of space and its heroic scale ("you are carving heroic friezes on the face of the Rocky Mountains"), he contrasted it to his own concern for small-town detail.\(^{234}\)

The same letter mentions F. Scott Fitzgerald, then staying in Asheville close to the hospitalized Zelda. Since both Fitzgerald and Wolfe resided in and around Asheville in the summers of 1936 and 1937, Perkins thought that Basso would be an excellent go-between to keep an eye on two of Scribner’s more unruly authors. Referring to the shared Scribner’s ties, Basso told Perkins repeatedly that if he had “any sense of responsibility to the firm,” he would come down to have “a round-up of Scribner people.”\(^{235}\) Of the three writers, Fitzgerald was in worst shape, having reached the stage of *The Crack-Up*. On various occasions, Perkins asked both Basso and (indirectly) Wolfe’s relatives, to visit the depressed Fitzgerald. Thus Wolfe told his brother Fred in a P.S.: “There is a poor, desperate, unhappy man staying at the Grove Park Inn... Perkins thought if Mama went to see him and talked to him, it might do some good-- to tell him that at the age of forty he is at his prime and has nothing to worry about if he will just take hold again and begin to work. His name, I forget to say, is F. Scott Fitzgerald...”\(^{236}\) Basso visited Fitzgerald too but as the latter seemed “hell-bent on professional suicide,” he found it difficult to pull him out of his low spirits, which sank even lower after Hemingway had vilified him in *Esquire*. However much Basso pitied Fitzgerald, he

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\(^{234}\) Hamilton Basso, letter to Thomas Wolfe, 12 October 1935, Wisdom Collection, Houghton Library, Cambridge.

\(^{235}\) Hamilton Basso, letters to Maxwell Perkins, 17 May 1937 and 3 August 1935, Hamilton Basso Collection, Beinecke Library, New Haven.

could not help but draw the conclusion that Fitzgerald behaved like a pampered child. Wolfe, on the other hand, who had, in Basso’s opinion, valid reasons for feeling distressed—over the lawsuits and the worsening relationship with in loco parentis Perkins—exhibited less of a "sophomoric attitude."

For a full picture of Basso’s sympathies for Wolfe we should not only draw from his correspondence but also include his New Republic articles and reviews. Until Wolfe’s death, Basso’s formal criticism of Wolfe’s work was rather two-faced: although he believed that Wolfe had managed to transcend his own regional background by rebelling against “the isolation in which [Wolfe] was vacuumized as a boy,” he felt that Wolfe had remained a provincial at heart.237 Not afraid to acknowledge he was a “hick” himself compared to his more cosmopolitan friends Malcolm Cowley and F. Scott Fitzgerald, Basso identified with Wolfe’s parochialism, in fact, he joked once that Wolfe did not put more “thinking” into his books because he was affected by a “real humbleness, along with the provincial’s feeling . . . that he wasn’t in the same class with the real bright boys.” Basso further speculated that Wolfe was never attracted to the ideas of the Agrarians because he thought he did not “have enough sense.”238 Interestingly, Wolfe confirmed these feelings in a letter to Dixton Wecter: “I spent a very pleasant evening with the Warrens, the Tates, the Brooks and Mr. Ransom. In fact, I did almost everything except become a Southern Agrarian. I suppose I don’t understand enough about that.”239


238 Hamilton Basso, letter to Matthew Josephson, 3 July 1937, Matthew Josephson Collection, Beinecke Library, New Haven. Basso writes that this remark was largely meant as a joke, yet added that it was “revealing . . . I’ve heard him bellow in torment because he wasn’t as ‘smart’ as some of the critics.”

Given Wolfe's parochialism, Basso was particularly impressed that he had nonetheless been able to break out of Asheville. Walking through Asheville himself, Basso had often wondered "how such a walled-in place produced a writer so deeply conscious, so very disturbed by the vastness of America." It was because of Wolfe's ability to surpass regionalism and "think big," Basso believed, that his books had a widespread appeal. Seeing Eugene Gant as a kind of Everyman whose autobiography carried "something of the autobiographies of us all," he argued that Wolfe's power lay in the "re-creation of a place and characters understandable, in the light of their own knowledge and experience, to readers all over the Western world." In the same article, which was especially intended as an invocation of the Muses of Critical Appreciation, Basso associated Wolfe's panoramic view with his height. In a book review he had already propounded this theory, writing that Wolfe's "mountain-top of six foot six" was not only "strange and lonely," its view was unique and knew no equal in the landscape of American letters. In a letter to Wolfe's sister, Mabel Wolfe Wheaton, Basso would use a similar image in relation to what he called Wolfe's "windyness":

Sure he was windy sometimes. But he was windy because he had to huff and puff . . . to blow that house down . . . He saw the essential meaning of life as being contained in a lot of big, thick walls--hidden from view. He wanted to open up the view . . . So he had to push down the walls. Hence windyness sometimes--huffing, puffing, blowing as hard as he could: anything to get these walls down. And when he succeeded--well, he opened up views that had never been opened before. That is his greatness.

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Though Wolfe’s vantage point was exceptional, Basso thought his friend’s grandiloquence both a strength and weakness. Like many of his fellow critics, Basso regretted Wolfe’s lack of discipline, and comparing the novel with a barrel in which the novelist throws his hay, Basso believed that Wolfe’s barrel was lost, causing the hay to sprawl in all directions: “If only it were possible to make [Wolfe] realize the distinction between looseness of form, pliability, etc., and literary anarchy.” In a similar vein, Basso wrote that a novelist can never convey the full 100%: “The reader, if you are 90% successful, can supply the other 10% himself. I think perhaps that is Thomas Wolfe’s only serious defect as a writer. Over-zealousness, trying to get it down 100%.” If Wolfe could only curb his Whitmanesque urges, he had every potential to become a great writer.

Basso’s reviews were generally complimentary and, considering that they appeared at a time that Wolfe received a negative press, the latter was very grateful for Basso’s critical support. To thank Basso for “Thomas Wolfe: A Portrait,” Wolfe wrote the following:

The whole thing [the portrait] has warmed me up more than I can possibly tell you, and if I was fired with the ambition to “learn ‘em” before, that piece of yours has set off a bonfire . . . I do think that I learned something valuable from the piece, in addition to the happiness it gave me. I think you hit the nail on the head with what you said about the railroad trains in my books and how the feeling of space is probably derived from the childhood of a man who grew up in the confinement


244 Hamilton Basso, letter to Maxwell Perkins, 27 May 1936, Scribner’s Archives, Princeton.
of a mountain town... my whole childhood was haunted by
the ringing of train bells at night, the sound of whistles fading
away somewhere along the French Broad River, the sound of
a train going away down the river towards Knoxville and the West.245

In the same year that this was written, Basso published his fourth novel, *Courthouse Square*; in it, departing trains, riding and whistling through the night, are emblematic of the hero’s sentiments. Returning to his Southern hometown, David Barondess feels imprisoned and cut off from the rest of the world, the town having turned into a cultural swamp. Thus the train in the distance comes to symbolize escape and the only contact with the external world. Clearly, Wolfe’s fiction served as an intertext here.

The year 1936 saw the friendship of the two men deepen. “Thomas Wolfe: A Portrait” may have certainly contributed to this effect, Wolfe being acutely sensitive to both criticism and praise. While Basso continued to live in the North Carolina mountains, Wolfe returned to Germany. The letters of this period deal with literature, writing and dissatisfaction with the critics whom Wolfe described as “scavengers,” “filth purveyors” and worse than “Adolf Hitler’s Nazi thugs.”246 Basso vented his disgruntlement with the critics too, and argued that good criticism, at its best practised by writers themselves, is simply a matter of the right “gut-feeling... it finally boils down to something like this: How does your belly feel about it?” To prove his point, Basso added that Wolfe’s “The Web of Earth” gave him a “good belly-feeling.”247


Meanwhile, Wolfe's relationship with Perkins had begun to deteriorate. Pressured by the publication of his new novel and critics' innuendos that he could not compose a single book without Perkins's aid, Wolfe decided to leave Scribner's. To convey his troubled feelings, Wolfe wrote a 28-page letter, which is a moving and insightful account of the intimate relationship he and Perkins had had. In the letter he broke off all relations with editor and publisher.

Wolfe mailed this long letter in January of 1937 but had already finished it in December of 1936 when Basso visited him in his New York apartment. Clearly upset with the Perkins entanglement, he could not be appeased by Basso, who thought that Wolfe should talk things over with Perkins. Wolfe could not be dissuaded and by the end of the afternoon, when Basso was ready to leave, Wolfe "went to one of those packing boxes of his, pulled out a sheaf of second sheets, got a pencil and wrote 'To my friend, Hamilton Basso: Dear Ham-- I've gone upon the record here --this is not perhaps the whole story-- but in a general way it says some things I felt had to be said. I am leaving this copy of the letter in your care, and, if anything should happen to me, I leave it to your discretion what should be done with it.'" With this gesture, Thomas Wolfe gave the copy of the now famous letter to Hamilton Basso, who, with Perkins, was the only one to receive the document.248

Thirteen years after this incident, Elizabeth Nowell, Wolfe's short story editor and agent, was collecting Wolfe's letters and found references to the 28-page letter yet could not trace the actual document. Learning, however, that Wolfe would sometimes hand out extra copies of important manuscripts and papers to close friends, she wrote Basso and inquired whether he

248 In a letter to Mabel Wolfe Wheaton, Basso inflated this incident: "Tom had this dark suspicion he was going to die and, about a year or so before it happened, he wrote a postscript on the bottom of a long letter which said, in effect, -no, in those exact words-- if anything happens to be, please see that the record is straight." (Hamilton Basso, letter to Mabel Wolfe Wheaton, 27 September 1940, North Carolina Collection, Wilson Library, Chapel Hill).
was perhaps the “mysterious friend” that Wolfe entrusted his papers to. Basso answered that he indeed possessed the letter.\(^{249}\) His usual self-effacement claimed no credit for the fact that he might have been, and most likely was, Wolfe’s “mysterious friend.” With a fine sense for discretion Basso was insulted when Nowell subsequently suggested that he should publish the letter before she did: “What’s got into you anyway? Did you think for one moment that I would want to hoard Tom’s bones in order to grind them into literary flour for myself; or that I would be inclined to race you or anybody to the public prints; or that, if the letter Tom gave me turned out to be the missing, mysterious document, it wouldn’t be yours for the asking? At ease, lady, at ease!” Upset with Nowell’s bad taste, Basso was in no mood to rush and publish the letter that Wolfe had slipped into his hands so confidentially. Called upon by Nowell, however, he felt he ought to reveal the letter, only, “to see that Tom gets a proper, final hearing.”\(^{250}\) In reply, Nowell apologized for her brash suggestion and tried to allay Basso’s irritation with one of her fond memories of him: “You are a lovely guy, and I always think of you the way you were when you came up to Tom’s apartment one night and he was sitting in that big Tudor chair and you felt so good you spun around and swiped your arm above his head. So I hope you feel like that all the time, and my false delicacy or whatever got me all snarled up, didn’t make you stop for even a few minutes.”\(^{251}\) Eventually, Nowell did not have to resort to Basso’s copy of the letter as she found it among Perkins’s papers after all. Still, she asked Basso to check the editorial notes whose accuracy he was very concerned about: “I know I am

\(^{249}\) Hamilton Basso, letter to Elizabeth Nowell, 12 April 1949, Hamilton Basso Collection, Beinecke Library, New Haven.

\(^{250}\) Hamilton Basso, letter to Elizabeth Nowell, 27 April 1949, Hamilton Basso Collection, Beinecke Library, New Haven.

\(^{251}\) Elizabeth Nowell, letter to Hamilton Basso, 28 April 1949, Hamilton Basso Collection, Beinecke Library, New Haven.
seeming overpunctilious, but there is something so awfully personal about letters, involving, as in this case, so many people, that I think they ought to be handled with care.”

Let us return to the year 1937, which is the year Wolfe decided to go home again after years of exile in the North and abroad. For the summer, he had rented a cabin at Oteen, North Carolina, in the vicinity of the Bassos’ cabin at Brevard. Perkins had forewarned Basso that Wolfe was on his way down. His remark that Wolfe had said that “he was going back to his native mountains to die” sounds strangely foreboding in the light of his death one summer later. To welcome Wolfe at Oteen, Basso wrote him a letter whose envelope held the legendary “Postmaster: Will you be good enough to hold this until the arrival of the addressee whose presence will be made known, probably, by an earthquake or some other violent upheaval.” The letter itself is written in a different vein, closing off with “well i gess i better sine off now but if you dont rite me about getting together i am er gon to be rite sore, don’t git any gum in youre hair. with kindest regards from your ole fren and himble and obedint servant you big bussird you.” The intimate and playful tone is indicative of their friendship and the letter itself would be the start of more times spent together.

On May 1st, 1937, Basso confirmed Wolfe’s arrival with the message to Perkins that all Wolfe did was sleep. Two weeks later Wolfe brought his family to pay the Bassos a surprise visit. They had first shown up at the Grove Park Inn to pay their respects to Fitzgerald. Fitzgerald must not have been too pleased with his visitors as he recommended they should go and see the Bassos and sent them away with a bottle of gin. Etoha Basso remembers the get-together vividly: as the Wolfes stayed until well into the evening, she tried to quiet their giant appetites with the meager leftovers of a chocolate cake. Basso recalled the afternoon in a letter to Matthew Josephson:

252 Hamilton Basso, letter to Elizabeth Nowell, 2 May 1949, Hamilton Basso Collection, Beinecke Library, New Haven.

253 Maxwell Perkins, letter to Hamilton Basso, 6 July 1937, Scribner’s Archives, Princeton.
If you think this book [*Of Time and the River*] howls, you ought to be around his family, en masse. He brought them over here to spend an afternoon, a whole crowd of Wolfes and Pentlands, and they were so exactly like they are in the book, it got more and more fantastic until finally I thought maybe I was a character in a book too and I tell you right now it is a very funny feeling to feel like characters in one of Thomas Wolfe’s books.254

That same summer, Basso spent a weekend with Wolfe in Oteen. According to Basso, the weekend was “wild,” not “riotous” but “just wild” in the pattern “in which Tom spent all his days.” Reporting back to Perkins that he still had the “lingering echoes of Tom’s oratory” in his ears, he noted that his friend really enjoyed being a local celebrity.255 Joe P. McLeod, who lived “a little more than a stone’s throw down” from where the Bassos lived, remembered how, in the summer of 1937, Wolfe and Basso passed by one day when he was tending his garden; he looked up and noticed “Tom Wolfe and Hamilton Basso . . . They walked down to the river, stood about a bit, still talking hard as they could. Then they walked back toward Partridge Hill. I didn’t call out. They were busy talking.”256 It was a summer of content for

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254 Hamilton Basso, letter to Matthew Josephson, 3 July 1937, Matthew Josephson Collection, Beinecke Library, New Haven. It was on this occasion also that Tom’s mother got up out of her chair to declare solemnly: “. . . and to think his father had to work for a living!” after Wolfe had casually mentioned that his royalties were piling up in Germany. Etoila S. Basso, interview, 3 January 1991, Tempe.

255 Hamilton Basso, letter to Maxwell Perkins, August 1937, Scribner’s Archives, Princeton.

Basso who, often troubled by loneliness, now felt he had found a friend with whom he could share the mountains, his observations upon the South and his writing.

Wolfe, on the other hand, felt enclosed by the mountains again and decided to move on. Leaving Oteen, he visited the Bassos one more time and entrusted them with the manuscript of "The Party at Jack's." Wolfe wanted to hear Basso's comments upon this story and although Basso acquitted himself faithfully of this task, Wolfe never reacted to what he had to say. Moreover, at this time Wolfe seems to have been overworked, which made him extremely sensitive to criticism of any kind. His subsequent visit to Sherwood Anderson in Marion, Virginia, did not improve his condition. Anderson, who, according to Basso, had "a streak of malice" in him, had apparently said something mean to Wolfe, which, coupled with Basso's comments on "The Party at Jack's," shattered Wolfe's confidence even more. From a letter, never sent to Basso, but handed to him by Mabel Wolfe Wheaton at Wolfe's funeral, Basso remembered the following: "Dear Ham: So you have a chip on your shoulder and want me to knock it off. All right -- I will -- I have just performed a similar operation on the Squire of Marion . . . I thought you were my friend." "In addition," Basso remembered in 1949, "Tom said that he understood I was getting ready to do a job on him -- by which I gathered he meant what is called a literary attack-- and he accused me of not any longer being his friend." Cut loose from Perkins's guardianship, Wolfe felt as if the whole world had turned against him. As a matter of fact, Wolfe's antagonism probably brought Perkins and Basso closer together. As loyal, patient and forgiving friends of Wolfe, they related to each other well and would console one another whenever Wolfe had one of his quirky bouts of suspicion.

Wolfe's last letter to Basso is dated 9 September 1937, and is a mere business-like scribble, asking Basso to send on all his manuscripts to Elizabeth Nowell. Before Basso set sail for Europe, he sent Wolfe a note, confirming that he had sent the manuscripts to Nowell and

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257 Hamilton Basso, letter to Elizabeth Nowell, 27 April 1949, Hamilton Basso Collection, Beinecke Library, New Haven.
hoping he would see Wolfe before he left: “if I don’t -- so long and good luck. I’ll certainly see you when we get back.” Basso would never see Wolfe again. Despite his repeated attempts to renew their friendship, Wolfe sent him a mere postcard, depicting Old Faithful in Yellowstone Park. He called it “Portrait of the author at the 2,000,000 million word point,” and Basso admitted that the spouting geyser “sort of looks like Tom, too.”

In August of 1938, Perkins broke the news of Wolfe’s pneumonia and asked Basso if he could visit the Wolfe family to find out more. This was immediately followed by Perkins’s news of Wolfe’s famous last scribble: “had a very nice letter from Tom, written in a rather feeble hand, he was not supposed to write and had a relapse afterwards and even when I last heard from Mrs. Nowell, was running some fever. But I guess he is out of danger now.” Wolfe died shortly afterwards and when Basso learned of his friend’s demise, he fell silent and went for a long walk in the woods. “I have never known anything to affect [Ham] as this,” Toto Basso wrote to Wolfe’s sister, Mabel.

An interesting detail is that, after Wolfe’s death, Basso may have been sent out by Perkins to get hold of Wolfe’s papers. Relying on Basso’s tact, he may have thought that Basso would be the right person to “negotiate” with the Wolfe family. His efforts must have been in vain,

258 Hamilton Basso, letter to Thomas Wolfe, 19 September 1937, North Carolina Collection, Wilson Library, Chapel Hill.

259 Hamilton Basso, letter to Elizabeth Nowell, 14 April 1949, Hamilton Basso Collection, Beinecke Library, New Haven.

260 Maxwell Perkins, letter to Hamilton Basso, 2 August 1938, Scribner’s Archives, Princeton.


262 Basso would fictionalize this experience in two of his novels, The Greenroom (1949) and The View From Pompey’s Head (1959): in both novels the hero is sent out by his
as Perkins writes “I had written Mrs Wolfe, but I had feared difficulties. Everyone in that family seems to hold on to whatever there is of any kind, whether valuable or otherwise. Tom had that trait himself.”

Both Perkins and Basso were pallbearers at Wolfe’s funeral in Asheville. Basso recalled the funeral in a 1940 letter to Perkins and remembered how he and the Scribner’s editor had had a melancholy conversation “on the portico of an ugly hotel, in the ugly town of Asheville.” At the time, Perkins had asked Basso whether he thought Wolfe had “carried out his plan.” In the letter, Basso answers that question with a “yes,” Wolfe’s “plan” involving a “running, endless autobiography.” However, whether Wolfe had reached the peak of his potential, he hesitated to confirm. For the first time, Basso doubted whether Wolfe would have become a great writer at all: being too much a “prisoner of his own personality,” and writing from what Basso referred to as the “window” of his terrible egotism, Wolfe never managed to escape from the chains of his ego: “he was the earth’s center. He says so, time and time again, in page after page. And thus, for all his sincere ambitions, all his dismal despair at times, he enjoyed. He wanted to know all things, see all things, be all things-- but out of the compelling thirst he had, to slake the throat of his own being.” Mentioning Tolstoy, Shakespeare but also Abraham Lincoln and Thomas Jefferson as examples of men who broke away from their egocentricity, Basso claimed that Wolfe simply could not remove himself from his own center and “immerse himself in other people.”

Basso remained very concerned about Wolfe’s legacy. When John Terry launched his abortive research for a Wolfe biography and approached Basso, who had been recommended

employer to be confronted with a famous but extremely difficult and inaccessible author (and author’s family).

263 Maxwell Perkins, letter to Hamilton Basso, 10 October 1938, Scribner’s Archives, Princeton.

264 Hamilton Basso, letter to Maxwell Perkins, 7 September 1940, Scribner’s Archives, Princeton.
by Perkins as one of the “celebrities” that Wolfe knew, he was not amused: “This cultism gravels me exceedingly and I think it would have made Tom sick.”265 “I have a horror,” Basso also wrote Mabel, “of these little people who are swarming in his wake. All these damnable little essays, pieces, surveys, criticisms by people Tom totally disliked.”266 In rebuttal, he was reluctant to give away any material when Nowell was editing Wolfe’s letters. His reservations seem to have been engendered by his desire to tell the truth about Wolfe, and where necessary, set the record straight. Or, as he told Mabel: “as far as I can prevent it, [Wolfe] won’t disappear into myth, or fable or nonsense.”267 In Basso’s last article, “Thomas Wolfe: A Summing Up,” he came to the aid of his dead friend once more by countering some of the assumptions critics were making. He also refuted Harper’s claims that “Wolfe’s last two books marked a new enterprise” and that “they were finished before he died.” Having seen most of the manuscripts when Wolfe was in Oteen, Basso knew which pieces Wolfe had written a few months before his death and which he had written as early as 1934.268 He also knew that Wolfe had not finished his work at all.269

265 Hamilton Basso, letter to Maxwell Perkins, 22 August 1940, Scribner’s Archives, Princeton.

266 Hamilton Basso, letter to Mabel Wolfe Wheaton, 27 September 1940, North Carolina Collection, Wilson Library, Chapel Hill.

267 Ibid.


269 Richard S. Kennedy remarked that, thanks to Basso, there was, for the first time “complaint that the publisher was not dealing fairly with the public or with Wolfe.” (Richard Kennedy, The Window of Memory, The Literary Career of Thomas Wolfe [Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1962] 410).
The tone of "Thomas Wolfe: A Summing Up" is rather defensive: whereas, in the Wolfe portrait, Basso had objected to the writer's tendency to embellish, in this last article on Wolfe, he argued that "the flaws in his writing do not particularly matter." Convinced that Wolfe would never have become a disciplined writer but would have been "forever loose and sprawling and sometimes windy enough to blow your hat off," Basso asserted that when Wolfe did get a hold of his material he was "magnificent in a way that few American writers ever have been." In a letter to Maxwell Perkins, he explained that he had written the article because Harper's suggestions would "inevitably confuse anyone who might someday or other, want to do a serious book about Wolfe."²⁷⁰

Basso was not averse to writing a book himself, "just to get things straight." He never did but remained a favorite candidate for any Wolfe project. When Life wanted to devote an article to Wolfe, both Elizabeth Nowell and Edward Aswell suggested Hamilton Basso. Nowell even exclaimed to Edward Aswell that he "would be the Grade A Blue Ribbon choice! More than anyone!" She recommended Basso so strongly not only because he had known Perkins and Wolfe equally intimately but also because he was a "Real Writer and a Name since Pompey's Head."²⁷¹ Earlier on, in 1946, Mabel Wolfe Wheaton had also suggested that Basso should write a book on her brother as she felt that she was too poor a writer to do it herself.²⁷²

Basso's importance as a friend of Wolfe's has been insufficiently noticed. The letters the two writers exchanged carry the proof of friendship in them; they reveal tender feelings, camaraderie, inside and intimate jokes, frustration with the critics, deep thoughts and mutual

²⁷⁰ Hamilton Basso, letter to Maxwell Perkins, 18 September 1940, Scribner's Archives, Princeton.


²⁷² Mabel Wolfe Wheaton, letter to Hamilton Basso, 6 August 1946, Hamilton Basso Collection, Beinecke Library, New Haven.
admiration. Thus, upon receiving a copy of Basso's novel, *Courthouse Square*, Wolfe told Basso: "I read a first rate review of it in the book section of the New York Times last Sunday. I was delighted . . . I see we were likened unto each other, which may be a tough break for you but which pleased me greatly."\footnote{273} While we should recognize the relevance of Basso's *New Republic* criticism on Wolfe, it is regrettable that he never wrote a Wolfe study. Perhaps this was because Basso had become too close a friend, for he confessed to Mabel: "Among all these writing people I know, he was my best friend."\footnote{274} Basso would finally admit that it was "hard to write about him . . . the things I have to say . . . will never, never be said. If Wolfe's defect lay in saying too much, mine perhaps, lies in saying too little."\footnote{275}

\footnote{273}{Thomas Wolfe, letter to Hamilton Basso, 28 October 1936, Hamilton Basso Collection, Beinecke Library, New Haven.}

\footnote{274}{Hamilton Basso, letter to Mabel Wolfe Wheaton, 27 September 1940, North Carolina Collection, Wilson Library, Chapel Hill.}

\footnote{275}{Hamilton Basso, letter to Maxwell Perkins, 7 September 1940, Scribner's Archives, Princeton.}
v. Basso Politics: A Battle of the Pens with Matthew Josephson and

Malcolm Cowley

The warm friendship between Thomas Wolfe and Hamilton Basso can best be understood in the light of their rejection of both the Agrarianism of the South and the radicalism of the North. Certainly, Basso was close to his *New Republic* friends, Matthew Josephson and Malcolm Cowley, but once the climate grew more political in the thirties, he found it increasingly difficult to understand, or merely accept, his friends’ devotion to the Left. Condemning their support of what he mocked as the “unPopular Front,” Basso himself was not conservative but “liberal for America in the late twenties and very liberal for the South at the time, but among the group associated with the *New Republic* . . . only moderately so.”

Reluctant to be either a son of the South or a convert of the North, Basso felt doubly isolated, a predicament his fictional heroes also suffer from as they vacillate between Southern roots and Northern compromise. Basso’s letters to Josephson and Cowley illustrate these conflicting feelings. Whereas in one letter he would confess that his talking to mountaineers “of crops and the Bible” rather than of “art and literature,” forced him “to hack out” his own view of the world, in the next letter he would deprecate his country life, complain of general boredom and speak of his longing to visit New York again to charge his battery. To Perkins, who occupied neutral ground, he would especially rant and rave at New York intellectuals: “The other day I went several miles back in the mountains to see a mountain family I know and like. It was startling, after seeing so few people with those qualities in New York.”

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York, to come across human beings with simplicity and friendship and dignity and pride. Yahoos are bad but the intellectual Yahoo-- Mother of God deliver us.”

The *New Republic*, the magazine for which he wrote so many pieces in the thirties, was initially a publication to Basso’s liking. However, once it moved more to the left after Edmund Wilson’s “Appeal to Progressives” of 1931, he became disenchanted with the magazine’s politics. Denouncing the editors’ reliance on “predicting,” Basso fell back on his “political paganism, . . . preferring personal values and ‘exalted sentiments’ over [sic] the intellectual, political values and ‘cool thinking’ of the *New Republic*.”

Otis Ferguson, well-known critic of the *New Republic*, shared these sentiments. Sending Basso books to review, Ferguson enclosed the latest *New Republic* gossip and scoffed at the “Red Fever” of New York intellectuals. Ridiculing the Trotskyites as a “bunch of girls with an itchy girdle,” he criticized what Basso may have meant by the *New Republic*’s predicting: “Gazing into the fate of Europe, their [i.e. the editors’] keen prognostics are never compromised by the fact that meanwhile they have somehow befouled their drawers.” In fact, Ferguson’s letters evince that Basso’s editorial recommendations did not go unnoticed: “You started something more far reaching in The New Republic than you or its editors know, by the let’s-look-at-the-troubles-in-America plan. You remember when you brought their Soviet trials duck down with that. It has been their guiding-light ever since, though of course they don’t know it and wouldn’t acknowledge authorship.”

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278 Hamilton Basso, letter to Maxwell Perkins, 4 July 1935, Scribner’s Archives, Princeton.


The "let's-look-at America" approach Ferguson refers to, was the new and first-hand way of informing readers of the national state of affairs: writers and photographers left their studies and studios and traveled all over the country to report on strikes and other incidents related to the Depression. Ferguson's claim that Basso was responsible for this prime trend of thirties' journalism is probably a generous overstatement, yet it reveals that Basso, though skeptical of the *New Republic* mainstream philosophy, offered perceptive suggestions, and was heard. Slowly but surely, his importance within the magazine grew and with it, his courage to speak up against *New Republic* personalities such as Josephson and Cowley.

Basso's friendship with these two men goes back to the late twenties. It is not known when or where exactly the three met for the first time but it is likely that they either got acquainted with each other in New Orleans or befriended one another through the *New Republic*. Although the existing correspondence between Basso and Josephson starts in 1931, their friendship went further back in time, for it was Josephson who paved the way for the publication of *Relics and Angels*. Basso's friendship with Cowley saw its beginnings in 1927: in a 1947 letter, Basso realized he had known Cowley for twenty years.

As established figures of the literary world, Cowley and Josephson were people Basso looked up to and felt inspired by. Especially Josephson's support was pivotal to Basso, who, despite his vivacious demeanor, was prone to spells of dejection and doubt. Like Sherwood Anderson and to a lesser extent, Lyle Saxon, Josephson stimulated and encouraged the young Southerner, a favor Basso warmly acknowledged: "if I managed to do anything at all, you have

\[282\] At the time, Josephson was an editor at Macaulay's and had both Basso's first novel and Robert Coates's debut published.

\[283\] Hamilton Basso, letter to Malcolm Cowley, 22 June 1947, Malcolm Cowley Collection, Newberry Library, Chicago. The letter was written upon Maxwell Perkins's funeral. From Basso's correspondence with Perkins we know that he knew Perkins from 1927.
helped enormously. It was you, after all, who got me published for the first time and you continued to believe in me.”

Possibly, it was Josephson also who drew Cowley’s attention to the young Basso, who, in need of quick cash, was very willing to write for the New Republic. One of Basso’s early pieces for the magazine was an account of the Scottsboro Trial, which, according to Etolia Basso, captured Cowley’s attention and triggered his admiration. As a result, Basso was given more and more assignments and finally became a kind of “Southern correspondent” and reviewer of Southern novels. In The Dream of Golden Mountains (1980), Cowley relates how Basso would occasionally come up from North Carolina and light up the New Republic office with his amiable personality and customary “bear hugs.”

Basso’s early letters to Cowley are humble and ingratiating and should be seen as requests to do work for the New Republic. With Josephson, Basso seems to have been more at ease. In his first letter to Josephson, written from a humid and mosquito-infested New Orleans, Basso confided that he was working on a story and a novel, which, after the failure of Relics and Angels, were supposed to put him on his “literary feet” again. This was followed by letters outlining the Beauregard project and, in July of 1932, Basso was relieved that Maxwell Perkins had accepted the Beauregard manuscript for publication: “I had gotten to the point,


what with everybody shying away from my last novel, like a wild horse, that I was beginning to wonder if I’d ever get published again.”

As the political climate among intellectuals intensified, Basso became more assertive, defending his own opinions and ideas rather than parroting those of his friends. While subscribing to progressivism and liberalism, Basso was suspicious of Communism and said so in many a letter. Accusing fellow writers and intellectuals of fad-following, Basso regretted the politicization of American literature: “Once upon a time all perplexed people in novels solved their problems by suicide; now they join the Communist Party. I’m afraid it’s just another literary device. And now that I’ve lived near a mill-village and have come to understand working people a little better I am more impatient than ever with garret revolutionists. A tower is a tower even if it happens to be painted red.”

Basso found the Communist attachment to political theory and neglect of social realities particularly irksome and wished that the “blundering communists” would come down to Southern mill villages so that they could “sharpen their understanding” of the country’s actual conditions:

... the orthodox position [of the Communists] is identical with the position of those Baptist missionaries who venture into China. The philosophies are different but in their unyielding fundamentalism they are alike ... except that the Baptists are better off because their approach is emotional rather than intellectual ... I am more interested in what happens to the workers and farmers than I am in New York revolutionaries ... we have to think and act honestly, deriving method from actuality instead of proceeding from concept

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to fact. The Christians have failed because they were so convinced
of the Christian imperative that they forgot the Chinese did
not live in Arkansas.290

To some extent, the Communist movement was of course fed by, and considered to be the
antidote to, (the rise of) Fascism. Basso made sure to condemn both Communism and Fascism
and claimed that the two movements were equally authoritarian and equally dangerous. With
democracy being the “only prank” he wished to “cling to,” he lashed out repeatedly against the
Communist justification of violence and hate in their fight against Fascism: “all these systems
are built on hate . . . and while people may think they ‘hate’ ideas, etc., the hate itself is vented
on people.”291 In an equally impassioned letter to Matthew Josephson, Basso exclaimed: “Talk
to me . . . of Fascism and Communism, and all I see are rivers of blood . . . I cannot submit to
the philosophy . . . that to save the world from Fascism we must maim and slaughter and kill .
. . No! That road, I say, leads not to the shining heights of ‘justice’ and ‘democracy’ but to a
black pit of universal barbarism . . . the ghastly barbarism of the one thing I believe in --the
human spirit--.”292 Adamantly, Basso told Cowley that he could neither tolerate the
Communist “regime of hate” and radicals’ belief in “means justifying the end,” nor accept
“Marx as a Bible, as infallible, when I know goddamn well he is fallible.”293

290 Hamilton Basso, letter to Matthew Josephson, 28 April 1934, Matthew Josephson
Collection, Beinecke Library, New Haven.

291 Hamilton Basso, letter to Malcolm Cowley, 15 November 1937, Malcolm Cowley
Josephson Collection, Beinecke Library, New Haven.

292 Hamilton Basso, letter to Matthew Josephson, n.d., Matthew Josephson Collection,
Beinecke Library, New Haven.

293 Hamilton Basso, letter to Malcolm Cowley, 12 August 1937, Malcolm Cowley Collecion,
Newberry Library, Chicago.
Basso's frustration with his friends,' and especially Cowley's lack of political insight, surfaces most poignantly in a letter of 1939 that Cowley wrote upon finishing Basso's Days Before Lent (1939). Wondering whether Basso was reconsidering his old faith because of the novel's Catholic motif, Cowley criticized one of the characters’ observations that Communism and Fascism were "wolves from the same litter and ... the great enemies to human liberty," and challenged Basso with the hint that he would rather "kiss Stalin's toe than Pacelli's." Basso's response was one of utter indignation. Where Cowley wrote that it was questionable whether Fascism and Communism were raised from the same litter, Basso wrote in the margin: "Let's wait and see...July 15, 1939, HB." Upon Cowley's comment that Basso was too rigorous in his belief that all Communists were bad, Basso wrote "Nuts!" in the margin. Other "marginal" comments pertain to Cowley's denial of the rumored 1932 famine in Russia: when Cowley claimed that such a disaster had had to surface in population statistics, Basso countered with "Such faith, Malcolm, such faith! As if the monolithic state couldn't falsify figures!" Basso further responded with an angry "More blind faith! Damn it! Why can't Malcolm do his own thinking!" to Cowley's lecture on why Communism should be given a last chance and, at all times, the benefit of the doubt. Though an intelligent and observant literary critic, Cowley appeared to be extremely unsuspecting in his estimation of the Soviet political situation. Basso, on the other hand, who may not have had Cowley's intellectual sophistication, did have a keen political instinct, which was rooted in his love of realism and common sense.

Curiously, while the epistolary battles between Basso and Cowley had little effect on their relationship, the bickering between Basso and Josephson finally resulted in a gradual petering out of their friendship. As the thirties drew to a close, Basso complained about the "silent treatment" Josephson was giving him. He tried to patch up the relationship in a letter of 13 August 1940 and made another attempt a month later: "I shall argue violently with you-- it has always been thus: we enjoy the striking of mind on mind: the sparks that fly, the smoky smell

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of flint-- but, after all the argument, I would always want to feel, and have you feel that on the inside, in the sentimental places of the heart, nothing is ever changed.” Finally, in a moving letter of 15 October 1940, Basso made a last reconciliatory endeavor, which is half-*apologia* and half-*mea culpa*:

You're Matty, the man who first believed in me. So how can I get off and have an “objective” look at you? How can I?

... I'm beginning to suspect that ever since you and I disagreed about the Moscow thing, I've been over-sensitive. There was a time when, frankly, I found a note of dogmatism in many things you said that I did not like. It seemed to me you were setting up certain rigid measurements to which you felt all people must conform or else be written off. Had I not always looked upon you as one of my closest friends, one of my “backers,” it would not have made so much difference. At the time it did make a difference.

Basso’s apologies and suggestion that “beneath the river of words runs the deeper river of friendship” were not enough to heal the bond that had meant so much to him. The two men had grown apart and no rapprochement could alter this. Etolia Basso, who found the Josephsons “terribly effusive” anyway, remembered how “Ham sort of steered away from Josephson” when the latter persevered in his radical beliefs.296

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296 Etolia S. Basso, interview, 8 January 1992, Tempe.
In 1961, when Josephson contacted Basso for his memoirs, *Infidel in the Temple* (1967), Basso appeared embarrassed, as if he did not want to be reminded of the tumultuous thirties:

Time passes, old friend. Rain on the roof, winter on the wind, and all those who have dropped by the wayside. I think of that young New Orleans provincial coming up to the city, and the rocks in your brook--I don't know Matty. Perhaps it means something merely to have persisted and endured. You mention your foresight in relation to Burke's comment on the state of France in 1790. I think of the old gentleman who ran the bookstore across the street from my grandfather's small shoe factory when I was a boy. When the telephone "came in," he would have nothing to do with it because he thought it was only a fad. Now that's the kind of foresight I admire.  

It is striking how Basso's and Josephson's natures surface once more in this final resuscitation of their correspondence: while Josephson resorts to books and uses the cerebral example of Edmund Burke to illustrate "foresight," Basso counters with an example borrowed not from books but from real life. Josephson, inspired by the noble examples of rebel-writers such as Rousseau, Zola and Hugo, became an easy pawn of the party and its ideology. Basso, on the other hand, used his pragmatism and remote existence in the mountains to put the radicalism of New York City in perspective. Despite the fact that both men were progressive thinkers and strong voices within the *New Republic*, they vented their liberalism in very different ways. Whereas Josephson was a parlor-socialist, a bohemian bourgeois, a prototypal intellectual and a radical humanist, Basso was a free-thinking realist, a countrified bourgeois and a libertarian

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humanist who, unlike Josephson, derived his knowledge from life rather than books and who preferred both first-hand and past experience to uncertifiable utopianism.

As for Basso's and Cowley's correspondence, when Communism lost its appeal after the Moscow Trials and the Hitler-Stalin Pact, the political theme of the early letters, which often revolved around the incongruity between (political) theory and (societal) reality, shifted to the philosophical debate over the value of book learning versus the learning one acquires through life. Whereas Cowley argued that books would always have a significant influence on people's lives and minds, Basso refuted the idea and declared that people, rather than books, had left their impact on his life:

If I were asked to name the books that had changed my mind, I could not truthfully name a single one. My impulse would be to name people instead: a highschool professor who taught me the difference between good books and trash . . . then that Catholic priest I wrote a piece for The New Republic about, who opened new fields of thought and speculation; then a couple of girls: then a long break, the years of college totally wasted. Then in recent times, people I've known in New York. I got to books as it were, through people: and I should guess that the making or unmaking of a mind is far more than a mere matter of books. 298

Although Basso could not and would not deny his own intellectuality and love of books, he was immensely drawn to ordinary people, getting along "famously well with plumbers, farmers and carpenters."299 Cowley became somewhat leery of Basso's mixing with


commoners and wrote in a letter of January 6th, 1939: “Well, baby, I wish I had your genius for getting acquainted with all sorts of people.” Cowley seems to have believed that, once one belonged to the self-contained class of intellectuals which magazines like the New Republic fostered, one simply could not step out of that milieu in what he saw as Basso’s attempts to “relate” to people. However, for Basso, who lived among mountaineers throughout the thirties, this was not so much a choice as a way of life. His genuine sympathy for the humble lives of ordinary people was no posturing or the putting on of false identities. It was an honest, pragmatic and natural impulse. Hating to be pigeonholed as a “writer” or “artist,” Basso confessed: “The truth is, I suppose, that I ain’t an artist. I’ve never thought of myself as one, or because I write that I was somehow separated from other people . . . and it’s hard, because my deepest love is for writing, and books and ideas, to be thrust into a special and (to me) false category.”

Unfortunately, in the world of books and artists, Basso was surrounded by people who were the very opposite of his personality and it is especially in the correspondence with Cowley that Basso’s lasting repugnance of intellectuals shows. Panning Cowley’s infatuation with W.H. Auden’s modernist erudition, which was, to Basso’s mind, too abstruse for the average reader, Basso wrote “Fuque, Malcolm!” [asterisked with: “spelling, throughout, by courtesy of Malcolm Cowley”]: “Poetry is dying on its feet when poets limit their audiences to other poets: and all this clap-trap of [Auden’s] notes in the back of his book. A line or an image isn’t worth a fuqueing damn if it needs ten lines to explain it.”

The correspondence between Cowley and Basso was a constant tug of war but although they disagreed fiercely, they never lost their sense of humor, called one another “baby” and pinpricked each other with

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301 Hamilton Basso, letter to Malcolm Cowley, 7 May 1945, Malcolm Cowley Collection, Newberry Library, Chicago.
phrases such as “Honey, I don’t mind what you say about the critics. I’m sick of the bastards.” In later years, the quarrelsome tone of the thirties’ letters would lighten considerably and change into something more friendly and superficial. Remarkably, in these later letters, neither Cowley nor Basso ever mentioned their thirties’ embroilment. The only trace of what had occurred in the thirties is to be found in a letter that Basso wrote to his wife in 1942, when Cowley was under the duress of harsh public scrutiny:

I read Muriel [Cowley’s wife]’s letter: it’s pretty bad for them, especially for Muriel. But I still can’t entirely absolve Malcolm: I too clearly remember. No, the only way you can judge a man is by his act and from his acts . . . you do wonder just what ground Malcolm does stand on. I don’t blame him for anything except being such a gargantuan naif—just as so many of those people were. Word of God, I wouldn’t care if I never saw another intellectual again. A bunch of observers, for the most part, lookers-on. It’s that part of me, the observing part, that I don’t like. Not even in me. Skip it.

For those who had been so wrapped up in them, the thirties became a decade of denial, regret, melancholy and shame. Even a writer like Basso, who had shown no interest in zealous radicalism, recalled the decade abashedly: when Josephson approached him for his thirties’ correspondence in preparation of Infidel, he replied mournfully: “Going through these reminders of twenty-five years ago has left me a bit subdued. It has been a rocky road for us

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303 Hamilton Basso, letter to Etolia S. Basso, 11 March 1942, Hamilton Basso Collection, Beinecke Library, New Haven.
all, and, everything else aside, I think it is to our credit, if I may include myself, that we managed at least to persist.  

The correspondence between Basso, Cowley and Josephson is especially worthwhile in the context of these writers’ commitment to the intellectual life, which, in the thirties, often implied political radicalism. Furthermore, the different letters give us a relatively authentic impression of where Basso, Josephson and Cowley stood, what their political sympathies and antipathies consisted of and how each of them dealt with the other’s stubbornness. Interestingly, where Basso severed all ties with Josephson, he remained a close friend of Cowley’s. This had undoubtedly to do with the fact that whereas Josephson persisted in his bohemian radicalism, Cowley was to repent his political misjudgment(s) shortly after the thirties were over. Another reason for Basso’s break with Josephson but continued friendship with Cowley may be that Josephson and Cowley had such different personalities. Josephson was the ambivalent product of a bourgeois and wealthy background, yet he wanted to be a voice of the proletariat. Cowley, on the other hand, was merely politically naive. Perhaps he would have been more at home with the innocent “Lyrical Left” of the nineteen-tens than with the Old Left of the nineteen-thirties.

Though Basso valued his intellectual independence, he also experienced isolation: while he could not fully relate to his *New Republic* friends, as a liberal, he also felt uprooted in the conservative environment of the South. In fact, his employment with the Yankee *New Republic* was seen, by some, as a betrayal of his Southern roots. His criticism of the South in his novels and *New Republic* articles marked him as a “Southern dissident.” Cleanth Brooks even hinted that Basso’s “rejection” of the South and later exile in the North led to the difficulty of placing and identifying him as a Southern writer. At the same time, one may argue that

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Basso's enlightened views of the South and his sound politics in the thirties validate his merit as a (Southern) writer and form the basis for his rediscovery today.
Because the winters were so severe, the Bassos did not look upon their mountain dwelling as a permanent residence. Seeking the warmer climate of Aiken, Savannah, Beaufort and Charleston in the winter time, Basso started visiting New York City on a regular basis once he became more involved with the *New Republic*. Although this kind of life was relatively varied, it was not varied enough. This changed when Basso enjoyed the company of two fellow writers in the summers of 1936 and 1937. We have already dwelled on Basso’s friendship with Thomas Wolfe but said little about his other illustrious friend, F. Scott Fitzgerald. This is partly because Basso and Fitzgerald were not as close. Also, the few letters that Fitzgerald sent to Basso were lost in a flood which inundated the Bassos’ cellar.

What we do have is Basso’s correspondence with Perkins, who had asked Basso to keep an eye on Wolfe and Fitzgerald when they were in North Carolina. At the time, Fitzgerald suffered from a nervous breakdown and worsening alcoholism. Despite several attempts to cheer up the *Gatsby* author, Basso had little confidence in his painstaking efforts. After one of his visits to Fitzgerald, (who, according to Etolia Basso, liked to invite complete strangers and servants of the Grove Park Inn to his dinner table so that he did not have to eat alone), Basso told Perkins:

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\text{I felt --and still feel-- that, if he wants to abandon fiction and write only about himself, a straightaway autobiography would be a darned interesting, even exciting, book. I didn’t get very far with the idea. He countered with some crazy idea about writing the story of his life “as it might have been --if he had won the Princeton-Yale game in the last quarter, if the Great Gatsby had sold 1,000,000 copies” -- I don’t know Max. I’d do anything in the world I could but I’m afraid I’m not much help. I think I’m pretty much of a hick as far as Scott is} 
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concerned—I haven’t lived the international life he has.\textsuperscript{306}

Perkins was annoyed and said that it would be “nonsensical of him to write that pseudo-
biography where he made a touchdown against Yale etc. He has got to stop that sort of
nonsense . . . and be serious and do something important.”\textsuperscript{307} Basso’s tact, as well as the
realization that he was not close enough to Fitzgerald, stopped him from conveying Perkins’s
message. Further evidence of Basso’s kid gloves’ handling of Fitzgerald can be found in a
letter of 13 February 1936. Writing from New Orleans, Basso tells Fitzgerald of a wonderful
dream he had had: “You had published a new book, or I was reading one of the old ones, and
there was that feeling of pleasure and delight that comes from reading a perfect page—every
word and accent right, every image there, the lovely evocation of mood—and while reading,
you yourself in the background somewhere, the tone of your voice etc.”\textsuperscript{308}

Basso admired Fitzgerald greatly and would often favor his talent over that of that other
famous contemporary, Ernest Hemingway. Describing Hemingway as a “bully-boy” caught up
in a “lost generation act,” and as “too old a man to keep on having wet dreams,” Basso
preferred Fitzgerald because he was more of a “moral writer”: “I thought that Scott was a moral
writer and Hemingway wasn’t (I don’t believe that fellow in The Bell, not in the last chapter).
And I’m not asking for preachments or evasiveness. (There is no preachment or evasiveness in

\textsuperscript{306} Hamilton Basso, letter to Maxwell Perkins, 6 October 1936, Scribner’s Archives,
Princeton.

\textsuperscript{307} Maxwell Perkins, letter to Hamilton Basso, 9 October 1936, Scribner’s Archives,
Princeton.

\textsuperscript{308} Hamilton Basso, letter to F. Scott Fitzgerald, 13 February 1936, Scribner’s Archives,
Princeton.
Gatsby and yet you find the morality of that book matched against Scott's personal morality: something he's never been given credit for, being a bad boy."

Basso's last letter to Fitzgerald was written one month before he departed for Europe; having sold *Courthouse Square* (1936) to the movies for the then grand sum of $5000, Toto persuaded her husband to go abroad for a year. In the letter, Basso refers to the debate Wolfe and Fitzgerald had had over the question whether a writer should be putting things in or leaving things out: "I saw Tom . . . last weekend and heard about the furious literary controversy you two are conducting. As an innocent and deeply interested by-stander, may I urge you not to take Tom . . . too seriously. He is somewhat worried that you will-- but no word of this, of course, to him." Concluding, Basso said a last farewell and deplored that they had never really tried to become closer friends. From a professional and personal point of view, Basso and Fitzgerald were incompatible. However, their sympathy for each other seems to have been genuine: while Fitzgerald told Basso that he liked *Courthouse Square* "enormously" and wanted to discuss it "in person," Basso would remember Fitzgerald fondly as well as melancholically when he learned of his untimely death in 1940.311

It was dreadful about Scott; even more than Tom in a way. There was always some shadow of the red black man about Tom, or so it seems now, but even when I last saw Scott --all bashed up and broken though he was-- there was still a quality of life and


310 Hamilton Basso, letter to F. Scott Fitzgerald, 21 August 1937, Scribner's Archives, Princeton.

311 F. Scott Fitzgerald, letter to Hamilton Basso, 23 October 1936, Hamilton Basso Collection, Beinecke Library, New Haven.
laughter about him; even though there was the suggestion, now and then, that he was looking beyond the moment and into the past--into the frustrated promise of a lot of glamorous dreams. So that's two down, out of men I have known fairly well, and it looks like we turn out fairly young. Good old Scott, good old Tom.  

Basso's sadness was heart-felt. He valued his friendships with Thomas Wolfe and F. Scott Fitzgerald tremendously and his association with these important writers can be seen as a significant episode in Basso's career: both Wolfe and Fitzgerald left their traces on Basso's fiction, something which we will return to in the next chapters.

Another important episode that would not have an impact on Basso's art so much as influence his life, was his sojourn in Europe in the fall of 1937 and spring of 1938. The Bassos left for Europe from Baltimore on September 30th, 1937. Two weeks later, they were roaming the streets of London, a city which Basso called the "capital of imperialism." It was Basso's first time abroad and like a true innocent, he noticed how Londoners were somehow "different... they have a hell of a time trying to understand me. They speak English." In a letter to Malcolm Cowley, Basso criticized the British for their hypocrisy and a "conscious moral rectitude" which he experienced as a "pain" in his "extremely moral neck."

France agreed more with Basso. Though appalled by the noticeable rise of anti-Semitism and Fascism in France, he praised Paris as the "city of them all," the Parisians being "so

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312 Hamilton Basso, letter to Maxwell Perkins, 29 December 1940, Scribner's Archives, Princeton.


successful in the arts of peace and love.” During the winter and early spring, the Bassos stayed in St. Paul de Vence. Although Basso did not speak a word of French, he mixed well with the locals whom he would occasionally join for a game of boules. St. Paul de Vence inspired Basso to write The Greenroom (1949), Basso’s only novel set on European soil. An unpublished, yet good suspense story, entitled “A Candle for the Marquis,” is also set in Vence. Like the New Republic article that Basso wrote on Thomas Mann, “A Candle for the Marquis” is written against the background of the impending war. The French, the American protagonist comments, “speak of the War the way Americans speak of Death. You know it is coming and you know there is nothing you can do about it; yet it always seems far enough away, no matter how imminent, to be spoken of with a certain detachment.” The threat of war finally became too much to bear, and after a short visit to Italy, from where Basso described Rome as a “somewhat dowdy but charming provincial lady suddenly introduced to international society,” the Bassos decided to seek the safer shores of America. By April of 1938, they were back in Pisgah Forest, in time to attend Thomas Wolfe’s funeral.

In letters to Cowley, Josephson and Perkins, Basso argued that Europe did not “change” his world but “illuminated a world already pretty well formed.” The expatriate adventure, so common an experience among Basso’s contemporaries, came late for him and was rather different from the experiences of his friends. Whereas Josephson, Cowley and Wolfe had lived


in Paris and London as impressionable young men, Basso, an established writer by 1938, avoided Paris and chose the Southern French countryside instead. Typically, he preferred the country to the city, domesticity to the life of the garret-dweller and quietude to the social and artistic scene. Although Cowley and Josephson had given him the names and addresses of artists and writers in Paris, he never contacted any of them.

Upon his return to the mountains, Basso found it hard to settle down again in his writerly routine and reclusive lifestyle. Thomas Wolfe was dead and Fitzgerald was in Hollywood. After his European sojourn, the South looked particularly bleak and dead. In 1939, Basso told Cowley again and again that he wanted "out." When Toto became pregnant, his desire to leave became even stronger. Having a low opinion of the Southern educational system, Basso told Cowley that "the people you like to play with are not always the people you like to think with." Furthermore, the Bassos were extremely doubtful as to whether they should expose their child to the South's many prejudices. The decision to leave became a little easier when, in 1940, a paper mill arrived at Brevard. As the stench of sulphur spoiled the clean mountain air, Basso deplored the fact that the quaint old mountain community changed so rapidly into an industrial and standardized small town: "This was just about the last part of the world I knew about where people got living experience... at first hand and now it's kind of polluted the way the tannery polluted the French Broad River... Jesus how frightfully easy it is for people to become bourgeois." From this moment, Basso's mind was set on leaving. The lack of good libraries became a source of irritation and his loneliness unbearable. In a woebegone letter of August 13th, 1940, Basso tells Josephson: "It's a wet, soppy, drippy mountain day with fog on the ridges and gurgles in the drain and the world is in a rotten wretched shape and what the


situations calls for is to be with one’s friends instead of being a thousand miles away.”

At the same time, Basso realized that he really needed seclusion in order to write. Owning up that he would “rather hunt turkeys and play poker and tell stories than write any day,” Basso knew that he had to “enclose” himself in the mountains to get pen to paper. Getting out of the mountains, however, he felt “like a woodchuck coming out of his hole,” wanting to “see everybody” and “talk and talk and talk and talk.”

In search of a more enlightened place to live, the Bassos moved to Charlottesville in October of 1940. The first impressions were good. Describing the town as “pleasant,” Basso told Josephson how his fellow townsfolk, most of them academics, had “suddenly found out there is something called liberalism in the world, which they are for, but sometimes I think it is the way a sixty-five year old man would be for women if he discovered them for the first time at that age.”

But soon the mood turned. After all, how could Basso envision a congenial way of life amongst the puffed-up intellectuals he so despised? By November, the word “pleasant” had turned into “pleasantly dull.” Disliking the academic scene, Basso cited Toto who compared Charlottesville to “that place in the Atlantic where all eels go to breed-- only here they

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324 Ibid.
breed professional Southerners.” By January of 1941, Basso was ready to leave again, calling Charlottesville a “stinkpot” of smug and pompous faculty members.

The years 1941, 1942 and 1943 were characterized by a restless wandering to and fro between Pisgah Forest, Aiken, South Hadley, Washington D.C., Florida and New York City. Then finally, when Toto tired of sitting in Central Park and Basso was offered a job on the New Yorker, the family moved to Weston, Connecticut. Rather distinctly, the move would close off Basso’s Southern years and, though he would return home in many of his novels, the North became a permanent residence for this exiled son of the South.

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Now that we've got a house, and a hill to sink our roots in, there's not a damned single thing I want--except to write the best goddamned books I can and to work, as the sort of person I am, for a better and more tolerant world.

Hamilton Basso, letter to Matthew Josephson, 7 August 1935
1. The Southern Renascence: An Attempted Definition

The Southern Renascence is a broadly used but ill-defined concept. Much as it is a well-established notion in the field of Southern Studies, there does not seem to be an authoritative definition, or as the critic, Michael O'Brien, has argued, very few people have gone to great lengths to explain or define the Renascence.\footnote{Michael O'Brien, \textit{Rethinking the South, Essays in Intellectual History} (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1988) 168.} Although O'Brien pours scorn on both Richard King's and D.J. Singal's books on the Renascence, he fails to provide us with an adequate definition himself.\footnote{Richard King, \textit{A Southern Renaissance, The Cultural Awakening of the American South, 1930-1955} (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1980). D. J. Singal, \textit{The War Within: From Victorian to Modernist Thought in the South} (Chapel Hill: U North Carolina P, 1982).} A much earlier publication by John Bradbury does not fully define the Renascence either.\footnote{John Bradbury, \textit{Renaissance in the South} (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1963).} Although Bradbury gives a comprehensive survey of the different Renascence themes and writers, he does not particularize the movement but circumscribes it as a revolt against sentimentality, romanticism and Confederate rhetoric. Thomas Inge's definition in the \textit{Encyclopedia of Southern Culture} is not a great improvement over Bradbury's or O'Brien's "definitions" either.\footnote{M. Thomas Inge, "Southern Renascence," \textit{Encyclopedia of Southern Culture} (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1989) 839-869.} Inge merely postulates that the Renascence had nothing to do with Mencken's often quoted slur but was a "period of self-analysis and reflection on the values [the South] had fought to preserve" after defeat in the Civil War. Many Southerners have rooted
the Renascence in the historical importance of the Civil War or have, like Walker Percy, claimed that the Renascence occurred "because we got beat."\[331\]

The word "Renascence" is misleading because it infers a revival of a high culture and, with it, a resurgence of the arts. Although the Old South featured a genteel or cavalier culture, to speak of high culture in the antebellum era, would be an exaggeration. One of the first Southern critics to acknowledge this was W.J. Cash, who wrote the controversial but intriguing *Mind of the South* (1940). If we are to believe Cash, the South never had a great intellectual tradition nor did it produce any great writers or painters prior to the Southern Renascence. Both David Barondess and Jason Kent in Basso's *Courthouse Square* (1936) and *Days Before Lent* (1939) allude to this: observing that the American South is as picturesque as the South of France, they wonder why Dixie never saw the equivalent of a Vincent van Gogh or a Paul Cezanne. Since the South has not known a highbrow heritage antedating the Renascence, the word "Renascence" is a misnomer, a euphemism for an aesthetic past that never was.\[332\] Instead, the word "Awakening" qualifies as a more accurate term.

Another puzzling question that besets the Renascence is what exactly triggered the Awakening of Southern letters? Just as the beginnings of modernism have often been associated with Virginia Woolf’s shorthand remark that “On or about December 1910 human nature changed,” so has the Southern Renascence been summed up by Allen Tate’s argument that, with “the war of 1914-1918, the South reentered the world --but gave a backward glance as it stepped over the border: that backward glance gave us the Southern Renaissance, a literature

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\[332\] Notice that though the South has known a wide variety of popular literature in the antebellum era, this literature has not fuelled the American canon as Southern Renascence literature has.
O’Brien refuses to believe in the mysticism of Tate’s sweeping statement. Instead, he assumes that the Renascence was the natural “emergence of an ordinarily competent literary culture, a stock of good writers, the occasional very good one, the rare genius . . . There is no mystery. Western culture swarms with such people.” In other words, O’Brien ascribes the occurrence of the Southern Awakening to mere coincidence. He further objects to Tate’s cultural pessimism, for his definition seems to suggest a “sense of ending.” O’Brien believes that the Renascence was not so much an ending as a beginning of important and new perceptions about the South.

Irrespective of O’Brien’s criticism, Tate’s definition is valid in the light of the cultural transformation the South underwent in the period between the two wars: after all, the Renascence coincided with the South’s transition from a predominantly agrarian society to a partly industrialized society. Taking a backward glance at its agrarian past yet already committed to its new future, the region found itself on a threshold with, on the one side, the memory of the once glorious and conservative Old South and, on the other side, the promises of a progressive if poor New South. This sense of a threshold, which Benjamin Spencer described as a vacuum “between a culture that has died and another unborn,” occasioned the so-called “historical imagination” of the Southern writer, that is, an awareness of the past in the present.

Likewise, Richard King claims that, from the late twenties, Southern writers were not only trying to come to terms “with the inherited values of the Southern tradition but also with a

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334 O’Brien, 170.

certain way of perceiving and dealing with the past, what Nietzsche called ‘monumental’ historical consciousness.” 336

In other words, the Renascence is best defined as a time when the Southern writer found himself at a crossroads between past and present. His heightened awareness of these contrasting eras spawned a certain identity crisis: pressed to make a choice, the Southern writer could either pledge allegiance to the past and assume an Agrarian profile or he could break with the past and choose the direction of the New South. Accordingly, we see a division in the Southern tradition between the Agrarians and what John Bradbury called the “forward-looking liberals and humanitarians.” 337 As the reader may remember, Hamilton Basso was already cognizant of this dichotomy in Southern letters: in 1935, he argued that Southern writers were either “traditionalists” or “realists.” 338

In view of these contrary identities, one may well call the Southern Renascence a literary identity crisis, which, triggered by Mencken’s inflammatory critique, urged writers to redefine the South as well as establish their own identities. Was the South a mythical land of moonlight and magnolias or had the moon waned and the magnolias whithered? 339 Was the Southern author to write about the golden antebellum era or was he obliged to show the poverty-stricken


337 Bradbury, 200.


339 Although the *Encyclopedia of Southern Culture* trivializes Mencken’s influence on the Awakening of Southern letters, Fred Hobson argues that Mencken was the driving force behind a “radically new concept in Southern literature”: “it was the great responsibility of the writer to challenge the tradition, not to glorify it, to examine it critically, not to defend it.” In this light, there seems to be a strong connection between the *Double Dealer*’s (and Basso’s) and Mencken’s point of view. (Fred Hobson, “H.L. Mencken and the Southern Literary Renascence,” diss., U of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1972, 452).
present? In its attempt to answer questions like these, Southern Renascence literature exhibits a constant tension between past and present, the Old South and the New South, the agrarian way of life and the industrial way of life, the small town and the big city, nostalgia and disillusionment.

Like most canons, the Southern Renascence canon has shifted. *The Encyclopedia of Southern Culture* distinguishes between a first and a second generation of writers, which also accounts for two different canons as some of the subject matter and themes changed with the newer and younger writers.\(^{340}\) Michael O’Brien bisects the Renascence canon too but employs a thematic dividing-line. Thus whereas the one canon is predominantly Agrarian, which O’Brien describes as the early canon that focused on aesthetics rather than on politics, the other canon is preoccupied with what O’Brien calls “the social discourse of change, the direct confrontation with society.”\(^{341}\) As examples of the latter, he cites C.Vann Woodward on Tom Watson, Howard Odum on regionalism, W.J. Cash on the Savage Ideal and James Agee on the sharecropper. To extend the list, one may want to add Hamilton Basso on Huey Long. Chronologically, Basso belongs to the first generation, yet, in terms of his anti-Agrarian

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\(^{341}\) O’Brien, 168.
sentiments and predominant themes, he belongs to the second generation. Surveying his novels of the thirties, one does not only discover that his books are affected by the Southern Renascence Temper, one also finds that, with his recurring interest in the Southerner's confrontation with, and criticism of, his native region, Basso should be placed among the Southern realists, or social critics of the South.
In *Cinnamon Seed* (1934), the protagonist, Dekker Blackheath, introduces the reader to a Southern showboat. Offering a variety of entertainment, ranging from musical performances to acrobatics, showboats first appeared in the 1830s and became very popular between 1870 and 1910. However, as the movie industry drew more and more people to the cinema, the popularity of the showboats languished, one of the last boats being the “Cotton Blossom,” which also happens to be the boat in *Cinnamon Seed*. Dekker’s view of the “Cotton Blossom” is a dim one: repulsed by its vulgar display of sentimentalities and cheap formulas, he thinks showboats are “just grand affairs in musical comedies and books by lady novelists” (CS, 230-231). To underline Dekker’s denunciation of the South’s misrepresentation in the arts, Basso allows the hero to throw his aunt’s book, “some sweet sentimental tale devoid of ideas and reality,” into the fireplace.

Interestingly, in 1932 Basso had already written about a showboat performance in the *Sewanee Review*. In fact, *Cinnamon Seed*’s fragment is almost a verbatim copy of the 1932 story, a slight but important difference being that Basso was more explicit in his critique of the South in the *Sewanee Review*. For instance, he was appalled by the forced picturesqueness of the rustic characters of the showboat play and condemned the entire performance as a grave distortion of reality. According to Basso, this was an “easy habit to fall into . . . it has become pernicious in so many of the people who have written about the South.” As he had maintained in letters to Matthew Josephson and Maxwell Perkins, Basso reiterated that the South “is not picturesque;” its “good indolent life is gone. It has lost its force and has been robbed of its

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342 Hamilton Basso, *Cinnamon Seed* (New York: Scribner’s, 1934).


meaning. It exists only in the past, something to be remembered, something we of the South
wish could be restored."

To counter Southerners' recreation of the Old South in showboat performances and fiction, Basso aimed at a more authentic representation of Southern realities in his second novel.

Set in New Orleans and the countryside of Louisiana, *Cinnamon Seed* is an eighty years' chronicle of the Blackheath family. While the novel's "actual time" takes up three decades, from the nineteen-hundreds to the nineteen-thirties, the "historical time" goes back to 1850 when the Blackheath patriarch, Robert, like Thomas Sutpen in William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936), erected a columned plantation home in the Dixie wilderness. Due to the extended time frame, the novel has a panoramic quality which is reinforced by the narrator's juxtaposition of the fame, fortune and misfortune of three representative families of the South. The heart of the narrative is taken up by the hero's family, the Blackheaths. In the shadow of the Blackheaths, we find a family of black servants, with most notably among them, the characters of Horace and Sam. The third family, whose fate is intertwined with that of the Blackheaths and whose rise is inversely proportional to the fall of Willswood House (i.e. the Blackheaths' house), is the Brand family. Their hero is the trashy Harry who, as Louisiana's governor, senator and would-be President, is the spitting image of Huey Long.

The first book opens two days after Dekker's father, Kinloch, committed suicide. Dekker's orphaned state does not only highlight his tragic fate, it also complicates his *Bildung*. Unlike the meek Tony, Dekker is rough, impulsive, unpredictable and rebellious, or as aunt Olivia characterizes him: "The way he acts is the way your knee acts when you hit it" and "there are two kinds of men in this family: the wild ones and the peaceable ones. The wild ones make life more interesting but the peaceable ones are better to have around. Dekker's one of the wild ones" (CS, 269; 292). Dekker's forthright character saves the novel from the tiresome ramifications which were mustered up by namby-pamby Tony. However, because of the hero's wild and shiftless behavior, Dekker is a difficult character to understand.

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345 "Cotton Blossom," 393.
Believing in the determinism of ancestral heredity, Basso portrays Dekker as someone who identifies with his grandfather, Langley, and his great-uncle, Edward. In a number of Basso novels, fathers play an insignificant role while sons like to emulate their mythical grandfathers. Merrill Maguire Skaggs, who explored the extent in which Southern Renascence fiction draws on, but also departs from Southern local color fiction, has written that, in reaction to the happy and doting families of local colorists, Southern Renascence writers like Flannery O'Connor, Carson McCullers (and Hamilton Basso) are often preoccupied with the “conflict between two generations of the same family.” Indeed, as in most of O’Connors’s and McCullers’s fiction, nearly all of Basso’s fictional children and adolescents do not get along with their “guardian or parent.”

After his father’s sudden death, Dekker is adopted by uncle Carter (i.e. Kinloch’s brother) and his religious wife, Elizabeth, who is a look-alike of aunt Hermine. Their son, John, is the opposite of Dekker and, like his father, Carter, a “peaceable” specimen of the Blackheath family. As the reader follows Dekker’s troublesome assimilation into the rule-ridden household of his aunt and uncle, Dekker’s grandfather, Langley, is responsible for most of the action and atmosphere of Book I. Though his brother, Edward, died in battle, Langley survived the war to live his life in the shadows of the past. Like another Beauregard, he finds comfort in a world of reminiscences. While Langley’s war memories are left-overs from Beauregard, his reminiscences of the family’s past are enlightening and illuminate the Southern reliance on the historical imagination as well as the idea that the present is burdened by implications of the past.

Recollecting the past in tranquil and ponderous flashbacks, Langley remembers how Edward and his faithful servant, Jube (i.e. Horace’s grandfather) rode off to war while Langley was left sulking at the plantation gate because he was too young to be a soldier. Through Langley’s flashbacks, we meet Peter Brand (i.e. Harry’s grandfather), the cruel overseer at Willswood. We also encounter Bella, Robert’s black mistress and grandmother of Sam. We further obtain a glimpse of the family secrets, which, like the family secrets of Louis Couperus’s plantation

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families, have left an indelible mark on the surviving relatives and hang like a curse over the house. Together with Langley, the reader witnesses Edward's brave demise in battle and, upon the former's return home, the reader finds the family patriarch, Robert, in his pine coffin. The war is over and while the house is wrapped in mourning, the naked Bella performs an orgiastic dance in front of the mesmerized soldiers. Humiliated by her husband's past infidelities, Mrs Blackheath shoots the dancing Bella and although Langley, like a true cavalier, takes the blame, his mother is convicted after Peter Brand testifies in court that he saw Mrs. Blackheath fire the gun. The progenitor's death at the close of the war, the consequences of defeat and the Blackheath crime seal the fate of the family's decline and fall. Conversely, it occasions the rise of the Brands, the new order supplanting the order of the Old South.

The disintegration of the Blackheath family is precipitated by Carter's and Kinloch's move to New Orleans where they open a law firm. The ailing Langley and his two spinster daughters, Olivia and Ann, are left to run Willswood, which, due to a lack of funds, decays in a Faulknerian way. In fact, the house is in danger of being demolished altogether when a planned highway is to cut right across the Blackheath property. At the close of the first book, Langley's friend, Solomon, comments: "Pretty soon the whole river'll be built up from New Orleans to Baton Rouge. Won't be a farm or plantation left. Nothin' but in-dus-trial enterprises" (CS, 104). As the industrialized South advances in more ways than one, the Old South is breathing its last: after he learns that Carter employed Harry Brand, Langley dies, his body slumping on the twilit porch.

Langley's death, coinciding appropriately with the end of Book I, is preceded by a curious subplot. Like their grandparents, Ann and Sam are attracted to each other but do not acknowledge this because of the Southern miscegenation taboo. On top of that, there is another taboo for theirs is an incestuous impulse: not only do Sam and Ann descend from the same grandfather, as a member of a feudal household, Sam is looked upon as a member of the Blackheath family. Denying their sexual urge, which, in Basso's books, always seems to be

347 Louis Couperus (1863-1923) is a Dutch novelist who wrote on planters' experiences in the East Indies.
more alive in the hot and humid environment of the South than in the cold and sterile setting of
the North, they both escape North: Ann marries a Minneapolis doctor and Sam leaves
surreptitiously in search of the seemingly brighter horizons of the North. Thus by the end of
Book I, Olivia is the only Blackheath left at Willswood and, though she knows that times are
changing and Willswood may go under, she perseveres and like her father, clings to the ghosts
of the past.

Book II lacks the imaginative force of the first book. This can largely be ascribed to
Langley's absence. When "the Colonel goes out of the book," Perkins told Basso, "it makes a
great difference."348 Robert Coates, who was highly complimentary of the novel, also
suggested that Langley's death left a "void."349 Compared to the lively and atmospheric first
book (and the action of the third), the second book is a bland intermezzo that could have been
omitted. Like the young Basso, Dekker drops out of law school and turns up on Olivia's
doorstep to help her run the plantation. John, on the other hand, graduates from Harvard,
travels to Europe, gets engaged to the dull Constance Cummings and finds employment with an
advertising agency. In view of Basso's experiences with the advertising world, which he
disliked --a dislike that would resurface in In Their Own Image (1935)-- it is not so surprising
that Dekker ridicules John's job as a mere "writing of poems for ladies' drawers" (CS, 211).
While John settles down in what Dekker sees as a despicably sedate lifestyle, Dekker becomes
more and more restless. Revelling in drunken bouts and brawls, his restiveness peaks at John's
engagement party: feeling closed in by the phoney world of his adoptive family, Dekker leaves
in an attempt to find his true identity.

Book III is filled with (perhaps too much) action. Again we find Olivia alone at Willswood
and, to emphasize her lonely battle for survival, the narrator confronts her with Harry Brand.
As the story unfolds, the Blackheaths lose more and more ground in their confrontations with
the Brands for, while Olivia cannot stop Brand from building the highway, Carter cannot deter

348 Maxwell Perkins, letter to Hamilton Basso, 18 July 1933, Scribner's Archives,
Princeton.

him from scandalizing the Blackheath firm. But Olivia is not abandoned completely. She is followed around the house by her faithful servant and friend, Horace, and like an old married couple, they spend the rest of their days bickering.

At one point Olivia and Horace are joined by Ann's daughter, Elinor, who must recuperate from her bronchitis in the warmer South. Although her actual health improves, like Ellen in Basso's *Wine of the Country* (1941), her mental health deteriorates in the South's Gothic environment, where the impish and dwarfish Dee-Dee, a kind of demon child, sneaks up on the pale Elinor, spies on her through doorway cracks and peeps in on her through her bedroom window at night.

In the meantime, Sam returns to Willswood, disillusioned with the equally racist environment of the North. However, the victim of more racism in the South, Sam does not find the peace he so much longs for. At the same time, Dekker, who has strangely disappeared from the story, wanders about the South and takes on all sorts of blue collar jobs, working in tanneries, mills and mines. Yet, like Sam, he feels the pull of his roots and finally returns to the family plantation.

Back at Willswood, Dee-Dee, who likes to torment animals, takes his cruelty a step further and pushes the unsuspecting Elinor in front of Tard Sturkins's onrushing car. Witnessing the scene, Sam leaps for the little girl and saves her life. Unfortunately, his embrace of the shocked little girl and his kisses are misinterpreted by the "nigger hating" Sturkins who subsequently beats him up. Dekker comes to Sam's aid and although Sam is rehabilitated and thanked profusely by the Blackheaths, he can no longer tolerate the constant exposure to racism and hangs himself. Dee-Dee dies too; fleeing the loft where he is hiding, the strange child falls to its death. In the closing pages of the novel, Horace dies of old age and, though these deaths seem

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350 Like Brand, Huey Long greatly improved the infrastructure of Louisiana; the highways he built changed Louisiana from a rural backwater to a part of the United States.

351 Their relationship, which is endearing and genuine, bears striking resemblance to the relationship Miss Daisy and her black chauffeur have in the Hollywood movie, *Driving Miss Daisy* (1989).
to further the disintegration of the Blackheath household, the continuance of the family line has somehow been secured by Dekker’s return. Not only has he returned a “man,” the announcement of the coming of Jonquill Keitt, a girl on whom Dekker has always had a silent crush, appears to warrant the Blackheath progeny. The concluding scene leaves the reader with an image of the South that will not go away:

Behind the house Jeff Davis worked the pump, the handle rattling and the water sloshing into the pail, and from the cabins the voices of children rose thin and quarrelling on the sunlit air. They shrilled their quarrel out and then there was only the sing-song of the pump and the glittering afternoon drawing subtly to its close. Splashes of sunlight fell upon the house and from the fields there came the scent of growing cane. (CS, 378-379)

Dekker Blackheath is a considerable improvement over Tony Clezac. As a character, he is not only more consistent, he also wins the affection of the reader more easily. Where Tony is a rather weak and introverted character who is all feeling, Dekker is strong, extraverted and guided by instinct. Also, while Tony’s revolt is modest and inane, as he silently mocks the Church and quietly tries to live up to the gentlemanly image of his grandfather, Dekker exclaims “To hell with the Bible,” (CS, 5) and “To hell with being a gentleman!” (CS, 151) In fact, Dekker casts aside everything that is Southern and associated with the South: he does not only flee from his adoptive family but also resents Southern religion (as epitomized by his pious aunt Elizabeth), Southern gentlemanliness, Southern hospitality, Southern sentimentalities and Southern white trash (as personified by Tard Sturkins). 352 Besides rebelling against his Southern heritage, Dekker, like his creator, scoffs at law and politics. He describes the legal

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352 To give an instance of Dekker’s rebellion against Southern hospitality: he tells the reader on page 301 that “Southern hospitality was a great bore sometimes. It didn’t ring true. People went through all the motions of being hospitable but there was no inner hospitality behind it. Hospitality was a tradition they had to live up to.”
profession as grubbing "around in other people's business and spouting your head off before some pot-bellied judge!"(CS, 172), and calls political activists (of Josephson's and Cowley's kind) "futile and cowardly" because they merely "run around trying to identify themselves with the working class, declaiming that they belong to the proletariat" (CS, 301).

Although Dekker appears to be a working-class hero who would be on the side of the revolution "if there was a revolution tomorrow"(CS, 301), he does not sympathize with the Communist Party but thinks the organization too exclusive a "club." Also, despite the hero's blue collar episode, which may strike a proletarian note, Cinnamon Seed is not a proletarian novel. Notwithstanding Basso's proletarian New Republic articles on Southern mills and strikes, he insisted that this novel was not proletarian or political, as that would be "a pose" on his part. According to Basso, Dekker's work in the mills and the tannery was merely to have him "object to the Capitalistic system," and was, as such, entirely "incidental" to the novel.

While the hero may be a-political, his rebellion and refusal to conform to Southern society are rooted in the fact that, unlike his forebears, Dekker does not have anything "to believe in [or] something to accept without questioning, just as [Langley and Edward] accepted their Episcopalianism and their God" (CS, 208-209). Knowing that the meaning of planters' families has become obsolete in a changing South where men like Harry Brand "run the show"(CS, 209), Dekker has to reinvent his own and his family's role and significance in society. Tony experiences the same dilemma when he realizes that he cannot make the same choices and lead the same life as his grandfather did. The heroes' orphaned state as well as the sense that they have fallen into a crack between the old order and the new, aggravate their lonely condition. "I have no home," Dekker says, "I am an orphan" (CS, 8).

Ironically, in spite of the heroes' "homelessness," they need to return home to come to a definition of their identities and roles in society. While Tony's quest for a mature and full

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354 Hamilton Basso, letter Maxwell Perkins, 2 August 1933, Scribner's Archives, Princeton.
identity only starts upon his arrival home, Dekker's quest has been fulfilled by his homecoming: "He was back now . . . In the end, no matter what you said or did, you always came back. You scrubbed hides, you drove a dinky, . . . you sweated and got drunk and gave yourself to the moment, and then you came back. There are some things you cannot escape. What next? Who knew? Perhaps the storm. But for a moment, before it came, here was peace again, peace and beauty, a deep healing sense of peace" (CS, 338).

In Relics and Angels and Cinnamon Seed, the homecoming of the hero is inextricably tied up with his ultimate Bildung and rapprochement with his family and society. Accordingly, as if Dekker's revolt against his Southern heritage, his family and society never took place, in the end, he reconciles himself with being a planter, his love for the soil being too much a "part of his being" (CS, 175). Basso told Perkins that, eventually, Dekker "could not get away from the pull of the earth, from the tradition of several generations of planters. And so finally he goes back home . . . Once home, he understands that there is what we might call an obligation of blood, of history and that is his proper place in life." A sense of place as well as an understanding of the family identity are prerequisites to the hero's final maturation and the key determinants in his pursuit of happiness.

Maxwell Perkins was enchanted with the novel's atmosphere but complained that Dekker lacked prominence as a hero. Since Basso rounded out characters like Olivia and Langley so much, Dekker was not, in Perkins's view, the main character of the book: "his direction is vague and so is he when he grows up . . . the story spreads out into pools and shallows and gradually dissipates itself." Dorothy Scarborough, critic of the New York Times Book Review made the same point; although she praised Cinnamon Seed as an "interesting novel of

\[355\] Ibid.

\[356\] Maxwell Perkins, letter to Hamilton Basso, 31 July 1933, Scribner's Archives, Princeton.
the new South,” she did not think that Dekker was the most important, let alone most interesting character in the book.\footnote{357}

Perkins’s and Scarborough’s criticism was justified. In later novels too, Basso would sometimes fail to foreground the protagonist in such a way as to make him the designated hero.\footnote{358} At the same time, one may ascribe \textit{Cinnamon Seed}’s “dissipation,” or Dekker’s lack of distinction as a hero, to its panoramic quality. Or rather, the problem of the protagonist is no longer an issue if one assumes that Dekker is not the hero but that his family, as a whole, act as the corporate protagonist. As in \textit{Relics and Angels}, \textit{Cinnamon Seed}’s characters derive their ultimate identity from their family. Thus we find Olivia reflect: “Here, in this earth, was rooted the history of her house. Its story was their story . . . there they had all lived, gaining meaning from their place and time and leaving behind them, on the earth, some slight impress of themselves. Not until Carter went to New Orleans followed by Kinloch, had the earth ever been deserted; and now save for herself, the desertion was complete” (CS, 263). Like Tony, Olivia and Dekker experience the same sense of duty, or “obligation of the blood” and the soil, and it is for this reason also that Olivia stays and Dekker returns to the family estate. The Blackheaths are exemplary in their manifestation of family solidarity. Not only are the “wild” Blackheaths (Langley, Olivia and Dekker) the backbone of the family since they are most pertinacious in their preservation of the estate, they also represent the family’s continuity: when one is momentarily offstage, the other takes over to either remember the past (Langley), preserve the present (Olivia) or secure the future (Dekker). Robert Coates described the Blackheath cohesion as a “kind of pull that exists between relatives, no matter how far apart they may be or how much at odds.”\footnote{359}


\footnote{358} Basso’s \textit{In Their Own Image} (1935) and \textit{Wine of the Country} (1941) exhibit this flaw too.

\footnote{359} Robert Coates, letter to Hamilton Basso, 20 February 1934, Hamilton Basso Collection, Beinecke Library, New Haven.
The Blackheaths' extraordinary family identity is strengthened by heredity patterns and the history the family shares. Joseph Millichap has justly argued that the Blackheaths resemble William Faulkner's McCaslings in the way in which the family's past relationships reverberate in the present. Like the McCaslings in *Go Down, Moses* (1942), the Blackheaths inherit the burdens, curses and relationships of the past. Additionally, *Cinnamon Seed* exhibits a systematic twinning of people's fates, thus the novel opens as well as closes with a suicide (Kinloch and Sam) and besides the firm tie that exists between Langley, Olivia and Dekker, there is an equally strong bond between Carter, Ann and John: as opposed to the "wild" and rebellious members of the family, who stand firm and do not abandon Willswood, they are the "peaceable" ones who turn a deaf ear to the obligation of the soil and leave for the city. These patterns also apply interracially, that is, the relationship between Robert and Bella returns in the relations between Sam and Ann, Dee-Dee and Elinor, and, more Platonically, Horace and Olivia. Similarly, Langley's relationship with Horace echoes the master-servant relationship of Edward and Jube. Less obvious but certainly more than coincidental is the analogy between Dekker's and Sam's rebellion, their secretive leavetaking and their unexpected return home. Forever a family unit, the Blackheaths and their servants are one, and as such, their fates are wholly intertwined.

The different family patterns and the opposition between the "wild" and the "peaceable" Blackheaths further resound in the Old South-New South contrariety. Representing Willswood and the ways of the Old South, Langley, Olivia, Dekker (and Horace) are fundamentally different from those who have abandoned the plantation in favor of a life in the city. The "peaceable" ones, Ann, Carter and John are more inclined towards compromise and thus more acceptant of the changes of the day; as new Southerners, they embrace progress and enjoy material wealth and bourgeois luxuries. They drive automobiles and John boasts about golf and trips to Europe. Also, Carter refuses to live as if it were still 1860: claiming that the "caste

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360 Millichap, 42-48. Millichap further suggests that it is not unlikely that Faulkner might have been inspired by *Cinnamon Seed* as "in all possibility Faulkner would have read his friend's first successful novel."
system" of the Old South has disappeared, he has no qualms about employing Harry Brand. Conversely, the Willswood residents know neither progress nor wealth. Riding their carriages, they scoff at the automobile and, still conscious of their class, they resent Carter for stooping to trash like Brand. As for Horace, in contrast to his successful grandson Lance, who leaves for the city to become a famous jazz musician, he is stunted by his conservatism: until his death, he is the selfsame servant that his grandfather was.

To draw attention to the societal transition from Old South to New South, the narrator alludes frequently to the nature of the changing order. While Horace admits to the “Cunnel” that they “ain’t much longer for dis wu’ld” (CS, 134), Langley feels lost in the vast “uncertain emptiness that separated two alien but sometimes identical worlds” (CS, 55). Remembering the Golden Age when the garden was in bloom and the minstrel songs mingled with the tinkling of crystal chandeliers at plantation balls, Langley does not see that, in reality, Willswood House is, like the Clezac house, in a state of disrepair and decay. Like the Clezac garden, we find that behind the house, “where the formal gardens once were, the trees had grown into a thicket” (CS, 46). Also, symbolizing the advent of the new age, the industrial push is tangible and relentless. As the highway comes closer and closer, Horace and Olivia notice the transformation that the neighboring Bennett plantation underwent upon its sale to an oil company. Even warfare has become an industry. Contrasting the Civil War to the mechanized warfare of World War I, Langley’s friend, Solomon, observes: “Men don’t fight men no more. It’s machines fightin’ machines” (CS, 160). Finally, to emphasize that the antebellum era is a bittersweet remembrance of things past, the narrator has Langley, like some aged Eugene Gant, look back and mourn the evanescence of time in plaintive expressions such as “Lost and forever gone!” Particularly Wolfian, and gratingly so, is Langley’s sentimental “Oh youth! Oh life! Oh time! Oh yesterday!” (CS, 143).

In his sometimes sentimentalized juxtapositions of the plantation past and the industrialized present, Basso does not seem to have been partial to either era. Just as he condemns the many feudalisms of the Old South, so does he insist that modern times and a life in the city do not necessarily guarantee progress or happiness. While the plantation survives as a kind of anachronism, the city is hit by the Depression and John’s conversations turn from golf to
economics. Also, Carter's law firm, though much more profitable than Willswood, is brought in disrepute because of Brand's dirty politics. Sam does not insure his happiness in the city either: due to the Depression, he loses his job and returns to the country where Willswood serves as his safety net.

The impression that Basso's preferences may have gone out to the Old South because of his apparent sympathies for the "wild" Blackheaths, is misleading. *Cinnamon Seed* is not an *apologia* for the antebellum era or a retelling of the popular plantation fable. On the contrary, Olivia, who functions as a kind of bridge between the old generation and the new, is realistic enough to concede that times have changed: "all the old things were gone and forgotten. There was a new way of life now, the old strict forms were shattered and broken... Once all this had stood for something merged into a rich congruent, organic design whose significance transcended the material facts of acres and slaves and a big house with trees. But now... that significance was gone [and] lost" (CS, 209-210).

All the same, although this passage seems to indicate that the plantation era has come to a definite end, the novel is marked by inconclusiveness as its closing scene presents the opposite of what Olivia finally acknowledges. Willswood may be in decline but the closing scene of the Big House and the moonlit cane fields leaves the reader with the impression that the plantation myth is in fact ineradicable. The lack of true progress or change has been especially brought to light by the race relations in the book. Because Basso was so concerned about a truthful depiction of the African-American condition in his *New Republic* pieces and, since he seems to have been particularly articulate about this issue in *Cinnamon Seed*, we will have a brief look at Sam's story, which is one of the novel's subplots.

Although the black character was never absent from the earliest of Southern fiction, it was not until the nineteen-twenties and thirties that the stereotyping of the black character was called into question.\footnote{John Bradbury, *Renaissance in the South* (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1963) 79.} Whereas prior to the twenties, blacks were often seen as plantation "types" (e.g. the contented slave, the brute nigger, the comic negro, the black mammy and the tragic
mulatto) in the course of the twentieth century, the black type became increasingly human. While William Faulkner has received special credit for his role in this evolution, Basso was very much ahead of his time too in his sensitive portrayal of the black Southerner.

In *Cinnamon Seed* the question of race is first introduced when the young Dekker stumbles upon the hidden lives of the black servants: perturbed by the hysteria of a bayou revival meeting, Dekker runs home and asks his aunt how blacks are different from whites. Olivia is evasive. As someone who has inherited the feudal views of her family, she answers that it is something one must "feel," and as something that has been "arranged" (CS, 69-70). As can be expected, this does not satisfy the boy's curiosity, so he approaches Horace with the same question. Horace is equally vague. Having learned to accept the difference, his answer is that "De diffunse am already dere" (CS, 70). Overhearing this conversation, Sam objects and tells Dekker that blacks are "an oppressed and exploited people," which elicits Horace's flippant admonition: "One day he's gonter open dat big mouf er his'n onct too often. Den dey's gonter be a diffunse sho-de diffunse 'tween a dead nigger en a live un. Yessuh!" (CS, 71).

There is a distinct difference between Horace and Sam. Whereas Horace falls into the category of the "docile and happy-go-lucky servant" stereotype, Sam's character defies any such categorization. For a thirties' novel Sam is an unusual black character as he is presented as a human being of flesh and blood. Also, as a character who inherited the wild streak of the Blackheaths, Sam is essentially the opposite of Horace. In contrast to Horace, who, as the typical "good Negro" of local color fiction, is loyal, laidback, content, lazy, naive and jolly, Sam is rebellious, defiant, unhappy, proud, intelligent and serious. Nicknamed "Mr. Edjucation" and described as an "uppity black," Sam can neither identify with the plantation blacks nor feel comfortable among whites. Feeling both superior and inferior, Sam's mixed blood lies at the root of his tragedy because, "homeless" like Dekker, he walks the no man's land between the two races. This condition is not unusual in the case of the mulatto. Like Faulkner, Basso would take the mulatto as the quintessential victim of a segregated culture, or

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as Irving Howe writes: "Trapped between the demarcated races, the mulatto is an unavoidable candidate for the role of the victim" and is therefore often referred to as the "tragic mulatto," a type that already existed in Southern fiction of the nineteenth century.\(^{363}\)

Comparing Sam to other mulattoes in Southern fiction, he is probably closest to Faulkner's Joe Christmas in *Light in August* (1932) and Carson McCullers' Sherman Pew in *Clock Without Hands* (1961). Although Sam is a softer and more saintlike version of Joe and Sherman, the predicament of these mulattoes is the same. In spite of their recalcitrance, defiance and daring, Sam, Joe and Sherman are lonely and sad characters who are highly self-conscious of their color. An embittered man by the end of the novel, Sam "had tried to establish an identity unconditioned by the color of his skin, to be not a negro but a man. [Yet] he was still a negro. No matter what happened . . . he would never be able to escape the pigmentation of his skin" (CS, 284). Correspondingly, Christmas and Pew cannot escape the pigmentation of their skin either: once people know that they are of mixed blood, they are pigeonholed and treated as blacks. Fellow blacks, on the other hand, view them as whites, or part white, and therefore do not accept them either. This schizophrenia of color, or inability to find comfort in either the black or the white world, ultimately leads to Sam's, Joe's and Sherman's sad deaths.

The fate they share notwithstanding, Sam is also very different from Joe and Sherman. Whereas the latter two succumb to uncontrolled violence and act out their roles as assertive and aggressive avengers of the black race, Sam is not a black nemesis but a passive victim of the white race. Indeed, one may even wonder if Sam, in all his martyrdom, is not too much a duplicate of Beecher-Stowe's Uncle Tom.

In an earlier outline of the novel Sam's story is slightly different.\(^{364}\) Whereas in the novel Sam saves Elinor from a fatal accident, in a typescript version of the book he simply sneaks up on her and covers her with kisses. This scene is witnessed by Tard who then raises a lynching


\(^{364}\) Hamilton Basso, letter to Maxwell Perkins, 31 July 1933, Scribner's Archives, Princeton.
mob and, in spite of Dekker's heroic defense, in which he is wounded, Sam is captured and lynched. In effect, this outline has a few things in common with the plot of *Courthouse Square* (1936). In that novel the protagonist defends his fellow citizen, also a tragic mulatto, against a bloodthirsty mob, and is hurt. Like Dekker, who, in the outline, was to be reunited with the love of his life in the end, the hero of *Courthouse Square* finds his estranged wife by his bedside when he comes to.

Since Basso opted for Sam's heroism and tragic suicide and avoided the controversial topic of miscegenation, *Cinnamon Seed* is a straightforward indictment of racism in the South. The same applies to *Clock Without Hands*: in that novel too, the reader cannot ignore the writer's plea for civil rights' reform after the piano-playing Sherman is cruelly bombed by a white mob. The thrust of *Light in August* is less unequivocal. Since Christmas is such a controversial character whom neither the narrator nor the reader can fathom, the book's implications are much more complex. This is also what distinguishes Faulkner's treatment of the black character from Basso's. In Faulkner's oeuvre African-American characters are always seen from without, through the eyes of white people; in Basso's novels, and in *Cinnamon Seed* in particular, the black character is seen from within. Thus whereas Faulkner uses the epithets of "impenetrable" and "inscrutable" to describe mulatto characters like Christmas and Lucas Beauchamp, Basso takes the liberty of placing himself inside Sam's character. And while Faulkner, and to a lesser extent McCullers, seem to imply that there will always be a rift between the black and white world as the white man will never fully understand the black man, Basso does not appear to have such reservations and simply functions as a spokesman for the negro. The question remains whether Basso succeeds, for despite his good intentions, his vision is one-sided as well as ambivalent. Sam may be human and real but Horace never rises above the level of the black stereotype.

Nonetheless, critics praised *Cinnamon Seed* for its unusual and realistic treatment of blacks and Perkins told Basso that they were "presented differently" from what he had "ever known before." 365 Indeed, in *The Negro in American Culture* (1956), Margaret Butcher singled out

365 Maxwell Perkins, letter to Hamilton Basso, 2 April 1934, Scribner's Archives, Princeton.
Basso, William March and Robert Rylee as writers who "picked up the challenge of the South in a third generation defiance of its sacred taboos, especially its sex mores and the subject of the Negro, [writing] not so much in specific desire for retributive justice for the Negro as out of loyalty to realism's basic credo."366

The reviews hailed Basso as a "gifted young writer who deserves wide recognition" and significantly (from a Southern Renascence point of view), as one of the "rising young" penmen who were "going to create something uncommonly first-rate out of the supposedly barren soil of Southern letters."367 Not without flaws, one being the problem of the protagonist and the other Basso's crowding of the plot, *Cinnamon Seed* is a considerable improvement over *Relics and Angels*. It is not for nothing that James E. Rocks called the book the "author's most enjoyable and satisfying novel" and Joseph Millichap described it as one of Basso's "most interesting and best written works."368

What makes the novel especially fascinating is that of Basso's Southern novels, *Cinnamon Seed* is perhaps the best example of a Southern Renascence work. Some of the Southern Renascence motifs as summed up by John Bradbury, that is, the guilty relationship with the slave past, disintegration and decay after defeat, the past functioning as a framework for the present, the black experience, the contrast between the city and the country and the transition from the Old South to the New South are all clearly present in the novel. In addition, like Basso's first novel, *Cinnamon Seed* can be categorized as a social novel of manners: it does not only examine the life and behavior of a certain Southern class, but also deals with the


consequences of a new order replacing the old one. Above all, it is a novel that aims at Southern realism and though, occasionally, the author gets carried away with the charms of the past, the book’s plantation material has not been used to glorify the antebellum era but to show the reader that that era is incongruous with modern times. Like Ellen Glasgow, William Faulkner, Eudora Welty and other writers of the Southern Renascence, Basso did not borrow characters, plots, conventions and stereotypes from nineteenth-century Southern romance writers and local colonists to perpetuate this popular tradition but to transcend it.\footnote{Merrill Maguire Skaggs, \textit{The Folk of Southern Fiction} (Athens: U of Georgia P, 1972) 221-234.} Finally, \textit{Cinnamon Seed} may be seen as the fictional realization of Allen Tate’s Southern Renascence definition, for as a novel that has the “anamnestic” setting of Willswood as its focal point, the book is the prosaic embodiment of a present that is conscious of, and derives its meanings from, the past. Or, as Basso told Perkins when he conceived his plan for the novel: “It’s about the South but about the South, I think and hope, in a different way-- seen through the flux and flow of people’s lives.”\footnote{Hamilton Basso, letter to Maxwell Perkins, 11 July 1933, Scribner’s Archives, Princeton.}
Cinnamon Seed had barely rolled off Scribner’s presses, when Basso was already steeped in the writing of his 1935 novel which was to be “pitched . . . in a different key”: “I cannot go on,” Basso announced to Perkins, “as some of my friends do, rewriting the same book over and over.”371 Dreading that he was going to be pigeonholed as a “Southern writer,” Basso had not realized yet that the South would remain the best material for his novelistic potential.

Whenever Basso’s pen left Dixie—in In Their Own Image (1935), in parts of Wine of the Country (1941), in The Greenroom (1949) and in his last novel, A Touch of the Dragon (1964)—his work would lack the depth, passion and atmosphere that all his Southern novels possess. Because of the poor quality of In Their Own Image, one may readily agree with Howard Mumford Jones’s destructive criticism that “Mr. Basso’s novel” is simply “very brittle and very bad.”372 However, it would be equally “brittle and bad” to then dismiss the novel out of hand, as Jones did.

Although a comprehensive discussion of the novel would not bring the reader to an ultimate appreciation of the work, the book is worthwhile in its exposition of some of Basso’s thirties’ opinions. While it does not deserve any credit for its shaky plots, its cardboard characters, its lack of a protagonist, its ineffective suspense, its occasional melodrama and the strange motivations of some of its characters, In Their Own Image makes sense in the wider context of Basso’s political journalism for the New Republic and his epistolary battles with Malcolm Cowley and Matthew Josephson. Also, being a two-dimensional rather than a three-dimensional work, an allegory rather than a novel, In Their Own Image should not so much be appraised


from an aesthetic point of view as from the standpoint of its ideas. This means that neither an elaborate outline nor a profound analysis of the novel will much further appreciation of the work as a whole. Instead, one is better served with a brief outline and discussion of the novel’s underlying ideas, most of which are voiced by Basso’s mouthpiece, John Pine.

Inspired by Basso’s visits to Southern mills and his vacations in Aiken, *In Their Own Image* was to bring out the contrasts between the haves of polo-playing Aiken and the have-nots of the nearby mill village, Berrytown. Unfortunately, however, most of the novel’s action is monopolized by the lame get-togethers of the idle rich. The book opens with the arrival of Pierson James, whose successful advertising launched the fame and fortune of the hostess, the “Mayonnaise Queen,” Emma Troy. Her “Aiken cottage,” which bears great resemblance to Biltmore, the Vanderbilt mansion in Asheville that Basso must have been familiar with as he lived in Pisgah Forest, houses a number of guests, among them two caricatured Europeans who rail at what they see as the many absurdities of American culture.

Social climber that she is, Emma tries to arrange a marriage between her sympathetic but unhappy daughter, Virginia, and the Americanophobic Italian Count, Aldo Piedmontese. Weary of her mother’s match-making, Virginia is frightened to enter a marriage with a man she does not love and elopes with the commoner Tommy. Besides Virginia there is Emma’s son, Freddie, who, as a grotesque example of well-to-do and constipated indifference, is described as a “heavy, lumbering, dull-witted dog” (ITOI, 196). To bring out his pathetic side even more, Basso places him in a marriage with Benita Sturme, who, like another Carmen, derives great pleasure from seducing and dumping lovers. In an early plan for the novel, Basso named her “Roxanne” and wanted her story to be the central one to the novel. But since her nymphomania might have been too much for the straitlaced Perkins, she became, as Benita, one of the many minor characters in the book.

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374 With the typical circumspect deliberations of a young writer, Basso told Perkins in his outline “Roxanne”: “this will not be a ‘scandalous’ book as I have no stomach for that sort of
One of Benita's "crawling" and "drooling" love slaves is the painter, Kurt Beach. To satisfy his materialism, Beach has prostituted his art to the whims of the rich. Wishing he could be a portrait painter like Sargent, he ends up a second-rate Stubbs. Bored with painting horses and remorseful over his selling out, he is utterly frustrated yet cannot bring himself to return to "the clean exhilarating air of art" (ITOI, 76). Although he tries to take up portrait painting again, planning to paint the portraits of "the middle class Small Town," Beach's arrival in Berrytown is viewed with suspicion and, afraid to trespass, he flees back into the arms of his wealthy patronesses.

Conversely, Michael Langford, also a painter but a native of the mill village, is intrigued with the glamor of Aiken. Painting the various Aiken estates, Langford is seen as an intruder too, and, falling victim to the Red Scare paranoia of the rich, he is killed by one of Emma's detectives. Berrytown and Aiken are worlds apart and the incident seems to illustrate, in a rather black and white fashion, that the chasm between America's very poor and very rich can never be bridged.

John Pine is a third painter in the novel, and as Millichap has suggested, he has no relation to the plot at all but is simply "trotted in whenever Basso needs a forceful spokesman for one of his own ideas." Pine's observations are interesting because they echo Basso's views with relation to the rich, art and the South. Simultaneously, his comments are chafing: his editorializing is obtrusive, repetitive and really belongs in the columns of the New Republic rather than on the pages of a novel.

thing. This girl's sexual adventures will not be given any unnecessary importance. They will not be played down but they will also not be played up. I want them to be artistically real rather than realistically real . . . -without turning my back on realism in any way. What I am trying to say . . . is that the book is not to be a book about screwing. Screwing will have its place, just as it has its place in life, but it will not be the end and aim of the book. I am more interested in helping these people to become alive." (Hamilton Basso, "Roxanne," ts., Scribner's Archives, Princeton, n. pag.)

375 Millichap, 50.
After Michael’s death, the season is over and the party disperses. The two Europeans depart out of fear of more killings and James is headed for a marriage with Emma, who, through Virginia’s leap for happiness, comes to see the folly of her struggle for high life. According to Millichap, this ending resembles the conclusion of “many a 1930s film comedy where the social-climbing wife receives her comeuppance and realizes the error of her ways.”

To give the plot an extra twist and the story a redundant climax, Benita is caught cuckolding when her husband finds her in bed with a prizefighter. This incident is a residue of the Roxanne outline and Basso may have thought that it was too good an episode to waste. However, the event has clearly been pasted in and hence seems forced and purposeless to the novel as a whole.

Basso’s delineation of Aiken society life, a world that is vaguely reminiscent of Fitzgerald’s dramas of the *nouveaux riches*, is mainly intended as a satirical indictment of the vain lives of the rich and famous. In contrast to the mill village, which forms a bleak locale of poverty, unemployment and social unrest, Aiken is a “horse” and decadent scene of empty materialism and hedonism. In order to convey the artificiality, or “make-believe” of the latter, the narrator resorts repeatedly to the metaphor of the theater. For instance, the butler is said to look like a butler out of a play and the different characters are perceived as actors and actresses who dutifully say their lines.

According to one of John Pine’s many theories, the theatricality of Aiken has been “manufactured” by the rich as a means to shut out Berrytown realities. Sheltered by their capitalism, the jet set use their money to buy themselves out of reality: “The greatest value of money to these people is that it enables them to purchase an escape from reality. They wall themselves in with money the way a fort is walled with stone—a series of fortifications all designed to keep them protected from reality” (ITOI, 144). Living in their own cushioned

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376 Millichap, 55.

377 For various references to the theater, see pages: 12; 15; 135; 141-142; 151; 158.
“reality,” or rather, living “in their own image,” the rich create a cocoon which renders them oblivious to the problems of the outside world.

But there is more to Pine’s theory. Basso, who, by 1935, had started his reading of the Behaviorists (whose ideas he would employ more extensively in Days Before Lent [1939]), has Pine further expound that the moneyed classes, by locking themselves out of reality, would ultimately be unable to distinguish between illusion and reality. Pine calls this a “schizophrenic” state of mind and sees it as detrimental to the rich’s overall “conditioning.” Knowing deep down that “the rich live in a manufactured, unreal world” (ITOI, 204) in which true art cannot flourish, Kurt tries to break out of that conditioning but his failure to do so shows that he has been conditioned too much already. Langford’s failure to break through in the other direction finally proves Pine’s point that it “is just as hard for the rich to escape from their class as it is for the poor to escape from theirs” (ITOI, 143).

An oracular commentator and outside observer, Pine does not only set off the haves against the have-nots but also contrasts the rich’s denial of reality to the artist’s embrace of reality. Like Basso, who valued authenticity in literature, Pine believes that the true artist should not shun reality but immerse himself in it. This means that, like a quintessential “go-and-see-America” artist of the Depression era, Pine does not paint “a single goddamned mammy or a colonel or a house with white columns” but “Good honest American stuff, stuff with guts to it,” like for instance “cotton gins, nigger cabins, mill workers, poor whites [and] those brick chimneys that remain standing when a house burns down” (ITOI, 139). Conversing with Beach, who is a Southerner, Pine claims that the South is not represented by “what your granddaddies did in the Civil War” but by the “modern South.” Most Southerners, however, Pine continues, “talk” as if “the modern South does not exist,” that is, Southerners have been “so busy affirming the past” that they have “forgotten all about the present”(ITOI, 174). Needless to say, this is a well-known Basso argument. Moreover, Pine’s theory of the rich’s “unreality” versus the poor’s reality underscores Basso’s belief that it is in the South especially, where people are so accustomed to ducking reality already, that the rich can get away more easily with their negation of the truth.
Pine does not only function as a character who vents Basso's objections to the extremes of capitalism and the South. As an artist, he also voices the novelist's artistic creed. While the premise of Pine's aesthetics boils down to his preference of reality to make-believe, he also reveals that art should not merely equal realism but should, ideally, stay away from the esoteric and the political. Accordingly, Basso's denunciation of Cowley's panegyric of Auden's poetry may come to mind when we hear Pine mutter that he does not like Picasso because he "intellectualized all the guts out of painting" (ITOI, 138). Likewise, Basso's remark that his art was not drawn from books but had been inspired by life, experience and people lies at the core of Pine's argument that art "had to be rooted in a man's place and time. The only important art" is art that springs from "a deep awareness of life. It was experience absorbed by a man of great talent and returned to the world in a form that only he might impress upon it" (ITOI, 188). Similarly, the debates that Langford has with his union friend, Timothy, remind one of Basso's discussions with Josephson. While Tim tries to "radicalize" Michael, the latter refuses --like Basso-- to "turn his art into an instrument of class warfare" (ITOI, 102).

In conclusion, one may say that In Their Own Image did not really contribute to Basso's development as a novelist. The work seems to have been written in haste and is badly conceived. In addition, Basso's preachifying and ardent arguments with relation to capitalism, art and the South may be interesting but are too nakedly present in the novel and make the characters look pale and lifeless. Colored by issues of the day, the novel is a mediocre mixture of social satire and proletarian art. Due to Basso's inexperience with either of these genres, the book is shallow and never manages to grip the reader. Fortunately, Basso's next novel, Courthouse Square (1936), can be seen as a strong come-back of his talents as a Southern novelist. In contrast to In Their Own Image, it would establish his reputation as a promising Southern writer.
When Kurt Beach conceives his plan to paint the American Small Town, he tells Emma Troy: "You have no idea . . . how many hidden currents of emotions are concealed beneath the apparent stagnation of life in a small town" (ITOI, 205). Letitia, who is the Northern wife of the Southern hero in Courthouse Square, comes to the same conclusion when she visits her husband's hometown for the first time. Upon her arrival, she senses that underneath the placid serenity of Macedon, there is a "current of smouldering subterranean violence, which, like the fires that eat through the earth in the coal regions, might burst at any moment into sudden and reckless flame." Inspired by the concept of the "savage ideal" (i.e. the Southerner's proneness to violence), Courthouse Square portrays the Janus-faced quality of the Southern small town which bears great resemblance to the two-facedness of the novel's hero, David Barondess: like the town, David's gentle and polite exterior hides a Southern temperament of "dark and smoking violence, which, without any warning, might flare up and lead him to the excesses of anger and rage" (CTS, 357). Courthouse Square can be seen as a composite portrait of a man and his town; Letitia for one notices that it "was incredible that a man and a place could be so much alike" (CTS, 367). The parallel is significant for it endows the novel with a unity that is lacking in Relics and Angels and In Their Own Image. Whereas the first three novels reflect a burgeoning of Basso's apprentice years, Courthouse Square is a mature novel that was to put Basso on the map with important Southern writers such as William Faulkner and Thomas Wolfe. After the weak In Their Own Image, Courthouse Square embodies a successful return to Southern Renascence material as well as a renewed preoccupation with the motif of the Southerner's homecoming.

Like Relics and Angels, Courthouse Square opens with the return of the native. Disenchanted with Greenwich Village and "still conscious of his New York clothes" (CTS, 3),

378 Hamilton Basso, Courthouse Square (New York: Scribner's, 1936) 357.
David Barondess steps on to the dusty town square of Macedon and finds that nothing has changed. David, on the other hand, has. Having left the town as an adolescent, he returns a man. Like George Webber in Thomas Wolfe’s *You Can’t Go Home Again* (1940), David has become a successful novelist. But success is a relative term because like George’s writings, David’s work on the South is not held in high esteem by his fellow townsmen.

However, David’s return is not merely an escape from the platitudes of New York intellectual life. What really triggered his flight from the Big Apple is a severe mental crisis. Already a strained relationship due to a Northern-Southern “culture lag.” David’s marriage finally crumbles when the pregnant Letitia slips on an icy sidewalk and loses their baby.379 After a sad parting in Central Park, Letitia leaves for Central America and David returns home. His homecoming is both an attempt to come to terms with his grief and the fulfillment of his wish to write a book about his grandfather, Edward, who, as one of few Southerners, fought in the Union army.

The Barondess family, whose name does not only have an aristocratic ring to it but also contains the letters B-A-S-S-O, is an impoverished version of the Blackheath family: “One understands, from the house and the gardens about it, that the people who lived here originally were not wealthy but only moderately well-to-do: and that the fortunes of their descendants have suffered a considerable decline” (CTS, 11). Though the Barondesses have come down in social status, the people in town think they put on airs and therefore gossip about them as being “queer” (CTS, 48).

The reason for the Barondesses’ ostracism goes back to the family patriarch who, like the patriarchs in two of Basso’s novels thus far, determines the family identity and behavioral ethics for his progeny. Thus Edward’s sympathies for the black Southerner are inherited by his son, John, and his grandson, David. While John is a retired judge who made himself unpopular by disallowing his courtroom to be the playground for racial prejudice and family feuds, David

379 Letitia’s fall on the sidewalk is based on the death of Edmund Wilson’s wife, Margaret Canby, who tripped on some stairs and cracked her skull.
embraces the family identity too, when, in the end, he courageously saves a mulatto townsman out of the hands of a lynching mob. Living on “Abolition Hill,” a name that may be somewhat too obvious, the Barondesses are social outcasts because of their “nigger-loving” libertarianism.

Just as Dekker’s story in *Cinnamon Seed* runs parallel with that of Sam’s, so is David’s story tied up with that of Alcide Fauget, who, because of his education and mulatto background, may well be seen as Sam’s fictional brother. Like the Barondesses, Fauget is liable to become a pariah; that is, coming from out of town and being academically trained, Fauget runs the risk of being stigmatized as an “uppity black.” However, his self-effacing behavior and diligent service as the town’s druggist turn him into an unobtrusive member of the Macedon community.

What Fauget’s fellow citizens are unaware of is that he is really the son of the town’s Confederate hero, Cincinnatus Legendre, whose statue is in the town square, which is also “courthouse square.” Following in his father’s footsteps, though considerably quieter in his heroism, Fauget wants to buy the derelict Legendre plantation mansion, renovate it and turn it into a Negro Hospital. When John Barondess gives Fauget the necessary legal advice, one of the Barondess servants overhears the conversation and the news is leaked to the local newspaper man and aspiring novelist, Pick Eustis. Always envious of David’s success as a novelist, Eustis distorts the news and announces that Fauget, helped by the Barondess family, wants to buy the house to live in it. Tongues start wagging and in no time the rumor spreads that Fauget is an “uppity nigger” after all. A mob is raised by the town bigot and after having lynched three blacks, the mob proceeds to Fauget’s house. When David intervenes Fauget manages a narrow escape but David himself falls into the hands of the hostile crowd.

Being nursed back to life by his aunt Celia, who is the spitting image of *Cinnamon Seed*’s Olivia, David has, like Harry in Ernest Hemingway’s “The Snows of Kilimanjaro” (1938), feverish visions of preying buzzards, scenes of his country childhood, his life in New York City, and, curiously, “mountain snow” (CTS, 367). But where Harry dies, David survives, comes to and finds his estranged, yet loving wife by his bedside. The ending is sentimental and “smacks of the movies, particularly the ‘woman’s picture’ of that decade, wherein wives nobly
sacrificed themselves for noble husbands." Basso's poor handling of romance and female characters debilitate and date his novels. In defense of Basso, one could argue that the happy ending of Courthouse Square may have been encouraged by Maxwell Perkins who preferred conclusive and commercial endings to open and tragic ones.

Because David is much more a grown-up hero than Tony and Dekker, his homecoming can no longer be seen as instrumental to his Bildung. Nonetheless, he does share some fundamental characteristics with Basso's earlier heroes. Like Tony -- and Eugene Gant in Thomas Wolfe's Look Homeward, Angel (1929) -- he is sensitive and suffers from Weltschmerz and loneliness. Like the rebellious Dekker, he is "in arms against life" (CTS, 368) and like Tony and Dekker too, David is an orphaned hero: although we do get to meet David's father, John Barondess is so absent-minded and caught up in a world of bad memories that he seems more dead than alive. When David tries to start a conversation with him upon his homecoming, he feels as if there is a "pane of glass" between them (CTS, 58).

David's attempts to get through to his father do not succeed. When, towards the novel's ending, David breaks the news of Eustis' slander and wants his father to respond, John seems unperturbed. "He is even beyond hurt... He is not alive at all," David concludes (CTS, 233). While David's father is mentally absent, his mother is physically absent. She died when he was still quite young. Relics and Angels, Cinnamon Seed, Courthouse Square (and Days Before Lent [1939]) reveal that Basso's fiction of the thirties, like Faulkner's fiction of the same decade, offers "no white mothers who are central to the action; ... the mother is often literally or psychologically absent." Instead, the Basso hero is surrounded by spinsterish aunts

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381 The scene is reminiscent of Tony's awkward reunion with Laurine.

(Hermine, Olivia, Elizabeth, Ann and Celia) who are undersexed and fail to fulfill a nurturing role. Whereas Faulkner tries to compensate for the mother’s absence by placing the hero in the care of a black mammy, in Basso’s fiction this mammy is not present either. Consequently, since the Basso hero is truly deprived of a nurturing figure, he is bound to be a lonesome hero in childhood and adult life alike.

David’s loneliness is accentuated by an overall sense of rootlessness. Regardless of his forced attempts to fit in with Greenwich Village’s cream of the crop, he finally rejects New York’s Bohemia, partly because he is repulsed by its intellectual pretense and partly because he fears that he is too much of a “hick” to ever fit in. However, upon his return home, David learns that, while he thought he would never belong in New York City, he has also outgrown the hillbilly ways of Macedon. This gives rise to a sense of double exile or what we have referred to previously as the fundamental “homelessness” of the hero. This homelessness is not a unique characteristic of the Basso hero but can be seen as typical of the Southerner’s conflict with his hometown.

The Southerner’s revolt from the village is most often caused by his outgrowing of his home environment. This applies quite literally to Eugene Gant in Look Homeward, Angel (1929). Being hill-born, hill-bound and hill-haunted, Eugene perceives the town as a locale of entrapment and isolation. These feelings surface especially when the hero --or his father, W.O. Gant-- returns to the town. For example, when after a trip, Gant senior sets foot in the town square again he is overcome by a “sick, green fear, a frozen constriction about his heart because the definite centre of his life looked now so shrunken. He got very definitely the impression that if he flung out his arms they would strike against the walls of the mean three-and-four-storey-brick-built-buildings that flanked the Square ruggedly.”

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383 In chapter I we have already discussed that David’s anti-intellectual attitude reflects Basso’s own sentiments. Curiously, though Courthouse Square is most caviling in its critique of intellectuals, the book was dedicated to Basso’s intellectual friends, Matthew Josephson and Malcolm Cowley.

384 Thomas Wolfe, Look Homeward, Angel (1929; London: Heinemann, 1930) 79.
Eugene returns from college on a Christmas visit home, he is overwhelmed by a similar kind of claustrophobia: “The silent Square seemed to have rushed together during his absence” (LHA, 397).

These feelings of enclosure are most often experienced in the town square. The center of town, or the square, is important not only because it represents, as the oldest part and heart of the town, the town’s identity but also because it is interwoven with the protagonists’ identity: it is in the square after all that both Eugene’s and David’s fathers own their “shops” (i.e. the stone cutter’s shop and the courthouse). It is in the square also that justice (in the courthouse) and injustice (i.e. the raising of the mob) take place. Additionally, in Southern fiction, the town or courthouse square is an anamnestic location as it is the place where past meets present. Thus while in Faulkner’s Soldier’s Pay (1926) the square is the place where Civil War veterans muse and nap in the shade of elm trees, in Courthouse Square the square is frequently brought to the reader’s attention as the territory of Confederate hero, Cincinnatus Legendre. Anchored in the past and being the place where town life convenes, the square is quite literally at the center of people’s lives and thus forms an extension of their identities. It is not for nothing that the opening scene of Courthouse Square takes place in the town square. The square in Look Homeward, Angel is equally conspicuous: as the embodiment of the town’s identity, the square is the setting where Eugene is haunted most by his desire to get out.

Wolfe’s conception of the small town as a scene of claustrophobia is tragic in that the hero is forced into exile. Though Eugene grows up with a profound sense of place and roots, the ultimate quest for a full identity lies beyond the hills, in “strange cities” and among “strange people” (LHA, 511). “Go find yourself, lost boy, beyond the hills,” Eugene’s mother blubbers in a scene of Wolfsian melodrama (LHA, 564). Like Eugene, David acknowledges that he gained a full identity away from home: “I’m not quite the same person I was when I went away. Things have happened to me...”(CTS,57). Also, the town’s physician tells David: “When you left here you were a boy. Now you’re a man” (CTS, 7). Because of these negative perceptions
of the small town as the setting from which the young want to flee, one must conclude that the Southern hero’s general feelings towards his hometown amount to rejection and resentment. But of course the Southerner’s response to his hometown is much more complex than that.

Arguing that Look Homeward, Angel emerged out of Wolfe’s homesickness when he was writing the work far away from home, in London, Basso believed that the novel was marked by “the nostalgic yearning of a provincial . . . who, in a strange and distant country, longs for the sight of a familiar landscape . . . It was born out of a passionate feeling of place: a consciousness of class, of family, of home.” Basso’s commentary makes sense with regard to the pastoral slant of the book for, in spite of the tragic implications of the hero’s revolt, the narrator cannot refrain from casting longing and lingering looks behind. Moreover, the beauty of the hills occasions many a purple passage and Eugene’s final goodbye is seen as a “departure from that Arcadian wilderness” (LHA, 590). Basso’s vision of the Southern small town is also double-edged, that is, the tragic is often countered by the pastoral, a result no doubt of the Southerner’s love-hate relationship with his home region which W.J. Cash described as “the exasperated hate of a lover who cannot persuade the object of his affection to his desire.”

Ironically, while Eugene has to leave his hometown in order to find himself, Basso’s heroes return to their cities of birth to come to terms with themselves. And whereas in Wolfe’s oeuvre the hero sustains the revolt from the village as his reluctant homecomings prove that it is indeed impossible to go home again, Basso’s work usually zooms in on the episode which critics have termed the “return of the native.” In other respects, Basso’s small town feelings are quite similar to Wolfe’s. Not only is the small town identical in its isolated setting, which Basso, like Wolfe, reinforces by having outward bound trains whistle in the distance at night, but like Eugene, David is galled by the backwardness of the small town: condemned to cotton, poverty, torpidity


and decay, Macedon “was just like Mencken said. The Sahara of the Bozart” (CTS, 73). David thinks that his hometown suffers from a “time-lag,” a kind of “cultural amnesia” which causes it to retain “the symbols and concepts of a culture, when actually, that culture no longer exists” (CTS, 200). But David also realizes that the remnants of that very culture are part of the South’s beauty and mystique. In this way, the hero’s homecoming brings about a blending of the grotesque and picturesque, a revelation of the South’s vices and its virtues. Thus, when David sees a forsaken Negro church on a red hill, he muses: “This was the way he thought of it, mistreated by men and mauled by mules, lost in the backwash of time --and yet lovely with a loveliness he could neither outlive nor forget. It was like malaria in his blood” (CTS, 246).

David’s homecoming does not only give rise to his infatuation with “the unreality of the South’s beauty,” he also realizes that there lurks violence, intolerance and hate underneath that “goddamned romantic” veneer (CTS, 54). As an estranged Southerner, he is tossed between his affection for the land and his disgust with the South’s vices. However, whereas Eugene is just as aware of the South’s dichotomy and goes on the run, David stays put and likes to contemplate the South’s problems. Also, as David has been away, he sees the South’s predicament more objectively; in fact, when he explains to his Southern friends that the region’s problems should no longer be blamed on the Civil War and Reconstruction, Pick accuses David of “going Yankee on” them (CTS, 155). David’s ambivalence brings to light his fundamental loneliness, for he tells Pick: “If you think that I can get any fun out of being on the other side of the fence, in conflict with my own kind of people --my kin, my friends, persons I like and respect-- you are greatly mistaken” (CTS, 155). At the same time, when one of his New York friends suggests that he should go back if he is unhappy in the North, David replies: “I don’t know exactly where back is...” (CTS, 27).

David finally does go back and, where Eugene becomes his own man by fleeing his hometown and family, David finds his responsibility in life by returning to and rebelling against his town and thus confirms his own and his family’s identity. The Barondesses’ fate, David’s father observes, is “a central tragedy, part of the inheritance of” the house (CTS, 20). Just as John Barondess realizes that he must remain true to his father’s ideals and subvert the town’s
intolerance in his courtroom, so does David, like his father and grandfather, achieve “a brave and noble thing” by standing up to the town’s bigotry and violence (CTS, 85). The Barondesses are like the Sartorises in William Faulkner’s *The Unvanquished* (1938): they “are, exist completely, in their own uniqueness only as members of a particular family functioning in social stewardship within a particular community and place.” Or to quote one of David’s Southern friends, home and family are “props” to one’s identity. Likewise, David’s urge to go home stems from a tribal longing to be among his own kind: it is a “kind of atavistic throwback, a stone-age hangover --the feeling of being warm and secure in your own allotted cave, with the fire dispensing the black threat of the unknown and the other members of your tribe all around you, while outside the wolves and vengeful banshees howl hungry in the snow” (CTS, 201).

In *Courthouse Square* and *Look Homeward, Angel* the theory of the family identity is validated, but whereas Eugene is a romantic rebel whose revolt is psychological and solipsistic as he only gives in to his own needs and desires, David is a reformer whose revolt has societal and familial implications. Where Eugene escapes from his family in an act of rebellion, David returns to his family in an act of reconciliation. Also, where George Webber, the grown-up Eugene, returns home to be convinced that one cannot go home again, David shows that one can go home again if only one is willing to face the South’s problems. To extend the comparison, while Wolfe may be considered a “romantic” novelist because he bases his writings on the highly sensitive inner lives of his heroes, Basso is a social realist whose novelistic ground is not so much the hero’s private life as his public responsibilities. And while Wolfe has received great credit for, and has indeed become the banner man of, the theme of the Southerner’s conflict with his hometown, Basso examined the paradox between the Southern hero’s sense of place and displacement more often, more deeply and less solipsistically.

*Courthouse Square* is the central novel of Basso’s “homecoming topos.” It does not only exemplify the theme which most of his novels return to, it also sheds light on Basso’s personal

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feelings about going home. David may be the most autobiographical of Basso’s heroes: when Basso outlined David’s character to Perkins, he drew a self-portrait:

He is sick of the talk, the petty gossip, the little children of the Revolution. He is a humane man, who finds it hard to hate, and the elevation of hate to the fountain-head of a new religion, Communism, the fact that many of his friends have, contrary to their old and basic tolerance, adopted the new religion depresses him greatly... He is able finally to reach the simple conclusion that it is only by identifying himself with humanity, to love not a party or a class but all humanity, to be humane and tolerant and honest, that he can function as a man. It means putting love in the place of hate; tolerance in the place of intolerance; hope in the place of despair. 388

This passage has a great deal in common with the letters that Basso wrote to Josephson and Cowley. Although the Southern theme is more prominent in the book, David’s (and Basso’s) anti-intellectual sentiments are voiced most articulately in Courthouse Square.

Basso’s 1936 novel established his reputation as a social (and Southern) realist. Impelled by his social conscience, Basso felt that fiction was more powerful than history or fact in its ability to “illuminate.” Late in life, in his speech “Readers and Writers,” Basso told his audience that “Facts are deceptive” and “Fiction is truth.” By way of illustration, Basso propounded that the truth of the battle of Gettysburg could never be known or recreated since we were not present at the battle and consequently lack “total vision.” In fiction on the other hand, “total vision is possible... Impious though it may sound, the novelist can play God. Nothing is hidden from

him, nothing is concealed. He can approach as close to the truth as his genius permits.”

Basso was convinced that fiction was sometimes “better” than fact because, unlike fact, it inevitably encapsulated the slant and morality of its creator. This also explains the didactic concerns of Basso’s writing which, when telling about the South, may have been especially appropriate. Not only was the South of the thirties a region that had much to learn in terms of civil rights and industrial progress, the general public needed to learn much about the South as well; misrepresented by plantation romances and stigmatized by its postbellum backwardness, the South deserved very little credit in the eyes of Northerners and other non-Southerners. Writers like Basso, and most Southern Renascence writers in general, shared the ambition to debunk and demystify some of the worst stereotypes of the South and its inhabitants.

Besides Basso’s desire to tell the truth about the South, *Courthouse Square* should be praised for its authentic picture of middle-class Southern life. While the works of Erskine Caldwell and William Faulkner are radical departures from the antebellum school, presenting a vision of the South that is often extreme and grotesque, Basso did not want to see the region “in terms of [these] polarities —aristocrats versus poor whites—” but, together with fellow Southerners like Howard Odum, Ellen Glasgow and others, he intended to show a middle-class South whose “very existence . . . had been hitherto ‘ignored’ by writers of the region.”

Although Basso did not want *Courthouse Square* to be classified as a “Southern novel,” writing to Perkins that the novel’s “crisis may be Southern because of its relation to the Negro, but it may be transposed, I believe with minor differences, to any part of the country,” the book is unmistakably material of the Southern Renascence. Apart from its main theme, the

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391 Hamilton Basso, letter to Maxwell Perkins, 4 April 1936, Scribner’s Archives, Princeton.
Southerner in conflict with his hometown, the book is an indictment of the South’s careless neglect of black civil rights. Not only does the hero become the target of racist violence, the hero’s father presides over a court case that is quite similar to the Scottsboro Case. In fact, John Barondess is the kind of judge that the Scottsboro Case should have had. In a passage that is a virtual rewriting of the Scottsboro article that Basso did for the New Republic, we read how “John hated intolerance and prejudice . . . but it was an attitude he understood. It was the South again, the history and psychology of the South, the old incubus of slavery yet lying across the land—punishment for the sins of the fathers being imposed even unto the third and fourth generation. It was the shame of the Old South . . . transmuted into the defiance and resentment and prejudice of the new. It was the isolation, the distrust of strangers and new ideas and outside things” (CTS, 43).

More so than in any of Basso’s other novels, the South is a recurrent topic of both John’s and David’s discussions. While they both criticize the South’s backwardness and its reluctance to let go of the past, they do not realize that they have fallen victim to Southern anamnesia themselves. Like the region they inhabit, John and David will not and cannot forget. With memory being an important agent in the book and the flashback its prime device, the hero and his father are both needled by their fixation with the past. Unable to shake bad memories, John resembles Langley Blackheath as he finds “the images of memory” “sharper and more definite” than the people who surround him in reality (CTS, 20). David has bad memories too, and “wishes it were possible to somehow end the past, not to be plagued by it, to drown it as you drown unwanted puppies in a stream” (CTS, 139). Conscious of the past in the present, David wishes “memory did not have its hooks in him . . . Not to remember. Not ever to remember again.” Yet in the anamnestic setting of the South it is impossible to forget (CTS, 203-205). This is also what David learns when, at the close of the novel, he declares that it “was very important to remember. Memory was a part of life, to remember was to live, and he did not want to die” (CTS, 365).
The importance of memory, however painful and confrontational, is also the crux of David’s defense when he is accused of turning “Yankee.” David claims that instead of employing the past as a panacea for the present, the past should be remembered in its truthful proportions. He reminds his audience that tenant farming, racial discrimination and mill villages are just as much part of the glorious Old South heritage as antebellum homes. Truthfully, to remember the time “befo’ de war” is to remember things in their proper context and therein lies, in David’s and Basso’s view, the only viable solution for the modern South.

In its preoccupation with the South as a setting for artistic potential, *Courthouse Square* is clearly written on the wave of the Southern Renascence. Aware of Mencken’s criticism, David attacks the old plantation legends for producing a “hundred third rate romantics” but not one “first rate artist” (CTS, 57). Elsewhere, David wonders why nobody ever painted the “real thing” of the South: “The South was begging to be painted, crying out for somebody with a hot, sun-obsessed palette like Van Gogh . . . It needed a man of genius, with excitement and sincerity and passion, and it had been turned over, instead to a lot of pygmy people with pastel minds” (CTS, 207). Pick Eustis is equally concerned to lay down the reality of the South: “I tried to do something different. I’m tired of all these books about degenerates. There are a lot of decent people in the South” (CTS, 154).

Upon its publication the novel was certainly noted as an innovative and progressive work about the South. While Lyle Saxon believed that the book placed its writer “among the significant writers of the South,” Jonathan Daniels thought that Basso had proved that he was “typical” of that breed of writers whom he called “awakened young Southerners.” Matthew Josephson, clearly unaffected by Basso’s critique of intellectuals, was of the opinion that his Southern friend took “more courageous ground than the ‘agrarians’ . . . by and large you are

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striking strong blows so far as the South is concerned -- for the good cause, for the old
Enlightenment and for true humanism. All of which is terribly necessary."

A general point of criticism came from reviewers who thought that the novel was too
moralistic and therefore failed to qualify as a “lasting” novel. There is some validity in this
objection especially if one takes David’s endless theorizing about the South into account.
Nevertheless, for the student of the Southern Renaissance, Courthouse Square is a work that
may tell more about the South than William Faulkner’s extraordinary, if less accessible, art or
Thomas Wolfe’s tiresome jeremiads. Courthouse Square may in fact be read as a strong
precursor of Harper Lee’s To Kill a Mockingbird (1960): both novels are narrated from the
viewpoint of a progressive family in a conservative small town, in both books the father of the
protagonist uses his legal profession to fight racism and the protagonist is raised without a
mother, and in both novels we encounter white trash mentality, the power of gossip and how
mobs can be raised at the drop of a hat. The reason why Lee’s book became an instant best-
seller and Courthouse Square was never reprinted should be explained by the fact that To Kill a
Mockingbird was written at the time of the civil rights movement in the South. Courthouse
Square on the other hand, received no best-seller attention and this may have been due to the
book’s very progressiveness: with the issues it raised, the novel was obviously written ahead of
its time. Today this is part of the novel’s strength. Courthouse Square’s merit lies in its
exploration of the Southerner’s ambiguous relationship with his hometown, its analysis of
Southern small-town psychology, its sensitivity to black civil rights and its realistic portrayal of
the Southern middle class. Finally, being the fourth of Basso’s eleven novels, Courthouse

393 Matthew Josephson, letter to Hamilton Basso, 28 October 1936, Matthew Josephson
Collection, Beinecke Library, New Haven.

Parks also suggested that Basso could be a reformer as a New Republic journalist but should
not use the same voice as an artist. “Six Southern Novels,” Virginia Quarterly Review 13
Square constitutes the apogee of the writer’s early oeuvre and his first claim to maturity as a writer of serious fiction.
Whereas Cinnamon Seed, In Their Own Image and Courthouse Square all appeared within a year of each other, it took Basso rather longer to finish Days Before Lent (1939).395 This had not only to do with Basso’s trip to Europe, which interrupted as well as inspired his work, but also with his desire to depart from some of his old subject matter. To give his novel “a new slant on things,” Basso felt that he “had to throw a lot of things overboard . . . it was tough going [but] I feel a lot better about it. I’ve begun all over again.”396 Part of Basso’s new approach was the book’s Pavlovian framework; rather than having his characters act impulsively or instinctively, Basso reduced their behavior to what Pavlov called the “conditioned reflex.” However, before learning about the novel’s Behaviorist underpinning, the reader needs to consider the novel’s story first.

Days Before Lent meant a return to New Orleans. Though extremely useful as an atmospheric setting, the Crescent City is clearly no longer the locale of Double Dealer coziness or childhood capers. Although the hero, Jason Kent, a thirty-year-old bacteriologist, has had a Quarter childhood that is practically interchangeable with that of his creator, New Orleans is presented as a city that has lost some of its mystique. This can be ascribed to Basso’s feelings about New Orleans: every time he revisited the city of his birth, he would be disillusioned with how much it had changed. In Days Before Lent, the city is cheapened by tourism, decay and an overall museumlike quality. The Mississippi River, once the artery of the United States, has lost a good deal of its glamor too, or as Jason contemplates on one of his many river rambles: “Only a few of the steamboats were still afloat . . . trailing behind them a wake of melancholy as mournful as the old Confederate soldiers who sold repainted golf balls in the park” (DBL, 110).

395 Hamilton Basso, Days Before Lent (New York: Scribner’s, 1939).

The story's title refers to the time frame of the novel; before Lent, which is the fasting period after the Mardi Gras festival, Jason has to decide whether he wants to make a name in medical research or choose the more mundane life of a general practitioner. The one would involve adventure abroad and amount to Jason's accompaniment of his mentor, the bacteriologist Jonathan Hunt, the other would lead to the more ordinary destiny of medical practice at home and marriage to Jason's true love, Susanna.

While the central action of the novel revolves around Jason's difficult choice, the reader is introduced, by means of flashbacks and the hero's encounters with other New Orleansians, to a number of characters whose lives run parallel to and are connected with Jason's life. As it happens, Jason's pursuit of the right profession --or to put it in terms of his mythical namesake, his quest for the golden fleece-- is interwoven with a search for the father. The Telemachus theme is a relevant subtheme in view of Basso's many "orphaned" protagonists.\textsuperscript{397} But more so than Basso's earlier heroes, Jason relates to a number of father figures. First there is his biological father, Peter Kent. For an educated man, Kent's interests are curiously working class. Having failed to become a prizefighter himself, Kent trains and dotes on the talented fighter, Joe Piavi. Jason, on the other hand, is not a fighter but a thinker and thus does not have the special relationship that Joe has with his father. Or, as he explains to Susanna, he could not call his old man, "father" or "dad" for these terms would imply "a relationship" he never had.

\textsuperscript{397} Telemachus undertook a long journey to find his father, Odysseus, in Homer's Odyssey. For more information about this literary motif, see Peter I. Barta, "Search for the Father," Dictionary of Literary Themes and Motifs, L-Z, ed. Jean-Charles Seigneuret (New York: Greenwood Press, 1988) 1141-1148. One of the interesting points that Barta makes is that in modern literature the "search for father is often the way to self-realization for modern man. Dostoevsky's Podrostok (A Raw Youth, novel, 1875), captures a young man's process of maturation, which is strongly connected with the development of his relationship to his father" (1146). Likewise, the maturation of Basso's essentially "fatherless" heroes coincides with their coming to terms with their actual fathers (e.g. David and Barondess sr.; Jason and Kent sr.) or identification with certain father figures (e.g. Tony and his grandfather; Tony and Mullendorf; Jason and the various father figures in Days Before Lent).
Like David Barondess, Jason would like to be closer to his father but ultimately fails to have a satisfactory relationship with his single parent. The absence of the mother figure, which seems almost customary in the Basso novel by now, enhances these feelings of failure. Out of frustration, Jason turns to a number of surrogate fathers.

Dr. Jonathan Hunt is Jason's intellectual father. In comparison with the book's Faustian scientist, Ernest Muller, Hunt represents science with a human face. Called a "skeptic" but never a "cynic" (DBL, 14), Hunt is both Jason's mentor in bacteriology and his mentor in life. A third father figure is based on a revered figure out of Basso's childhood who would also serve as a source of inspiration for a New Republic article entitled "Cardinal Pacelli and Father John." In Days Before Lent he goes by the same name and functions as the hero's spiritual father; in spite of Jason's anti-clericalism and atheism, he admires Father John as an example of "tolerance, humanity, kindness and goodwill" (DBL, 126). Like the socialist priest, Norman Thomas, whom Basso looked up to, Father John leaves his parish to do relief work for the poor in the bayous. He dies when a kala-azar epidemic breaks out and Jason gives him a medicinal overdose: as Jason is only slightly familiar with kala-azar and vaguely remembers the cure from Hunt's text books, he has to experiment with the dosage. Although Jason is hailed as a medical hero who prevented the kala-azar epidemic from spreading, he suffers from feelings of guilt and these add to his reservations about general practice.

However, a fourth father figure, Dr. Gomez, helps him cope with this problem. An exiled revolutionary from a fictional Latin American banana republic, the doctor offers Jason his practice when he decides to return to his country. Gomez sees Jason "as a son," gives him fatherly advice and has long philosophical discussions with the hero. Gomez's offer finally shows Jason a way out of his dilemma because whereas previously, his choice was between research abroad or a job at an insecticide plant in New Orleans, with Gomez's offer, Jason can

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practice medicine and thus still be engaged in the medical profession without becoming a "scientific monk" (DBL, 275).

Besides these father figures, who help the hero out of what he calls his "Hamletness" (DBL, 25), the protagonist is surrounded by a number of peers who have problems of their own. One of them is Joe Piavi. Since his fame has waned and his coach has died (like Dekker's father, Kent senior killed himself), he is given to bouts of alcoholism and smokes marijuana. Bound for trouble, Joe shoots a mafia boss and when he tries to find Jason for help, he runs into Danny O'Neill, a flashy newspaper man who thinks he might squeeze a good story out of the "wanted" Joe. When they leave Jason's apartment they are both shot in the back by avenging gangsters. Joe's death gives rise to an epiphany as Jason finally comes to understand the "nature of his bond with Joe," that is, the bond with his father, his family and "the world he cherished most, the world of man against the world of ideas, the open world of humanity as against the closed world of the laboratory" (DBL, 351). At the same time, Jason's friend, the Catholic priest, Victor Carducci, has a moment of revelation: after the Archbishop vetoes his housing project for the poor because it smacks too much of Communism, Victor decides to abandon his social work and devote himself fully to the Church. 399 In other words, while Jason comes to the conclusion that his place is in society, Victor withdraws from society.

While Jason has a number of "fathers," he also has a number of "brothers." Thus Joe is what Joseph Millichap calls the hero's "dark, violent brother," representing the life of the streets. Victor, on the other hand, is his spiritual brother. 400 Jason's third "brother" is the playwright, Tyrrell Surtees, and though Millichap describes him as a "sort of Tennessee Williams version of a decadent Southern playwright" (Millichap, 70), Surtees is in fact


400 Millichap, 72.
identified as “one of the lost generation” (DBL, 247) who is clearly modeled on Harry Crosby and F. Scott Fitzgerald. The resemblance with Fitzgerald is especially striking. For instance, just as Basso felt inferior and provincial when visiting Fitzgerald in Asheville, Jason thinks “his own history” “commonplace and dull,” compared to Surtees’s “great success, the legends that had grown up about him, his romantic marriage [and] even the tragedy that had overtaken his wife” (DBL, 33). Also, the narrator’s description of Surtees’s oeuvre clearly resonates with Fitzgerald’s: “Tyrrell’s incisiveness never cut very deep . . . the emphasis was always upon foliage rather than root, but in all his work . . . there was a muffled beat of tragedy: gaining in effectiveness because it was never permitted to rise above an undertone: the muted insinuation that all the bright glitter of these lives was simply the sparkle of mica in shifting treacherous sands. And time -- this black depression -- had shown he was right” (DBL, 81). Like Fitzgerald in 1936 and 1937, Surtees is on the verge of a nervous breakdown and in spite of Jason’s attempts, which greatly resemble Basso’s, to cheer up the playwright, Surtees knows “the party is over” and the world “is done for” (DBL, 209). On the day of Mardi Gras, Surtees circles over the parade in a silver plane and finally makes a suicidal dive into the Gulf. His last thoughts are filled with a bitter (and particularly Basso-esque) justification of his art: “But the world, eventually, would come to realize that he had beaten this phony crop of ‘social consciousness’ boys to the gun by years . . . Yet the critics, simply because he did not believe in thumping a drum, because he thought the function of art was higher than the function of propaganda -- oh what the hell!” (DBL, 319). Surtees’s condemnation of proletarian art does not only bring to mind John Pine’s and Basso’s preference of art to politics, the idea that Surtees

401 When Malcolm Cowley asked Basso whether Surtees had been based on Fitzgerald, Basso answered in a letter of July 17, 1939: “To answer your minor questions: Yes, Tyrrell Surtees was suggested by Scott Fitzgerald (I sincerely hope this won’t be considered a portrait of Scott. I would be very ashamed and distressed if I was the cause of hurting his feelings. Perhaps I did take him too seriously: Surtees I mean: as in fact, I take Scott. And there is a kind of theatrical quality in Scott that I tried to get). . . But besides Scott, Surtees had some of Harry Crosby in him too.” Hamilton Basso, letter to Malcolm Cowley, 17 July 1939, Malcolm Cowley Collection, Newberry Library, Chicago.
might have been more representative of his generation than any of his contemporaries also
derives from Basso’s conviction that Fitzgerald “rather than Hemingway or anybody else was
the intellectual conscience of his generation.”

More so than in his previous novels, Basso based some of his characters on people he knew.
Thus Jason’s girlfriend, Susanna, resembles Etolia Basso and one of the minor characters,
B. Wally Winter, is an alterego of William ("Willie") B. Wisdom. Wisdom became well-
known through his collection of the Thomas Wolfe Papers after Wolfe’s death in 1938.
Interestingly, the contact between Wisdom and Wolfe had been brought about by Basso. When
Wolfe planned his visit to New Orleans, Basso had written down Wisdom’s name in case
Wolfe wanted to attend a New Orleans ball. Wisdom was an eminent figure in New Orleans
society and therefore an excellent candidate to take the Asheville author under his wing.
However, since Basso himself was not very fond of Wisdom, the Winter character is a
caricature. Described as being “lifted from his clerkship in an uncle’s brokerage office to the
realm of the glamorous, the wealthy [and] the socially secure,” Winter is a social climber and a
dilettante who, with his “two front teeth protruding from his fishlike mouth,” looks down on
the Mardi Gras crowd; seeing the mob as a threat “not to what he was but to what he hoped to
be: a person of wealth, position, powerful and influential,” Winter aspires to his ancestor’s
fame which “had gained him entrance . . . into local society” (DBL, 254; 311-312). Obsessed

402 Hamilton Basso, letter to Malcolm Cowley, 8 November 1941, Malcolm Cowley
Collection, Newberry Library, Chicago. In the same letter Basso argues that “it’s the Gatsby
book, rather than the Sun Also Rises, that’s the distillation of our time. As for Dos Passos,
the other contender, it seems to me that it’s just badly written obviousness that gets
nowhere and says nothing.”

403 Etolia S. Basso confirmed that the description of B. Wallace Winter is in accordance with
her recollection of William B. Wisdom. She further remarked that her husband disliked
Wisdom initially, an animosity which he toned down when Wisdom became such a diligent
caretaker of the Thomas Wolfe estate. Etolia S. Basso, interview, interview, 6 November
1993, Tempe.
with caste and ancestry, Winter is guilty of Southern Shintoism, a phenomenon which Basso saw as one of the detrimental inheritances of antebellum society.

With the exception of Susanna, *Days Before Lent* has an all-male cast. In his depiction of males and females, Basso was clearly more at ease with male characters than with their female counterparts. As in the earlier novels, the romance element, the relationship between Jason and Susanna, is overly sentimentalized. Basso’s delineation of women as inferior creatures who adjust their behavior and life to the whims of men is sexist and becomes offensive when Jason utters phrases like it “is impossible for a woman to understand how a man feels when he feels like that” (DBL, 157).

If we ignore the sexism and the penny novel romance, *Days Before Lent* is an intelligent book and it was endorsed as such by public and critics alike. Listed among the *New Republic* “One Hundred Notable Books of 1939,” it won the Southern Authors Award of 1940 and was adapted for a film called “Holiday for Sinners,” a title much abhorred by Basso. Referring to “Hamilton Basso’s brilliant new novel” as “intelligent Southern realism,” Alfred Kazin commended Basso as one of those “young Southern novelists who have not only heard of Appomattox, but are quite willing to forget it.”\(^{404}\) Equally complimentary, Evelyn Scott observed that, with this novel, Basso departed from William Faulkner and Thomas Wolfe in his preoccupation with “genuine intellect rooted in actuality.”\(^{405}\) Clearly, Basso had tried to break away from standard Southern themes. Admittedly, the New Orleans setting and the celebration of Mardi Gras classify the book as “Southern,” yet the novel’s theme is not intrinsically Southern. Also, compared to Dekker and David, who had, according to Lyle Saxon, “uneasy” Southern “blood in their veins,” Jason lacks their inflammable temper and is almost too philosophical to be a Southern hero.\(^{406}\)


Having the face of a "dreamer," Jason has more in common with Tony than with either Dekker or David (DBL, 16). Like Tony, Jason is attracted to the life of the mind. They are both bacteriologists and they are both stimulated by their intellectual fathers, Hunt and Mullendorf. But more so than Tony, Jason is not merely intelligent and sensitive but tries to channel his sensitivity into a philosophy which is based on scientific principle: rejecting Freud, Basso resorts to Pavlov whose Behaviorist theories the hero employs to explain his own behavior and that of others. Jason wants to "take Pavlov's discoveries out of the realm of information, out of print and make them more an immediate and meaningful part of his own life" (DBL, 47). The hero's use of objective science to explain human behavior and life mirrors Basso's own groping: after his emotional debates with Josephson, Cowley and other intellectuals, Basso experienced a hankering for something definitive, a theory or a philosophy that would explain and justify the intellectual turmoil of the thirties. While Cowley, Josephson and others had leaned on Marx, Basso had, throughout the thirties, relied on his own instincts or what he called his "gut-feeling." However, by the end of the thirties, when he was composing *Days Before Lent*, he may have felt that his gut-feeling was not enough and, to fend off the constant theorizing of Josephson and Cowley, he devised his own philosophy as a means of self-defense. "I am ashamed of how ignorant we are," Basso writes to Cowley:

--an ignorance that leads us into all kinds of sloppy thinking,
wrong conclusions... It does make you angry... to see a man like
Edmund Wilson... tie himself into dialectic knots and revealing
large gaps in his mind where science is concerned.

The whole piece [i.e. one of Wilson's articles] seemed to have no
relation to anything but an abstract game of chess-- or better, counting
the hairs on an imaginary bald man's head.

Well, I'm trying to hack my way through all this confusion. It seems

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1 November 1936: 8.
to me that as a man grows older all the complexity—almost the
bewilderment—of his youth, the undirected, uncomprehended quest
for learning etc., gets resolved into a few simple beliefs.407

Before coming to the “few simple beliefs” in which both Basso and Jason ultimately find
solace, we should go into the fundamentals of Jason’s theory.

The novel opens with a long discussion on the question whether fear motivates people to act
in certain ways. Though Maxwell Perkins dreaded that “all this scientific talk” would discourage
the reader, it sets the tone of the book; while preparing the reader for Jason’s continuous
rationalizations, it immediately highlights the Behaviorist concept of man’s submission to social
conditioning.408 “Society, life,” Jason tells Susanna, “does the same thing to most people that
Pavlov did to his dogs, only more so” (DBL, 27). Elaborating on John Pine’s belief that people
are confined and conditioned by their own enclosures, their own realities, Jason argues that
people “grow up in cages --suburbanite cages, country club cages, Maine-in-the-summer-
Florida-in-the-winter cages-- and since they are all given more or less the same stimuli at more
or less the same time (paralleling Pavlov’s method) they all end up like a lot of buttons stamped
by the same machine. They live alike, dress alike, play alike, hope alike, fear alike and above
all, think alike” (DBL, 27). Because these people lose control over their free will and turn into
mere automatons of desire and fear, Jason calls them the “unsurprisables.” The happy few who

Library, Chicago.

408 Maxwell Perkins, letter to Hamilton Basso, 2 June 1937, Scribner’s Archives, Princeton. Basso defended Jason’s fondness of rationalizations: “I have been reading the best
of all writers lately, by the name of William Shakespeare, and I believe it can be learned
from him that the traffic will bear a lot of contemplative stuff, (as in Hamlet), as long as
there is the promise of action to come— a duel, a murder, a stabbing in the night.” Hamilton
Basso, to Maxwell Perkins, 8 June 1937, Scribner’s Archives, Princeton.
manage to escape their cages of conditioning, having preserved their own freedom and will power, are called the “surprisables.” The truly admirable characters, Father John, Hunt, Jason’s father and Dr. Gomez, are all surprisables and, as can be expected, Jason’s destiny lies among these “surprisable” individuals.409

Like a true quester, Jason learns from the various (surprisable) “sages” around him and is faced with a number of choices which he must decline in order to reach his final goal. One of the choices is religion which, as in Relics and Angels, has an overarching presence in the book. Because of this, various critics interpreted the novel as a turning point in Basso’s perceptions about the Catholic faith. Malcolm Cowley even suspected that Basso was reconsidering his old faith and James E. Rocks wrote that Days Before Lent reveals the “essential religious cast of Basso’s mind.”410 Upon a close reading of the novel, these interpretations do not convince. Not only did Basso fervently deny Cowley’s claim but recently he had attacked the Roman Catholic Church courageously and categorically in two New Republic articles.411 The novel itself further evinces that Jason’s attitude towards the Church, and organized religion in general, is that of an apostate rather than a devotee.

409 As can be anticipated in a Basso novel, the line of surprisables goes back to Jason’s grandfather, who, like all of Basso’s grandfatherly characters, is a mythical figure. Having come from New England, Jason’s grandfather is described as “one of those obscure mystics and sages America so often produces and from his library you could tell the love and veneration he had for learning” (DBL, 29). Like Basso and his grandfather, Jason identifies with his grandfather’s love of learning and like David, who went through all of his grandfather’s correspondence, Jason learns from his grandfather’s letters how important the “freedom of the mind and soul” is and how “each man must peddle his own cause” (DBL, 29).


Like Tony and Basso himself, Jason is raised a Catholic but as he grows older, he becomes "increasingly careless" about his religion (DBL, 128). Jason does not attend Church anymore but it is clear that in a Catholic city like New Orleans and with good friends like Father John and Victor, the hero is nonetheless exposed to Catholicism. Moreover, like Tony, Jason longs for something that is similar to religion in its capacity to provide solace and peace at a time of great confusion. One day, he stands in front of the Cathedral and feels tempted to go in. Comparing psycho-analysis to the confession booth, he observes that both religion and psycho-analysis heal people by means of "psychic catharsis" (DBL, 59). Church is a cure, a sanctuary of order in a world of disorder. It is for this reason also that when Jason is most confused and feels most like Hamlet (whom he mockingly compares to Pavlov's mad dog), he is drawn to the peace and order of the Church. Victor is an example of someone who found peace through the Church. Jason does not envy his friend, whom he associates with "the salt of self-abnegation." Yet, when he does recall the "serene benediction" of Victor's faith, Jason wishes "there might be a few more sessions of peace in his own torn and tumultuous days" (DBL, 102). The reader may be reminded of Tony's attitude towards the Church as well as Basso's letter to Cowley in which he wrote about religion as the fountainhead of peace and order. 412 Conceivably, Basso's religious ambivalence was inspired by George Santayana, who, while believing that orthodox religious tradition was all "make-believe," claimed that the Church was a shrine of "instinct and reason," and as such functional in its ability to comfort man and help him organize his life. 413

Like Basso, Jason remains a skeptic and decides against entering the Cathedral as God had become "too abstract" a notion (DBL, 59). Although Jason truly admires clergymen like Father


413 George Santayana, "Magic, Sacrifice and Prayer," The Philosophy of Santayana, Selections From the Works of George Santayana, ed. Irwin Edman (New York: Scribner's, 1936) 149. It is not clear what Basso may have actually borrowed from Santayana, but he was familiar with the American philosopher, whom he mentioned and admired in Mainstream (1943) and in his correspondence.
John and Victor, he is suspicious of the priesthood in general. For example, he loathes one of Victor’s evangelizing friends, a “business" priest who thought he “had to sell religion” (DBL, 107). Jason is of course also influenced by his anti-clerical father and by Doctor Gomez whose “anti-Catholicism had resolved itself into a principle of moral integrity” (DBL, 97). In the end, Jason sees Gomez and Victor as two extremes, one an anti-Catholic and the other a devout Catholic, and concludes that he likes men for what they are and not for what they believe in.

Curiously, although Jason rejects religious doctrine, his ultimate philosophy echoes the basic tenets of Christianity. Thus he learns from Hunt that while in science “the principle of doubt” is a prerequisite to “discover the relative, non-absolute truth,” in life the “principle of human interrelationship” is most important: “the forging of a bond —a living human bond-- with other beings. The more ties [Jason] had with other men . . . the richer and more fruitful his living experience” (DBL, 90). As the hero learns to distinguish and choose between science and life, medical research and practice, and between man on the periphery of society and man in society, he understands that a career as a general practitioner involves love and fellowship. Like Basso, who, in a letter of April 21st, 1938, told Josephson that he could not “breathe in the rarified [sic] atmosphere” of New Republic intellectuals as it gave him “mental nosebleed,” Jason is finally more intrigued with “ordinary everyday life”: “It was this life that interested Jason most. Essentially anti-intellectual, disbelieving in the absoluteness of mental values, trusting instinct and common sense more than he trusted any system of philosophy . . . the Higher Life was not for him. He could not breathe in that rarefied atmosphere. He had mental nosebleed” (DBL, 46). Elsewhere, he lauds fellowship: “a man was a man [if] he inhabited the earth [and] lived with other men.” (DBL, 86). To validate this view, Basso summons Hunt who, as a kind of Greek chorus in the last chapter, brings this point home to the reader once more. Starting out by saying that “Hunt was no churchman,” the narrator has Hunt make some scientific equation which leads to the somewhat abstruse (and Santayanesque) conclusion that “Wisdom = widely integrated knowledge plus a tolerant, loving-kindly attitude: a skilled cortical analyzer plus a humanized, cultured autonomic. Granted wisdom, the Religious Instinct, drawn by the magnetism of Order, might conceivably move in the right direction” (DBL, 370-371). With a
"balloon-puncturing expression on his face," Hunt then leans back in his chair and says "So that’s the answer. That’s what it adds up to. My village pastor taught me that when I was six years old" (DBL, 371)

Jason’s quest illustrates Basso’s belief that the life of the mind is not enough, “the most learned” not only being “the most confused” but also being “pathetically bogged down in the marshes of the Higher Life, searching for absolutes, Truth, Beauty and the Ideal Future” (DBL, 46) To Basso’s mind, the learned man, the intellectual, should not sequester himself from life, for true wisdom does not lie in study or the laboratory but in life itself. Days Before Lent is a manifesto of the writer’s pragmatic views and Jason’s final embrace of the “surprising” philosophy is really an expression of Basso’s intellectual individualism. Unfortunately, as critics were unaware of his correspondence with Cowley and Josephson, the novel has never been seen as the spin-off of ideas Basso dwelt on in the thirties.

Like Basso, who in the course of the thirties gave up on politics, some of the novel’s characters are greatly disenchanted with politics. While Jason does not have a high opinion of politicians because of his experiences with the politically run Board of Health, Tyrrell Surtees exhibits political “desperation” and Dr. Gomez comments that “The time we live in... is perhaps too much preoccupied with politics” (DBL, 200, 173).414 Gomez observes also that politics, like war, is a true “conversation spoiler” (DBL, 173). Victor is disappointed in politics too, as the Archbishop’s refusal to authorize his project reeks of politics. And Dick Manson, one of New Orleans’ socialites, likens the birth of Communism and Fascism to the birth of the

414 Clearly having Huey Long in mind, Jason argues that politicians were the “most parasitic of men. Buzzing, securely content, they were coated with graft and corruption as a bee is coated with pollen... gambling-joint pollen, gin-mill pollen, whore-house pollen, lottery pollen, slot-machine pollen... Uneducated, bottomlessly ignorant, they had an almost sinister understanding of basic habits, prejudices, loyalties, fears... [making] no appeal to reason... they realized... that the mass was also a creature of reflexes” (DBL, 71). Like Pavlov’s dogs who came running for the food bell, the masses come running to the sound truck (the sound truck and the radio were crucial to the success of Huey Long’s campaign).
Reformation and fears “an age of faith” (DBL, 205). By faith Manson means the faith of totalitarianism, which, according to Dr. Gomez, is based on Fascist and Communist principles of “machine-men” (DBL, 237). Or to put it in Jason’s Behaviorist terminology, totalitarianism imprisons and conditions its people in the name of what Gomez calls that “golden whore” of Liberty (DBL, 303).

To recapitulate: when, at the close of the novel, we are enlightened by Hunt’s semi-scientific formulas, we have been made aware of a number of contrary notions which can all be reduced to the surprising-surprising opposition. While the surprising human being escapes from the cage of conditioning and represents intellectual independence, life, humanitarianism, tolerance, love, instinct and emotion, the unsurprising human being is imprisoned in the cage of conditioning and robbed of his independence, freedom and capacity to enjoy life. In broad general terms, the surprising versus the unsurprising symbolizes the contrast between independent man in society and man enslaved by society.

Jason’s surprising ideal is a pursuit of happiness which all of Basso’s protagonists embrace: though always independent, they all try to achieve harmony with their environment, or rather, they all attempt to become responsible and altruistic members of society. Thus Jason’s thirst for knowledge should not only be interpreted as an appetite for science but as his desire for a better understanding of “the manifold complexities of the life about him” which would lead him “to establish, if possible, a fairly harmonious relationship with his place and his time” (DBL, 46). Although Jason’s philanthropy may be more pronounced since he finally opts for the altruistic profession of medical practice, the desire for personal and social fulfillment also lies at the root of Tony’s, Dekker’s and David’s pursuits. Since these protagonists clearly undergo a spiritual growth or conversion of sorts, which, in Tony’s and Dekker’s situation involves a large part of their personal development and, in David’s and Jason’s case, a definition of their role in society, Basso’s thirties’ novel can be classified as an Erziehungsroman in which character development, or the “education” of the hero is central.

What is especially remarkable about Days Before Lent is that Jason’s expiation, his doubts and his final epiphany, as well as other characters’ epiphanies, converge with the Mardi Gras
celebration, which forms the novel’s climax in a structural, symbolic and thematic sense. Although the precise origins of carnival are obscure, Mardi Gras, marking the last occasion to eat rich food before the fast of Lent begins, derives from “a primitive festival honouring the beginning of the new year and the rebirth of nature.” The notion of rebirth is of course highly appropriate in the light of Jason’s (and Victor’s) spiritual regeneration.

The novel’s suspense curve, which reaches its apex at Mardi Gras, has been carefully constructed by means of a number of Mardi Gras “deadlines.” Jason is not the only one who has to decide whether he wants to become Hunt’s assistant in the “days before lent,” but Doctor Gomez also has to determine on Fat Tuesday itself whether he wants to join the revolutionaries in their Paraguaman coup. In addition, Danny O’Neill has to pay off his gambling debts before the clock strikes twelve on Mardi Gras night. The proximity of these deadlines as well as the novel’s loudly ticking clocks contribute greatly to the suspense. On the morning of Mardi Gras itself, when the first whooping crows are heard in the street below, Jason still has not made up his mind: “his thoughts were scattered as the sparks of a pin-wheel—this spark Joe, this spark Susanna, this spark Doctor Gomez, this spark Hunt. Did he really want to go to India? Was he going to be a scientific monk after all?” (DBL, 278).

Atmospherically, the suspense, and the dwindling of suspense, have been cleverly reinforced by Basso’s alternate use of silence and noise. Thus in the very early morning of Mardi Gras itself, the town is enveloped by an eerie stillness denoting the silence before the storm. Soon, however, there is an eruption of noise: “Then, suddenly, the early stillness was rent with shrieking crows. A company of small clowns, whooping and shrilling, poured out of St. Anthony’s alley and ran into the square” (DBL, 277). In no time, the crowd swamps the streets and is accompanied by a cacophony of screams, noise and jazz music. Once the various dilemmas (i.e. Jason’s, Victor’s and Gomez’s) have been resolved and three of the characters have died, the crowd disperses, voices are silenced, the music peaks out and the city returns to

its former quietude as if nothing happened at all: “The band no longer played: the singing and
dancing were over: the children stood hushed and still. There was only the murmurous
humming and the shifting undertones of shoes shuffling in the trampled confetti, and, very far
away, in some part of the city ignorant of tragedy, the faint sound of trumpets like an echo of
revelry long since gone” (DBL, 342). The silence, with which the book also closes, has a
slightly anti-climactic overtone: after all, Tyrrell, Joe and Danny have died and Jason’s and
Victor’s new directions in life may be seen as compromises of what they intended to
accomplish. The fast being a time of compromise, Jason wakes up from his dream to become a
scholar and Victor withdraws to Church in an act of contrition.

The pattern of suspense, climax and anti-climax runs parallel with a pattern that progresses
from sanity to madness to final insight. While Surtees, Piavi and O’Neill cannot overcome the
madness of Mardi Gras and the temporary “insanity” of their own confusion, Jason, Victor and
Gomez survive both the “insanity” of their dilemmas and the external madness of Mardi Gras
and finally come to see their destinies in brief epiphanies. In fact, it is the madness of Mardi
Gras that fosters Gomez’s insight that he really should join the revolutionaries. After being
harassed by a girl, who sprays confetti in his mouth and slams an inflated bladder on his head,
which seems to refer rather bawdily to his profession, Gomez is greeted with cheers and a
shower of camphor balls (DBL, 297). The camphor balls, sounding like “cannon balls,” allude
to Gomez’s future participation in the army coup and indeed, after this incident Gomez has a
brilliant idea as to how he and the revolutionaries should go about their coup. Jason and Victor
experience similar revelations once the festival draws to a close and, when the clock strikes
twelve on Mardi Gras night, we read: “Mardi Gras in time as well as in fact, was over . . . ‘The
end of the labyrinth,’ [Jason] said slowly. ‘The golden fleece.’”

Incidentally, the theme of the Mardi Gras parade is “theater as a form of education and
entertainment.” In view of Jason’s, Victor’s and Gomez’s revelations, one may indeed suggest

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416 The golden fleece derives from the Greek myth of Jason and the Argonauts, questers of
the golden fleece.
that the parade functions as a kind of “educator” while the metaphor of the theater is appropriate in the light of Surtees’s fate: ending his career as a playwright of commercial theater, Surtees makes a last threatening loop over the carnival crowd when the last float, “The Theater of Broadway,” rolls past.417

The metaphor of the theater is also significant because of its make-believe associations. The masks worn at Mardi Gras add to this effect. While until Lent, people can indulge in their fairy-tale world and hide behind their masks, after Mardi Gras, they have to take off their masks and show the world who they really are. This applies especially to Jason, Victor and Gomez, who, after Mardi Gras, assume their new identities. Joe’s tragedy is that Mardi Gras does indeed muster up a world of make-believe: deluded when he sees his picture on the front page of the newspapers because of Weinstein’s murder, Joe is mistaken in believing that the world is preparing for his come-back. For him, as well as for Tyrrell and Danny, grand illusions evaporate, their death turning Mardi Gras into Judgment Day.

Apart from Basso’s employment of disaster images like that of an erupting volcano and a flood, the concept of Doomsday is also espoused by Dick Manson.418 Pessimistically inclined, Manson experiences Mardi Gras as the Judgment Day of the political and economic downswing of the country. Afraid to lose his wealth in the Depression, Manson sees the “river rising, with the dikes all bursted [sic] and the land in flood-- Did he think he could stop it? He was as

417 Surtees’s hovering over New Orleans must have been inspired by the looping-the-loops that Basso and Faulkner made with the Gate Flying Circus (see chapter I).

418 While poor people in New Orleans are said to be living on the edge of a volcano, when the Mardi Gras parade reaches its climax we read: “The clamoring mass, sending up its roar, was like a visible manifestation of those deep tremors that seemed to be rumbling through the earth. It was as if the earth had already parted and spewed up a relentless lava stream that was slowly moving to destroy the foundations on which [Dick Manson] had built his house of dreams” (DBL, 311). The image of the flood recurs but is most successful on page 295: “It was now high noon. Canal Street lay inundated by a tumultuous sea of humanity which, surging and straining against the dikes of the buildings, roared its welcome to Rex.”
helpless before these raging economic torrents as if they were the swollen river itself” (DBL, 309). Picturing the Mardi Gras crowd as the hungry crowd of the Depression, Manson is, like Basso, afraid that the changing tide might occasion the rise of a dictator of the stature of Hitler and Mussolini: “And if a savior came, if some mountebank preaching hate and prejudice fastened upon the land, if they sought a savior and got a dictator instead…” (DBL, 309-310). Manson’s fear of dictatorship corresponds with Basso’s distrust of dictators: “All the experience, reading, conversations of the past few years— all that has happened— leaves me with but the one conviction that I am against Dictatorship: and, for good reasons, any kind of dictatorship.”

Manson’s gloomy associations do not only give the novel a precise historical time frame, they also reinforce the significance of the Mardi Gras-Lent contrast. While Mardi Gras, with its gaiety, wild dances and decadence, symbolizes the twenties’ decade, Lent, as a time of the fast, stands for the thirties. Having reaped their fame and success in the twenties, Tyrrell and Joe learn that come Mardi Gras they are past their prime, or, as Tyrrell repeatedly mutters in his silver plane: “the party’s over.” Victor actually links Mardi Gras and Lent to the twenties and the thirties when he thinks of the “tumultuous world of the twenties that had plunged into that roaring abyss of October. He remembered the empty churches, and how all the world had apparently deserted God, and those years, he thought, were like Carnival— the days before Lent. And he also thought that this present time, these days of bleakness and sorrow, might also be part of God’s unknowable plan. Perhaps these days were the Lent of the world— the period through which mankind must pass to come to rebirth of some future morning when His infinite love and mercy would splendidly illumine the dawn” (DBL, 361-362). Thus Mardi Gras is not only a farewell to meat and fatty foods, but for the characters in Days Before Lent it also stands

419 Hamilton Basso, letter to Malcolm Cowley, n.d., Malcolm Cowley Collection, Newberry Library, Chicago. Though the letter is undated, we know that this goes back to Days Before Lent as plans for the novel are mentioned in this letter.
for a farewell to the "rich" dreams of yesterday and the coming of a compromised and sobering present.

Finally, as a symbolic epicenter of the novel, the Mardi Gras event is particularly successful because of the narrator's masterful handling of the stark opposition between the feasting crowd and the tormented individual. Interested in mob psychology, something which is already manifest in *Courthouse Square*, Basso places the various characters in the crowd so as to contrast the workings of the insensitive mob to the isolation of the sensitive individual. Again, Victor is a spokesman for all the characters when, walking among the throngs of people, he observes that "in this turmoil, he was deeply conscious of his own oneness, his own agonized separateness. The one and the many. The individual and the multitude. The man and the mass" (DBL, 357). Though Victor, Jason, Gomez, Manson and Joe are all members of the crowd, they are so absorbed by their own problems that they do not really take part in the Mardi Gras revelry. Besides feeling awkward and alone, they also exhibit a certain animosity towards the crowd. While the mob sheds "restraint after restraint," Basso's heroes are too inhibited to go along with the reflexes of the unsurprising crowd and because they stand out as party-poopers, they are vexed by the crowd. Shocked by people's uninhibited spontaneity, Gomez talks of how "one's ego [is] chastised by the crowd" (DBL, 297). Jason, who sees the crowd's uniformity as symptomatic of the behavior of unsurprisables, feels imprisoned and his attempt to squirm free is an indication of his essential "surprisability." To Joe the crowd has a significance too: "He had welded, by his act of murder, this whole scattered Mardi Gras crowd into a oneness it would not have otherwise had. By murder, and by his escape making it necessary for the police to hunt him, he had forged a swarming collection of individuals into the closer and more vital unity of the mass: vesting it with an awareness, even in its holiday mood, of life and death" (DBL, 280-281). Manson also views the crowd with enmity. Alone in his worries about the Depression and the future, he comments on the crowd's mass psychology: "From his place on one of the floats, behind the mask of Caesar, Dick Manson watched the crowd. He felt as though he were watching not only the excitement of the Carnival reaching its highest peak, but also the blind seething of humanity-- the mass-mind, the mass-soul, the
moiling roar and surge in which lay hidden the sperm and seed of all the future. Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow. There it was.” (DBL, 306). Although Tyrrell Surtees has separated himself physically from the crowd because of his position in the plane, he is negative about the crowd too: “Turn back? Why? The sight of those crowds, those ant-swarming streets of humanity, had given him the last incentive he needed” (DBL, 317).

Basso’s superb handling of the Mardi Gras event, with its thematic and symbolic reverberations, and his intelligent conception of Jason turn Days Before Lent into a stimulating book. Although the Southern motifs, which are usually part of Basso’s strength, are not as markedly present, Days Before Lent is an intriguing novel and is indisputably one of Basso’s better books. Moreover, the novel clearly demarcates the culmination of a formula that was already present in Relics and Angels. Tony, Dekker, David and Jason are typical Basso protagonists: on their way home, or contemplating their departure from home, these heroes strive for a surprisable life of independence, tolerance, humanity and altruism. Trying to reconcile themselves with certain demands of society and aspiring to be in harmony with their environment, they are really determined individualists who have a tendency to rebel and seek justice for people who are worse off. Although Basso was highly circumspect in using autobiographical detail, it is clear that Tony, Dekker, David and Jason are spokesmen of their creator and are representative of the various stages that Basso went through himself as a thinker, writer and human being.
vi. Summing Up: Hamilton Basso and the Southern Renascence

Having examined the thirties’ novels, we should be able to determine Basso’s place in the Southern Renascence. Though Basso belonged to the first generation of the Southern Renascence, unlike writers such as Margaret Mitchell and Julia Peterkin, he refused to portray the South as some *locus amoenus*. Rebelling against the extremes of the plantation school, the utopian Agrarians, and the Gothic vision of writers such as William Faulkner and Erskine Caldwell, Basso preferred the middle way of realism which was firmly embedded in his social conscience. In this respect, his work is comparable to the social realism of the Southern novelist, T.S. Stribling. At the same time, whereas Stribling was a writer whose perceptions of the South amounted to clichés, his Southern landscapes being the conventional setting for a tug-of-war between a saintlike hero and vicious rednecks, Basso, though sometimes inclined to draw the same antithesis between vice and virtue, was more nuanced in his treatment of the South. This nuance, which others may call ambivalence, comes out especially in *Courthouse Square*, where the hero’s love of his family and his desire to go home again clash with his aversion to the essential backwardness of the South. Interestingly, while Robert Penn Warren condemned Stribling for never having “been interested in the dramatic possibilities of a superior Southern white man brought into conflict with his native environment,” Basso seems to have done just that with *Courthouse Square*.420 Unfortunately, this novel did not gain the attention it deserved nor did Basso receive any recognition for the fact that he was dealing with innovative motifs and original Southern heroes.

Like the characters of *Days Before Lent* whose individuality comes to stand out in the Mardi Gras mob, Basso’s heroes are men who want to belong, blend in and go home again but who finally find out that their individuality and independence are vital in establishing a responsible and harmonious relationship with their environment. Simultaneously, notwithstanding the

hero's desire for independence, he is never alone but always connected to, and part of, a larger "corporate" identity, which is either that of the family or that of the community. In this way, the Basso hero usually ends up being more of a public man than he is a private hero.

Like no other Southern Renascence writer, Basso is preoccupied with the feelings of a disenchanted Southerner who, contrary to his feelings of exile, remains mesmerized by the pull and charm of his native region. Belittled by the Agrarians because of his sensitivity towards the race problem and other flaws of Southern society, Basso deserves a niche in the Renascence as a Southern progressive and realist who utilized his protagonists’ sense of displacement to illustrate the South’s social, economic and cultural stagnation. Time and again, the Basso hero harps on the idea that Dixie’s imperfections can be blamed on the South’s pathological relationship with the past. To give his heroes the legitimacy to speak out about the South, Basso presents them as amphibious characters, that is, characters who love as well as hate and characters who judge but who are never judgemental.

Finally, what sets Basso apart from a majority of Southern Renascence writers is his preoccupation with the neglected Southern middle class. Arlin Turner identified this void in Southern literature in an article of 1940: while granting that the production of Southern novels had been impressive and prolific, Turner claimed that the "great Southern novel" still had to be written as novelists had failed to render a "full and proportioned picture" of the South.421 With the absence of normality in Southern fiction and the neglect of certain classes (the middle classes but also ethnic minorities like the Spanish, the Germans, the Irish and the Indians), Southern literature remained incomplete. Turner called for a novelist “who concerns himself less with the strange and the unusual; who has faith enough in his ability to pass up the sensational and phenomenal in the world around him; and who will assign himself the task of describing the real life of representative Southern characters.” As examples of writers who had made “heartening approaches to the problem,” he mentioned Hamilton Basso, Ellen Glasgow, T.S. Stribling and Thomas Wolfe.

Interestingly, Basso wrote a very complimentary review of Glasgow’s novel, *A Certain Measure* (1943), in which he summed up her achievements as one of the important Southern realists. His remark that Glasgow intended to “show the ineffectuality of the aristocratic tradition in the face of the challenge raised by the new set of standards and values which in time would sweep it completely aside” reminds one of Basso’s Blackheath and Barondess families, who also try to live up to the *noblesse oblige* ethics of their “aristocratic” past in a changing South.\(^{422}\) In turn, Glasgow mentioned Basso specifically as one of the few Southern writers who, departing from both the “incurably romantic” imagination of the South and “the whole tedious mass production of degeneracy in our fiction,” was committed to honest Southern realism, a vein which she had helped create and liked to see perpetuated by writers such as Basso, Faulkner and Wolfe.\(^{423}\)


\[^{423}\text{Ellen Glasgow, “Heroes and Monsters,” *Saturday Review of Literature*, 4 May 1935: 3.}\]
It's awful hard, Max, this business of being an artist. I see these things-- not only the superhuman things like the Sistine Ceiling and Da Vinci’s “Virgin on the Rocks” --simply a magnificently beautiful and human thing like Hugo Van der Goes’s “Virgin”-- and I know what went into it . . . how much love and life . . . you simply stand and one small part of you freezes and then thaws and is warmer than it has ever been before . . . I shall never be able to do the perfect work I want to do.

Hamilton Basso, letter to Maxwell Perkins, 1 February 1938.
Chapter V: The Middle Years: *New Yorker* Stories and Forties’ Novels

1. The Forties: A War Within and Without

Before they settled in Connecticut, the Bassos spent the beginning of the war years in South Hadley, Massachusetts. Doing research for *Mainstream* (1943) in South Hadley, Basso traveled to New York City for *New Yorker* book notes and editorial work for *Time* magazine. To supplement his income, he started working for *Time* in 1942, having applied for the job with “what he thought was an outrageous parody of the news magazine’s style,” the editors were amused and signed him on.

Although Keith’s birth in 1940 was a source of joy, the early forties were trying years. The Bassos were running a tight ship financially and Etolia complained about her husband’s absence and his wish to join the army. However, notwithstanding his attempts to pass the army’s physical, in a letter of May 28th, 1943, Basso tells Toto that his weight was still eight pounds shy of the mandatory 132 pounds and that his bad right eye made him an unsuitable candidate for military service anyway. To serve his country nonetheless, Basso joined the Office of the Secret Service, the forerunner of the CIA, to “consult and advise . . . on problems and projects, perhaps best categorized as propagandistic.”

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424 “Hamilton Basso, Dead; Novelist Wrote of Southern Life,” *New York Times*, 14 May 1964: 35. According to Clarence Ikerd, Basso soon left the magazine as he did not like “the way Henry Luce dictated the editorial slant of the magazine nor the particular line Luce took on many issues. He was also dissatisfied . . . with the anonymous group method of writing.” (Clarence F. Ikerd, “Hamilton Basso, A Critical Biography,” diss., [U of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, 1974] 106).

425 Hamilton Basso, letter to Etolia S. Basso, 28 May 1943, Hamilton Basso Collection, Beinecke Library, New Haven.

426 Ikerd, 107.
her husband's weekly commuting, his unsteady freelance income and the challenge to keep on
writing novels became such a strain that Basso finally exclaimed: “My sense of order, and a
certain need I have for it, is as great --as yours-- perhaps greater. I always hope to find . . . a
way to restore that sense and feeling of order. So far I have been able to do it. The only order
left in my life is the order that comes from home-- therefore, when every weekend is devoted to
nothing else but palaver about the ‘situation,’ I am almost completely disoriented from every
thing when I get back to town.” Reproaching his wife for picking out habitats which then
turned out to be lonely or boring, Basso argued that he was trying his utmost, sustaining his
wife and infant son and standing on his own feet rather than “asking . . . favors of the Reynals
and Scribners of this world.” Besides his worries about seeing his family through the war, he
had sleepless nights over his growing loss of confidence in his work. “I cannot deny that I feel
a keen sense of failure in my work and that, because of this, there has been a diminution of
self-esteem which, if it continues, will eventually resolve itself into a lack of self-respect. It is
this that has always kept me going and which I would not want to lose.”

Where Fitzgerald
had his crack-up in the late thirties, Basso had his professional and personal breakdown in the
early forties. Although his reputation saw a rising curve with the publication of his thirties’
novels, the books were never reprinted.

In 1942, Basso left for the Florida Coast to recuperate from overall exhaustion and to
review the state of his marriage. Apparently, Toto had proposed the leave of absence, a
suggestion she would repeat whenever Basso found himself enervated after finishing a novel.
In this way, his trips for Holiday in the fifties were not only fulfillments of the magazine
assignments but were also meant as a therapeutic break from the typewriter and the proofs.

From the Florida correspondence, of which we only have Basso’s side, it is clear that whereas
Toto was ready for a separation, and perhaps even a divorce, her husband pleaded for another
chance. Plucking oranges in the garden of fellow novelist, Marjorie Rawlings, Basso
contemplated his marriage. The daily letters to his wife vary in tone: some are argumentative,

427 Hamilton Basso, letter to Etoia S. Basso, n.d., Hamilton Basso Collection, Beinecke
Library, New Haven.
others meditative and a few downright desperate. The most revealing letter of this particular correspondence dates back to February 26th, 1942. 428

Truth is, honey, old-maid-dom whithers me at my very roots. Nor can I say I’m sorry that it does. If you know me at all you should know that what I cannot live with, or by, is ordinary-ness. A villa or a garret. One or the other. Something dies in me when I have to live in between. (We’re talking symbolically so don’t do a Cowley on me). Perhaps it’s a grievous fault in me . . . Maybe you’re right: maybe the boy ought to grow up ordinarily. But damn it all, I distrust that “ought” . . . is it better for him to grow up ordinarily with a more-or-less constantly depressed old man, or a little unordinarily with a more-or-less infrequently depressed old man. And how about you? How about it old sweetheart. Is it really what you want? Ordinaryness? . . . Is that the end-aim of your personal aspirations-- as distinguished from what you want for me and Keith? If so, I’ve been wrong-- wrong when I saw you in the bookshop, wrong during all those bad years you left me pretty much alone, wrong now. 429

As time went by, the mood of Basso’s letters grew more conciliatory and with it the realization that separation was out of the question: “two people who get along so beautifully as we do apart ought to do better together. That puzzles me greatly. And it’s sheer moronic folly for us

428 Etolia Basso denies the marital difficulties of 1942; Basso’s correspondence of this time indicates otherwise.

429 Hamilton Basso, letter to Etolia Simmons Basso, 26 February 1942, Hamilton Basso Collection, Beinecke Library, New Haven. The book shop Basso refers to is the Pelican Book Shop in Royal Street, New Orleans; the Double Dealer met here and it is the location where Ham and Toto first laid eyes on each other.
to exhaust the other way we do with so much useless talk. Separation, which you have brought up so often wouldn’t work. I don’t really think so.”

After three weeks of Florida sunshine, Basso was ready to go home again and although we do not have Toto’s letters, it is clear that they had signed the peace to save their marriage.

While Basso was in St. Augustine, he met the Norwegian and Nobel Prize winning novelist, Sigrid Undset, whom he referred to reverentially as “Mme Undset.” He was quite smitten with her personality especially after he had found out that she had read both Beauregard and Festival, the English edition of Days Before Lent. Describing her as “magnificent,” Basso told his wife: “You see this little monolith of a lady, formidable seeming, severe, holding some sort of mental role to rap the knuckles of bad American boys, and then with indescribable charm, she isn’t any of these things— warm and wise and gentle and all of it played upon by a lovely sense of humor. We talked and talked and talked. Only now I am beginning to realize that I sort of forgot about Marjorie Rawlings. But she wasn’t there— not in the presence of this other woman’s compelling personal authority.” Rather self-consciously he added: “Mme Undset is what a writer should be like— there would be a greater dignity to my craft if they were.”

Staying away from the writer's colony at St. Augustine, Basso kept mostly to himself, exhibiting once more his reluctance to mix with a clique of other writers.

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430 Hamilton Basso, letter to Etolia S. Basso, 2 March 1942, Hamilton Basso Collection, Beinecke Library, New Haven.

431 Sigrid Undset (1882-1949) received the Nobel prize for literature in 1928. During World War II she lived in the United States.

432 Hamilton Basso, letter to Etolia S. Basso, 28 February 1942, Hamilton Basso Collection, Beinecke Library, New Haven.
After the brief crisis of 1942, the Bassos’ marriage greatly improved when, a year later, the family settled in Weston, Connecticut and moved into “an old two-story frame house with a barn and eight acres of land.” Because the house was faraway from the railroad station, from where many Westonians commuted to their jobs in New York City, the house was cheap. Van Wyck Brooks and his wife, Elinor, who already lived in Weston, had helped them find the house. Brooks first met Basso in 1942. At the time, he was so charmed by Basso that he told Ellen Glasgow about the Louisianan novelist. In reply, she confided that Basso was “one of the very few younger Southern novelists whose prose had distinction.”

Soon after the Bassos had moved to Connecticut, Elinor Brooks fell ill and died. The Bassos tried to console Brooks and invited him over for dinner frequently. This was greatly appreciated by Brooks, who, whenever the Bassos went traveling, would keep them up to date in postcard after postcard. Basso reciprocated the correspondence when Brooks traveled. These letters convey various impressions of life in Connecticut, Keith’s upbringing, Basso’s writing and his continued annoyance with intellectuals, critics and literary people. Brooks, who was very ill at ease with the neighborhood’s literary gatherings, was delighted to have found a kindred spirit: “I am glad to hear that you have escaped the fashionable circles of the Lyons Plains Road . . . we made rather a policy of keeping out of things, when we first went to Westport, and I cannot quite regret it but it gives one a feeling, in the end, that one doesn’t

\[433\] Ikerd, 109.


This postcard collection contains twenty-six postcards by Brooks and is to be found in the Hamilton Basso Collection at the Tilton Library of Tulane University, New Orleans.
belong anywhere." The correspondence between the two men can be typified as warm and mutually ingratiating. Compared to his tough-minded correspondence of the thirties, Basso's letters to Brooks are pleasant and soft-spoken. They reveal his smooth and natural style which Brooks characterized rather appropriately as Basso's "charming air of casualness," which is the hallmark also of his writing for *Life* and *Holiday.*

Besides get-togethers with Brooks who, on one of his birthdays, crawled underneath a table when his guests started a loud "Happy Birthday," the Bassos saw much of Malcolm and Muriel Cowley, the painter Peter Blume and his wife Ebie, and the writer Peter de Vries and his wife Katinka. They also kept up with friends from the past, like the critic Edmund Wilson and playwright Lillian Hellman. While Basso kept his network of literary friends alive, he was not drawn to the literary scene *per se* and found more satisfaction in serving on the local school board. At the same time, life was perhaps a little too dull; compared to the rural and mountain discomforts of the thirties, life in Connecticut was convenient but also suburbanly subdued. Missing the stimulation of his peers, Basso confided in Brooks: "The number of people worth talking to seem[s] to get fewer and fewer year by year."

In the same letter Basso complained about the severe winter which, besides slowing down the building of his outdoor study, delayed his writing: "just wrote a couple of short stories, the first pieces of fiction since 1941." Because of his breakdown in 1942 and an illness which was diagnosed as an adrenalin deficiency in 1945, Basso felt like "the wind" had been taken "out of

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his sails.”439 According to Malcolm Cowley, there was a remarkable slackening in Basso’s production after 1943; always having been a cautious writer, he became “excessively careful,” feeling “a continual need to challenge himself, to prove himself, to surpass himself.”440 Cowley probably based this comment on a letter of 1947 in which Basso told his friend that his new novel, *The Greenroom* (1949), was “crawling” along: “It’s bad when the creative and critical lobes are working at the same time. And then too, there is my increasing reluctance to publish-- my indifference really... I can’t see the point of publishing another novel. The bilge we get these days! So it has to be good enough, in itself, to be a protest against the bilge.”441 Basso’s perfectionism often hampered his writing or, as Cowley remembered: “He worked with difficulty, and usually produced five or six drafts of a work before bringing it to his publisher.”442 Basso set the same high writing standards for his son. One day, when Keith proudly presented his father with an essay for which he had received an A, Basso, upset with the essay’s sloppy prose, crumpled it up and placed Keith in a private school: “language was important in our family and to be used with care,” Keith recalled in an interview of 1992.443

Basso’s precision, fondness of language and intense devotion to proper usage was also

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439 In a letter to Van Wyck Brooks of December 22nd, 1945, Basso mentions his adrenalin deficiency for the first time: “and so along with 3/4 of the other people who inhabit the American Dream, I’m taking pills [and get] little work done.” Also, in a letter of January 8th, 1946, Toto writes the Brookses how Ham’s medication made him “like he was years ago, chirpy and whistley, bright eyed etc.” Van Wyck Brooks Collection, Charles Patterson Van Pelt Library, Philadelphia.


mentioned at his funeral when one of his friends observed that he “died without writing a slipshod sentence.”

Due to his uncertain income in the forties, Basso had to resort to journalism for *Time*, the *New Yorker*, and later, *Life* and *Holiday*. Although he liked having contact with other writers on the various magazines’ staffs, he saw journalism as a necessary evil that gobbled up all the time he wanted to spend on his novels. Besides writing three rather middling novels, Basso was very wrapped up in the composition of *Mainstream* (1943), his book of essays on American history. Like *Beauregard*, the lively essays reveal Basso’s personal slant on historical figures such as Calhoun, Jefferson, Lincoln, Long, Roosevelt and others. Although these historical reflections are intelligent and well-written, evincing Basso’s versatility as a writer, we will pay no attention to them here as they bear no relation to the literary oeuvre. Instead, we will discuss the gems of the forties’ writings, Basso’s short stories for the *New Yorker*.

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Basso joined the *New Yorker* in 1944. Starting out at the bottom of the hierarchy, he contributed to the "Talk of the Town" column but was soon promoted to profiles and short stories. Founded in 1925, the *New Yorker* was intended as "smart, sophisticated, irreverent, urbane, and not written for the old lady in Dubuque," or so its founding editor, Harold Ross, maintained.\footnote{Robert McCrum, "The New Corker!" *Guardian Weekly*, 11 October 1992: 19.} Ross's nit-picking, rude, flamboyant yet brilliant editorship turned the *New Yorker* into a high quality magazine of combined commentary, wit, literature, humor, profiles, travelogues, reviews and the local news of New York City. Over the years, the magazine managed to attract a great number of talented writers, cartoonists and critics, and by the time Basso joined the magazine, the *New Yorker* "had become the Vatican City of American cultural life. As Bob Gottlieb, (i.e. the third editor, who succeeded William Shawn in 1987) remarks, 'It came to be that if the New Yorker said it, it was so'."\footnote{Ibid.}

When, in 1952, Shawn took over from Ross, the magazine's slant changed slightly, espousing a more serious vein. Accordingly, the magazine came to defend "the environment [and] eloquently condemned bias and hatred." Also, attuned to the Cold War climate, Shawn's *New Yorker* "made clear to readers that the proliferation of atomic weapons was suicidal."\footnote{Philip Hamburger, "Thoughts About The New Yorker," *New Leader*, July 13-27, 1992: 11.} Otherwise, the magazine remained the same and stuck to its old formulas until Tina Brown took the editor's chair in the early nineties.

Although William Shawn's shy and gentle personality differed immensely from Ross's, he was equally gifted and carried on what had become the *New Yorker* tradition. According to Etolia Basso, her husband was very impressed with Shawn's editorial skills which Brendan
Gill remembered by its “silences, hesitations, sidelong glances of [Shawn’s] very blue eyes and tentative baton-like strokes in the air of his dark-green Venus drawing pencil.” And Joseph Epstein writes how “writers who worked under [Shawn] felt a fealty toward him of a kind owed to a kindly, tolerant, and wise father . . . He did everything possible to make writers feel stability in their working lives. Once he was committed to a writing project, he stayed committed.”

As for the ambience of the New Yorker offices, both Philip Hamburger and Joseph Mitchell claim that at the time that Basso was involved with the magazine, there was a “familial sense to the place.” Mitchell reminisced in an interview how “At the old New Yorker . . . A lot of us would go out to lunch together: Liebling and Perelman and Thurber, who was idiosyncratic and funny. Now everybody goes in and out.” Etolia Basso remembers that when her husband and Harold Ross went out to lunch one day, they noticed a huddle of three jittery men crossing a busy New York street. The three were E.B. White, James Thurber and Alexander Woollcott. Upon recognizing them, Ross said: “They are my three best men and they can’t even cross a street.” From Brendan Gill’s complacent Here at the New Yorker (1975), one may draw the conclusion that, although Basso was a regular contributor, he was not a true insider. This may have had to do with the fact that he did not live in the city but would commute to the office once or twice a week. Another reason may be that Basso was often uncomfortable in the company of other writers.

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448 Brendan Gill, Here at the New Yorker (New York: Random, 1975) 11.


451 Etolia S. Basso, interview, 18 February 1994, Tempe.

However, one fellow writer (and fellow townsman) that Basso felt relatively close to was the novelist and humorist Peter de Vries. De Vries, who died in 1993, wrote the following about his relationship with Basso and their work for the magazine:

We first became acquainted in those rabbit warrens at the New Yorker, where we had no editorial connection with the magazine at all. He took the veil as book critic, while also writing stories for “the book” on his own, which I did likewise functioning editorially in the art department: cartoons, captions etc. I can’t think of Ham’s even imagining such a post for himself. Neither the one nor the other had written a story till we found it published in “the book.” I had no idea who his editor was, and don’t even now. This miraculous magazine simply appeared, behind all that talent and toil. “Nobody can touch it,” Ham once remarked as we roosted at a lunch counter.453

Basso’s “Profiles” --of playwright Eugene O’Neill, of Somerset Maugham, of the artist Charles Prendergast and of the French philosopher, Jean Wahl-- are penetrating and detailed portraits, but as they were written under the very strict and meticulous editorship of Harold Ross, they are virtually interchangeable with those by other writers. The same applies to Basso’s book reviews. Unlike his New Republic writings, which were much more colored by his own and the magazine’s politics, Basso’s New Yorker pieces had to adhere closely to the magazine’s format. The short stories, on the other hand, are delightfully “Bassoesque” and it is regrettable that Basso wrote so few short stories in his life.

The six New Yorker stories can be classified as hunting and fishing stories, a genre made famous by Hemingway’s Nick Adams’ stories and Faulkner’s “The Bear.” Significantly,

Basso's stories deviate from the conventions of the genre that emphasize the ritual of the hunt, the test of manhood and the rites of initiation. Instead, the stories demythologize the hunt and criticize the violence involved. Possibly, Basso, who was not a great hunter himself and despised any sort of violence, wanted to show that the hunt does not deserve and live up to its mythical reputation.

The stories can be divided into groups of two; the first two, "The Age of Fable" and "The Edge of the Wilderness," are autobiographical fishing stories. In the first story Peter Maxwell and his six-year-old son Patrick, walk through the mountains of North Carolina. Nostalgic for the past, Peter sees himself in the small climbing figure of his son; the child's curiosity about the trout and the old Cherokee Indian they will be meeting on their way reminds him of his own childhood enthusiasm. Moreover, as his son is greatly looking forward to both the trout and the Indian, the latter of whom Patrick obviously pictures as some figure out of his story books at home, Peter realizes that he may have instilled too high expectations into the boy.

When they reach the Indian's hut, the Indian, who is no more than an old man in dirty overalls, warns them that the river does not contain any fish anymore. Upon their arrival at the river Patrick wants to go home: disappointed with the Indian's appearance, who, to the boy's mind, was "not an Indian" but a "dirty old man," Patrick assumes his father also lied about the trout in the river. Although Peter tries to rouse his son's interest for the fishing, when he sees that Patrick has stubbornly made up his mind, he decides to go home. At that very moment a huge trout explodes from the water and although Peter has it momentarily hooked, the fish gets away. This event triggers a change of heart in the child. On their way home, he babbles on and on about the fish they caught and about the real Cherokee Indian they will be passing again on their way home. His son's cheerfulness brightens Peter's fortieth birthday, the day on which "the age of fable was past."

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Joseph Millichap explains the story's title, "The Age of Fable," as something that the child ultimately recreates for the father. With Indians no longer looking like Indians and a river that is empty, the age of fable is not past but gains a new dimension thanks to the child's imagination. Although the fishing trip is a complete failure from the fisherman's point of view, it nonetheless manages to bring father and son closer together. This is also the objective of the hunt in Southern culture, the bonding experience between father and son being essentially more important than the actual outcome of the hunt. Most of Basso's hunts are unsuccessful, the hunt being subservient to the lesson the hunter is supposed to learn.

In "The Edge of the Wilderness" Patrick Maxwell uses foul language, and in a bedside chat, his father explains to him that the difference between corral and ordinary language is that the former may only be used very rarely. Out fishing the next day, Patrick is catching sunnies only and, as he once caught a twelve-inch trout, he cannot be pleased by small fish anymore. His train of thought is disturbed by a man who wades noisily through the river. The two start a conversation and Patrick asks the man if he has not got any rubber boots. Proudly, the man explains that he does not need any as he is wearing special pants. Asking the boy if he has ever seen such pants, Patrick says he has not. This pleases the man: "I'm glad you said that... Real glad. Because if you'd said you had, then I'd have known you were telling a whopper. And I don't take kindly to boys who tell whoppers. You know why?... Because I'm a minister of the Gospel, that's why." The minister then goes on to tell Patrick that he works for

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456 "The Edge of the Wilderness" was inspired by an actual story which Etolia Basso remembered when she reread the story in 1992. Having spent a summer on a ranch in Arizona, where the nine-year-old Keith had relished cowboy life, the Bassos returned to their home in Connecticut. They were welcomed by the next-door neighbor who had brought flowers and cookies. After Keith had munched a cookie, the neighbor asked him politely what he thought of her cookies. Keith, still under the spell of his life at the ranch, answered: "Damn good!" That night Keith was reprimanded by his father in a bedside chat.
the Baptist Church in Piny Knoll, Mississippi, and that his pants can also be used for baptism. “Do you know what I do when I baptize a person? I take him and dunk him under the water and hold him there. He gasps and chokes, he kicks and he thrashes, but I keep him down. Yes sir.”

Patrick, who does not like the man’s talk, decides to ignore the minister in his baptismal pants and concentrate on his fishing. But the man does not leave the child alone and asks Patrick if there are any fish in the river. Patrick confirms this and tells the man offhandedly that he caught a twelve-inch trout the other day. To the boy’s angry frustration, the man does not believe this but before he can insist he did catch such a big fish, a car stops by the roadside to pick up the minister. As the man climbs ashore, Patrick curses him, using the worst corral language he can think of: “The old grown-up stinker . . . Calling that pair of pants baptizing trousers! As if I’d believe that! . . . And he tried to make out that I was telling a lie, the old goddam stinking grown-up bastard!” Although Patrick is aware of the promise he made to his father, he also knows “that this was one of the times when ordinary language just wouldn’t do.”

As with “The Age of Fable,” the fishing experience is not about the rites of fishing but teaches us something else instead. The contrast between the disarming spontaneity of the honest child and the hypocrisy of the minister, who preaches to the child he should not tell any whoppers and then goes on to tell a lie himself, illustrates that the adult world is flawed and insincere. The story’s autobiographical overtones --Patrick is based on Keith and the unsympathetic minister may have come forth out of Basso’s anti-clerical sentiments-- add to its authenticity and effect.

The second set of stories, “A Kind of Special Gift” and “The Broken Horn,” are Southern tall tales.457 The first is the story of the narrator’s uncle, Zebulon. Although Uncle Zebulon is not a great hunter, he takes great pride in the dogs he breeds. His favorite dog is Bess. In the

barber shop, which reminds one of the beauty (and gossip) parlor of Eudora Welty’s “Petrified Man,” Zebulon likes to brag about Bess’s great hunting qualities. To Zebulon’s horror, Bess falls ill and, together with all his other dogs, dies of rabies. Bess’s death breaks Zebulon’s heart. He goes out on long walks by himself and one day, when the narrator meets his uncle in the fields, Zebulon tells him that he has developed a strong sense of smell which is similar to that of Bess’s. Elaborating on how rabbits, quails and bucks smell, Zebulon tells his nephew that it is a “kind of special gift,” which, because it brings him closer to Bess, makes him grieve no longer.

The narrator, who has the naïveté of a child, believes his uncle and tries to improve his own smell, “sniffing his way across pea fields” and encouraging his friend, Booker-T, to do the same. While doing so, they come upon a crowd, led by Uncle Zebulon and his hunting buddy, Major Bedford. Apparently, Zebulon had boasted about his acquired sense of smell in the barber shop and, challenged by one of the shop’s patrons, Uncle Zebulon decided to prove it and hunt something down. The whole town gathers to watch this spectacle but before Zebulon can demonstrate his gift, two of Zebulon’s brothers take him home. The next day he is sent to Alabama for a rest period of three months. Returning home, Zebulon resumes his former routine, breeding dogs and going on hunting escapades with the Major. Occasionally, though, the narrator meets his uncle on his country walks and observes that “He would always be standing very still, rapt and absorbed and he seemed to be smelling very hard.”

The story has a strong comic element which borders on the grotesque; the use of the grotesque, whereby the “author and reader share an aloof condescendingly amused attitude toward the characters,” is a popular portraiture device of a number of Southern writers. Erskine Caldwell, Truman Capote, William Faulkner and Flannery O’Connor all resort to the grotesque character in their tales of the South.458 One may further note that once more, Basso’s hunt is not the central event of the story. Instead, the hunt and its rituals are mocked. There is no

glorification of male courage, no conquest of the wilderness and no test of masculinity. Rather, we see a somewhat pathetic older man, who, mourning his dead dog, imagines he inherited his pet’s keen smell. Although Zebulon’s “gift” is fantastic and farcical, the story is not extreme in its grotesqueness but subtle in its quiet understatement.

The same applies to “The Broken Horn” which has the same setting and characters of “A Kind of Special Gift.” However, this time Major Bedford is the hero. Bedford, who still drives his old Buick, is finally persuaded by his wife to buy a new car. To break in the new car, the Major, Zebulon and his nephew go on a hunting expedition and as they are driving along, a deer jumps in front of the car and causes the vehicle to land in a ditch. Furious over what has been done to his brand-new car, Bedford crawls out and tries to shoot the escaping deer. He misses yet finds a piece of the buck’s horn that is broken off in the crash. Holding the piece in his hand, the Major promises he will kill the buck before the hunting season is over. Thus the Major becomes obsessed with the deer, which he, for some mysterious reason, does not manage to shoot. Like the bear in Faulkner’s story, and like the deer, Old Red, in Basso’s Wine of the Country (1941), the buck survives onslaught after onslaught, becoming “more a creature of fable than a living thing; no animal, it seemed, had ever possessed so dark and cunning a wisdom before.”

Ironically, as the season draws to an end and the Major frantically hunts, the buck is finally killed by a single bullet fired by a small thin man, who found the buck nibbling a plum tree in his back yard. Again, the hunt is demystified and although the story resembles the conventional hunting story in which an animal becomes almost invincible, the anticipated climax leads up to both the anti-climax of the buck’s easy killing and the story’s moral that monomaniacal obsessions merely lead to disappointment.

The last two stories are more serious than the other ones. Both relate the violence of the hunt to the violence of war and both deal with the hunter’s reluctance to kill. “King Rail,” a less successful story than “The Wild Turkey,” introduces the reader to “railbirding,” which is a
special kind of bird hunt from boats, practised mostly in the South. The story is told by one of the guides, who takes people out on the water and positions the boat in places where rails fly up. One day he takes a young man on board. For the young man, who has been in the war in China, this is his first railhunt. As the birds are few, the guide works himself into a sweat to find the right spots. Then after two or three shots, the young man comments—much to the irritation of the guide—that it feels like shooting “sparrows from a rickshaw.” In what the guide interprets as contempt, the young war veteran empties his gun and as he does so, an enormous king flies up. The guide is boiling inside, knowing that only few men in their lifetime get the chance to shoot a king as big as a rooster. Weeks later, the guide hears from another guide that the young man, who missed his once-in-a-lifetime chance, had not enjoyed the hunt, the guide’s hard labor had reminded him too much of the hardworking Chinese. Thence the guide is nicknamed “Gung Ho.” The story’s linking of the hunt to the war is interesting but perhaps not as effective as the war associations of “The Wild Turkey.”

This last story deals with two brothers, Robert and Paul. They are sitting in a blind, waiting for turkeys. While the brothers are waiting and whispering, it becomes clear that Robert wants his younger brother, Paul, to shoot a turkey before he goes off to war. At this point, the story appears to move in the direction of the traditional initiation story. Paul, however, has very mixed feelings about shooting anything because, on a previous duck hunt with Robert, he had forgotten to put on his safety catch when he climbed over a fence. The gun went off and hit Robert in the leg which then had to be amputated. While they are waiting for the turkeys, Paul cannot dispel this incident from his thoughts and when, finally, a group of turkeys appears, he cannot bring himself to fire: “The explosion would be just like the explosion that tore off Robert’s leg, and the turkey would die in its own blood, and for an instant, as Paul squinted down the barrels of his gun, he stared into a future which he wished he could escape.”

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460 “The Wild Turkey,” 27.
lowers his gun and confesses he will not shoot; while the turkeys fly away, alarmed by the sound of Paul's voice, Robert jumps up, fires angrily after the birds but loses his balance because of his stump. Robert then cries, upset with Paul's cowardice and his inability to join the army himself. Paul tries to console him and although he knows that he has failed as a hunter, he feels relief and release: "There was a sudden lightness in all the places where fear had been, almost a giddiness, and for an instant, as a wild rejoicing mounted in him, he was afraid that he was going to shout aloud." 461

One may want to remember here that all of Basso's hunting stories were written at a time that the world was being torn by war. In this light, the stories, and "The Wild Turkey" especially, seem to underpin a pacifist message. All of Basso's hunts are failures, signifying the futility of man's instinct to kill. Human values, the distinction between right and wrong are more important in these stories than the event of the hunt itself. Accordingly, in the first two stories, we learn that bonding can also take place without a successful hunt and that a child's honesty is much more valuable than adult hypocrisy. In the second set of stories, we learn that hunters' obsessions with their hunting dog or with deer lead to madness and alienation, while in the last two stories, we are taught that killing is not as glamorous as it has been made out to be. In all these stories, the hunt is demythologized. Basso's own qualms about the hunt can be seen as a rebellion against his Southern identity. Whereas in Southern culture the hunt is a revered realm of experience through which fathers teach their sons manliness, Basso infers that virility can also be acquired through less heroic means.

Ikerd was certainly mistaken in discardng these stories, saying that Basso "was still grappling with the problems of defining character with innuendo or a few swift strokes, and these emerged as too broad and simple and yet puzzling because not sufficiently explained." 462

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461 Ibid.

462 Ikerd, 114.
Reading these remarkable stories, one cannot help but regret, as Millichap has, that Basso wrote so few stories.\textsuperscript{463} Their autobiographical candor, humor, use of the Southern grotesque, local color as well as their subtle meaning and Southern “otherness” in their debunking of the hunt, turn them into jewels on the crown of Basso’s œuvre.

\textsuperscript{463} Millichap, 140.

Inspired by the New England scenery of South Hadley, Basso did not open his sixth novel, *Wine of the Country* (1941), with a dusty Southern square and the statue of a Confederate soldier but showed his reader the snowy Common of the college town of Chadhurst. Like Basso’s previous heroes, Tait Ravenwill is an intelligent and handsome young Southerner who finds himself at the beginning of a promising academic career in anthropology. At the book’s opening, he hurries his way across the Common to meet with fellow anthropologist, Dr. Prescott, a widower who lives with his three adult daughters, Catherine, Elizabeth and Jean, and his niece, Ellen. Of these girls Catherine and Ellen are given most attention. While Catherine is a sensible young woman who has a string of beaux she finds too dull to marry, Ellen is recuperating from a broken engagement. Unlike the happy-go-lucky and giggly Elizabeth and Jean, one being a night club singer and the other a vain Smith girl, Ellen is a sad character: her mother died when she was quite young and her father, a diplomat, drowned himself when she was nineteen. Ellen is not only another “orphaned” character but due to her father’s different posts abroad, she also experiences a sense of homelessness, a sentiment she shares with her literary brothers, Tony, Dekker, and David. Ellen’s melancholic demeanor both mystifies and attracts Tait and soon the two are married after a mushy courtship in the New England snow. Catherine, who is of course very happy for her cousin, is also a trifle envious: though she tries to hide her infatuation for Tait, it flares up time and again and does not go unnoticed by Tait.

After the wedding the couple leave for Tait’s Southern hometown, Three Crow Corners, where Tait hopes to finish his book before he starts teaching again at Falmouth. But as is customary in Basso’s novels, a homecoming is never without complications. While Ellen cannot adjust to Southern ways, her depression and final breakdown stemming from a collision

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464 Hamilton Basso, *Wine of the Country* (New York: Scribner’s, 1941). Chadhurst sounds like Amherst, a college town (and hometown of Emily Dickinson) close to South Hadley.
of Northern and Southern culture, Tait abandons his manuscript, unable to harmonize the life of the mind with the life on the farm. He finally gives up his research altogether, writes a letter of resignation to his university and, like Dekker, tries to save the family farm from going under.

Meanwhile, Ellen suffers from bouts of depression, is repulsed by the violence of Southern pastimes and aggravates her own unhappiness and bitterness by jealousy: suspecting her husband of having an affair with one of the local belles, Cynthia Blake, Ellen finally discovers the mutual affection that exists between Tait and Catherine and runs into a swamp where she gets lost and dies. Tait's brother, Ned, also dies in the swamps when his obsession with a deer, Old Red, culminates in bloody death for both the hunter and his prey. After these tragedies, Tait returns to his book and, like a true Jeffersonian, finds a balance between his agricultural and intellectual pursuits. Catherine returns home to take care of her father and although the book seems headed for an open ending, the reader's curiosity is satisfied by the correspondence between Tait and Catherine and what appears to be the promise of a future marriage.

Tait and Ellen are the successors of David and Letitia in Courthouse Square. In that novel there is a similar clash of cultures and where David and his wife leave off, Tait and his wife take over. Though we never get to see Letitia's full reaction to the South as she only arrives in Macedon at the end of the novel, we may well imagine that, if Letitia were to settle in the South, she might develop an aversion similar to Ellen's. Another antecedent of Wine of the Country is a short story entitled "The Headhunters." Though never published, this story appears to have been the seedbed for Basso's novel as it relates the fate of a Northern woman who divorces her Southern husband because she cannot get used to the savage ideal which Southern society espouses.

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Notwithstanding Ellen's mounting conflict with Southern society, which is poignant and real, *Wine of the Country* has a number of flaws, first among them the problem of the protagonist, a previously observed Basso weakness. Although one expects Tait to be the protagonist as he has so much in common with Dekker, David and Jason, he is hardly our center of consciousness. Seen from without rather than from within, Tait's importance is diminished by the attention that Catherine and Ellen receive. At the same time, they are not protagonists either even though it can be said that, due to Ellen's mental crisis, the reader becomes most intimate with her. Considering that Basso's female characters are usually marginal creatures who are merely there to serve and sacrifice themselves for the male hero, *Wine of the Country* is one of the few novels in which a female plays a leading role. But despite this emphasis, Basso's handling of the female character is not successful as Ellen and Catherine are dull, sentimental and painfully pressed to fulfill the roles of the exemplary wife and daughter. Unlike their intellectual husband and father, they view "philosophical questions" as matters "above" their "mental station," their only ambition in life concerning "la vie domestique" (W, 8; 293).

Meeting Ellen for the first time, one is too readily prepared for the tragedy that is going to ensue. There are a number of references to the streak of madness that runs in the Prescott family. In addition, Ellen has such mood swings that the outcome of her depression and madness seems a foregone conclusion. Once she moves South, her already unstable condition deteriorates rapidly. Telling Tait that the hot weather does "things to her head," she is overcome by the "sense of being set down, without proper warning, in the midst of an old and hot and twisted mystery of the earth she could not understand" (W, 166; 204). Like *Cinnamon Seed*’s little Elinor, who is apprehensive of Dixie's Gothic environment, Ellen feels she has entered a realm of dreams she cannot comprehend: "The fantasy possessed her, suddenly, that she had passed beyond reality. Her mind was unable to accept, refused to accept, the information transmitted by her senses --the hypnotic movement of the moss, the tangled dankness of the earth, the heavy bars of yellow S. It was, if not a dream, like being in a dream; a world beyond world’s end, sleeping unfinished in the womb of time" (W, 205-206).
In the end, the dream turns into a nightmare when Ellen sees her way out of the South blocked by Tait’s resignation from his university job. Feeling like an “outlander” and a “stalk of alien corn,” Ellen cannot get accustomed to Southerners whom she finds grotesque and whose pastimes she thinks monstrous (W, 207-213). An important turning point in the novel, where Ellen’s sanity starts to crumble, is the dove-shoot; the crippled and bleeding doves that fall from the sky are an apt metaphor for Ellen’s condition and when Tait grabs a dove and cracks its neck on the butt of his gun, the analogy is complete. The cock-fight that follows heightens Ellen’s conflict of emotions further: “it was a twisted and confused emotion compounded of dread and alienation and all the things that marked, like rushing milestones, the progress of the estrangement . . . And so she stood there, caught in the web of her love for him . . . and that which was not hate or repugnance or even dislike, merely not-love, doomed to helplessness like a stray nightbird trapped in a beam of hypnotic light” (W, 277). Once the “cock had died [and] in his dying, a subtler thing had also perished,” Ellen feels hopelessly trapped, and like the bell jar that lowers itself over Esther in Sylvia Plath’s *The Bell Jar* (1963), the heroine experiences the night as “a great black bell without a tongue, swinging mutely across the world, descending lower and lower and dropping at last to imprison her” (W, 319-320). Caught like a nightbird gone astray, Ellen finally goes mad, her wild and hysterical laughter ringing eerily through the empty house.

Basso’s psychological realism is highly convincing. In fact, Ellen’s depression may echo some of the mental deadlock that Basso was experiencing himself at this time. Ellen’s madness, on the other hand, appears to have been based on the insanity of a few of her literary sisters: Ellen reads, and identifies with the heroine of Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina* (1877). Like *Anna Karenina* and Flaubert’s Emma Bovary, Ellen tends towards extreme forms of pessimism

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466 Catherine, on the other hand, is reading *War and Peace* and admires her counterpart, the faithful and enduring Natasha.
and idealism, suffers from melancholy and finds herself in a marriage gone awry. Like Anna and Emma too, Ellen breaks down once reality fails to match her fairy-tale expectations. As characters whose fate has already been determined on page one, these heroines lack free will and, unable to change the course of their lives, they go down the dreadful slide of depression and suicide. In view of Basso's faith in the power of heredity and the corporate identity of the family, Ellen's decline and fall are a clear demonstration of the author's affinity with the naturalist school.

As his last name indicates, Tait Ravenwill has a will and a mind of his own. Having the machismo of Dekker, the temper of David and the intellect of Jason, he is the mixed product of Basso's love of life and love of mind. Tait's homecoming, which entails a return to his rural roots and a confrontation with the essentially anti-intellectual environment of the South (his fellow Southerners call him mockingly "Professor"), resembles Tony's homecoming in its triggering of a vocational dilemma. As Tait becomes absorbed in the world's problems anno 1940, he feels the many deficiencies of his Ivory Tower life: "the world of academicians was a closed garden where the sounds of the larger world's tumult came only in muffled echoes, faint and far away" (W, 144). Yet, at the same time, as a student of Pavlov, Tait also knows that "he was still bound, by habit, inclination, by years of conditioning, to the intellectual's life" (W, 215). In the end, he realizes that he is a farmer at heart when, at a turkey shoot, he is reminded of his blissful country childhood and acknowledges, like Dekker and David, that his

467 One may extend the list with Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* and Louis Couperus's *Eline Vere*, both of which are naturalist novels.

468 Naturally, Tait's growing resentment with academe can be seen as the partial offspring of Basso's anti-intellectual feelings which resurface when Tait accuses both intellectuals and artists of being "noisy prophets . . . amateur politicians . . . party hacks [and] cocktail high priests who know all about ordering other people's lives while messing up their own, the children of fashion veering like weather vanes in the wind, the bright boys, the brighter girls, the cliquists, the critics, the you-pat-me-and-I'll-pat-you's the whole kit and kaboodle" (W, 285).
sense of home, on the farm, is more congenial than a life away from home, at the university: “What he wanted was to stay here where he belonged, here where he had some living roots” (W, 309-310). Basso’s heroes always come home in more ways than one, the concept of home standing for both the homestead and the hero’s ultimate fulfillment in life.

Tait shares a few common characteristics with Basso’s other heroes but differs where the importance of the family identity is concerned: there are no family patterns to which Tait must adhere, there are no heroic grandfathers who need to be emulated and there is no overarching sense of a family identity or the idea of a family in decline. One could in fact argue that the family identity only matters to the Prescotts: not only is there the family’s recurring mad streak, the corporate identity of the family is also manifested in the ancestral ties the Prescotts still feel. While the modest scandal of Ellen’s broken engagement is said to affect “those dead and buried Prescotts whose rigid hillside headstones bespoke some of the unswerving rectitude they cherished throughout their days” (W, 16), Elizabeth’s singing career is frowned upon by her dead forefathers as well: like the penetrating stare of the Clezac family portraits, the names of Elizabeth’s “forebears stared from their tombstones like disapproving granite eyes” (W, 161). Ellen cannot escape the clutches of her progenitors either for she feels “like a puppet manipulated by strings held in dead hands: her mother’s, her father’s, a ghostly line of Prescotts and Wyndhams stretching to the China trade and beyond” (W, 24). As for the notion of the family in decline, a recurring Basso motif, Tait suspects that the theme of Dr. Prescott’s new book is not the “disintegration of the family as a social unit” but the “disintegration of the Prescotts” (W, 161). Tait himself has no such worries or ties with his family. On the contrary, with a father who is senile and only interested in puppies and a brother who, like a monomaniacal Ahab, disappears in the woods in search of Old Red, his family lacks the coherence and solidarity that the Clezacs, the Blackheaths, the Barondesses and the Prescotts exhibit.

Another feature, which sets off Tait from his predecessors, is his cultural pessimism. He shares this with Dr. Prescott. Their gloomy outlook on life is no doubt related to Basso’s own anxiety regarding the Spanish Civil War and the outbreak of the Second World War. Like
Maxwell Perkins, who, in letters to Basso, worried about Hemingway’s departure for Spain, Dr. Prescott sees the Spanish Civil War as a faddish attraction for the young, who, having lost the spiritual prop of religion, go off to war in search of something that might replace religion. As in Relics and Angels and Days Before Lent, where religion is viewed as a principle of order in a time of disorder, Prescott argues that man “as soon as [he] is cut adrift from his customary moorings --as soon as he finds himself, like his early ancestors, tossing about on a great sea of doubt and uncertainty-- he must of necessity find a new system of faith and practice to replace the one he has lost” (W, 106).469

Although Tait’s and Prescott’s ideas are interesting food for thought, they have little to do with the novel’s plot and distract rather than illuminate. Basso’s tendency to editorialize culminated in Wine of the Country. Whereas in Days Before Lent Jason’s axioms form a theoretical underpinning of his character and behavior, in Wine of the Country, Prescott’s and Tait’s philosophies become wearisome and redundant. From a letter by one of Perkins’s assistant-editors, who praised the novel for being “packed [with] pertinent and provocative thoughts,” we know that Basso considered himself a “novelist of ideas” and therefore may have deemed it legitimate to interject his narrative with the issues that were on his mind.470 In

469 Like Basso, who, by 1940, tired of the Marxism of his friends, Prescott deplores that the young find their new religion in Marx: “he (i.e. the young man) finds a new faith in Marxism. Jehovah comes out of Heaven and takes up residence in the Kremlin. The College of Cardinals . . . becomes this thing he calls the Central Executive Committee. Heaven, a land of milk and honey and three automobiles for every family, is still somewhere in the future . . . Hell has resolved itself into the ‘dust-heap of history.’ Purgatory is that limbo in which mortals must remain until they have proven themselves worthy of admission to that most celestial band known as ‘the party’” (W, 106).

470 The letter reads: “I can’t find words to tell you how good it is, and how difficult it is to find the right words to use in describing it. What you said one evening a long while ago about being one of the few ‘novelists of ideas’ now writing is absolutely and completely borne out by WC. Not only have you packed the story full of pertinent and provocative thoughts but, without any sugar coating, you have cloaked the ideas so gorgeously with story and characterizations that any reader . . . will love every word of it . . .” William Weber, letter
fact, when he was composing the novel, he strained to integrate the novel’s ideas with its action: complaining to Perkins that he did not know how to “keep ideas moving so that the action is not interfered with,” Basso wrote that it was “Damn tough, [for] you never know how much playing with ideas the reader can stand. It would always vary with the reader and if you reduce it to the lowest common denominator, you end up by saying oh to hell with ideas, let’s shoot a gun or anything to make a noise. Which would be a knife in the heart of the thing you want to do. And my real job . . . is to show how ideas influence action: how every action . . . is the extension of an idea.”

Regrettably, in Wine of the Country ideas and action do not complement, let alone reinforce each other.

In spite of the novel’s weaknesses, that is, the narrator’s frequent philosophizing and the problem of the protagonist, the book deserves credit for the part which is set in the South. Whereas the New England section of the book is slow and dull, once we move South, the novel picks up pace and becomes more attractive. Perkins even thought that once the reader arrived in the South, the story “moved too fast.” Clearly, the South was and would always be Basso’s fictional domain. Linking climate to literary style, Basso told Van Wyck Brooks that, unlike the writing of Brooks’s New England “chums,” Thoreau and Emerson, Southern writing was a “kind of reflection, in words and rhythm, of the rank tangle of vegetation that in

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471 Hamilton Basso, letter to Maxwell Perkins, 26 August 1940, Scribner’s Archives, Princeton.

472 Maxwell Perkins, letter to Hamilton Basso, 1 April 1941, Hamilton Basso Collection, Beinecke Library, New Haven. Perkins wrote: “my only comment on other than the most favorable one as to the contrast of the South with the North and the way in which one does get an absolute feeling of the South, and how it seems to this New England girl, is that the story seems to move too fast.”
the hot months stretches down from Virginia to the Gulf. That same style (and landscape) springs to life in the Southern section of *Wine of the Country*: as soon as the novel moves South, the reader is made to feel the oppressive heat, the mosquito-infested humidity and the unruly vegetation of Dixie’s marshes.

By having a New England outsider respond to the South, *Wine of the Country* is different from Basso’s other novels in which a critical Southerner reflects on his own region. Consequently, the South is no longer a setting of ambivalence but a realm of mere negative connotations. Elaborating on the opposition between New England and the South, the narrator implies that whereas New England represents snow, cold, ice, serenity and peace of mind, the South stands for heat, humidity, restlessness, the stirring of roots and the stirring of the soul (i.e. madness). In this way, the South’s scenery is not only set off against the New England landscape(s), the contrast also reverberates in Tait versus Ellen, the savage versus the civilized, Gullah and voodoo ritual versus empirical science, heat versus cold, instinct versus intellect, the grotesque versus normality, drama versus reality and the country versus the city. To Ellen’s mind, the South is a place of the grotesque, of hairy spiders in the bath tub and of people whose songs betray “a certain darkness of the blood; giving voice to the vast loneliness that lay like sorrow across the land; the loneliness of marsh and swamp and sky and sea” (*W*, 238). Perhaps one should take into account that *Wine of the Country* was written at a time when, leaving the South permanently, Basso dissociated himself from the region of his birth and therefore summoned up negative rather than positive feelings. Remaining a strangely mythical land, the South would be forever held in the clutches of its own anachronisms: “the fables were less fabulous now (the balls, the young lovers born to doom, the pistol-shots beneath the moss) and the lost mythological world assumed a ghostly reality it never had before. This was a stage and perforce, a drama had to be devised to fit into its frame. Anything

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473 Hamilton Basso, letter to Van Wyck Brooks, 22 August 1949, Van Wyck Brooks Collection, Patterson Van Pelt Library, Philadelphia.
less extravagant, anything less heroic than the death of a people, the loss of a cause, would not have sufficed” (W, 330).

In later years, Basso came to condemn the South more harshly and adopted the outsider’s rather than the insider’s view. Whereas in his thirties’ novels Basso was still in two minds about the South, in his forties’ oeuvre the South has become an oppressive decor of grotesque situations and characters. On a trainride South in 1947, Basso wrote to Perkins that he had begun to feel like an “alien” in the South and shared Ellen’s belief that the South had somehow missed out on the “civilizing” process: “My own conviction, after long thought, is that if it weren’t for . . . certain radial influences from other parts of the country, this whole section would return to its aboriginal state in less than 5 years.”

Although Perkins applauded Wine of the Country and Ikerd thought that it was “possibly the best” book Basso “ever wrote,” the novel is flawed and it found a negative reception in the reviews. From the letters that were exchanged between Basso and Perkins it is clear that both of them hoped that the novel might signify a final breakthrough, putting Basso on the map as a more “established” writer of American fiction. Or as Perkins told Basso in a letter of 1941: “Time is really important with an author. He cannot at best write a great many books, and we are mighty anxious to see you get firmly established with a real success.” However, unlike

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474 Basso’s use of grotesque situations and characters was not an uncommon trend in Southern novels of the forties. As the cultural optimism and high aesthetic ideals of the Agrarians were fading, writers like Truman Capote, James Dickey, Carson McCullers, Flannery O’Connor and Walker Percy resorted to a darker vein which is also tangible in Basso’s Wine of the Country and Sun in Capncom (1942).


476 Ikerd, 90.

477 Maxwell Perkins, letter to Hamilton Basso, 5 February 1941, Scribner’s Archives, Princeton.
Days Before Lent, which was widely and favorably reviewed, Wine of the Country was largely ignored. To vent his frustrations, Basso blamed Scribner’s for marketing the book inadequately. In a letter of October 15th, 1941, an incensed Basso wrote to Charles Scribner:

“I can hear Max saying that you can’t control the reviewers. Of course you can’t: but that doesn’t mean they can’t be influenced because I’ve seen them be influenced. And all I would have asked, mind you, is that they be influenced to read me.”

This letter was soon followed by another in which Basso hinted that he had been approached by another publisher, to which Perkins promptly responded by offering $150,- a month for the new novel. By December of 1941, a change of publishers was no longer on Basso’s mind. Well under way with his new novel, Basso announced to Perkins that his next work would be an altogether different book.

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478 Hamilton Basso, letter to Charles Scribner, 15 October 1941, Scribner’s Archives, Princeton.
v. The Huey Long Articles and Sun in Capricorn (1942):

Hamilton Basso's Lifelong Lobbying Against Longism

In Basso's life and oeuvre one keeps coming across the daunting shadow of Huey Long. In total, Basso devoted nine articles to the Louisiana senator, seven of which were published in the New Republic and two in Harper's Magazine and Life. In addition there is his novel, Sun in Capricorn (1942), and an essay in Mainstream (1943), the first a fictional diatribe against Long's dirty campaigning and the latter an assessment of the forces that shaped a figure like Long.

Basso's first impression of Huey Long goes back to a reminiscence of how he, as a young reporter, first met Long when the latter was running for governor in Louisiana. Like many Louisianans, Basso was taken in by Long's hillbilly rhetoric: "I liked his similes and metaphors derived from the barnyard and the cornfield... They understood him and liked him. I liked him too." Long's ability to sway an audience and his promises of new highways, bridges, lower gas and electricity rates and free school books had widespread appeal in the poverty-stricken state of Louisiana. In 1928 Long was elected governor and Basso approved: "I thought that here was a young and forceful radical it would be well to support." After the corruption and abuse of Louisiana's oil barons, Long promised change and he stuck to his campaign promises: he improved infrastructure, dropped utility rates, abolished poll taxes and taxed large corporations. In Basso's words, Long was the "first politician to win an enormous following by virtue of his attacks upon the evils and inequalities of our present social order."


480 Harper's, 664.

481 Ibid.

Although Basso had initially been impressed by Long’s social reforms, he grew disenchanted when the governor designed his own political machinery in order to gain complete control over the state legislature. Soon after the 1928 elections, the progressive reformer transformed into an absolutist megalomaniac. Basso was quick to pick up on the danger of Long, who had already begun planning his way to the U.S. Senate and the White House. Worrying about Long’s eye on the Presidency, Basso eventually compared Long to the Fascist dictators Hitler and Mussolini: “Once Mr. Long reaches the White House we shall be living under a dictatorship... If this sounds like an alarmist statement, I ask only that you remember the way democratic processes have been flouted in Louisiana... Mr. Long has power equal to that of Hitler’s.”

As Long climbed the political ladder, Basso’s criticism became more inflammatory and emotional. Having been kicked out of Long’s hotel room by the National Guard, an incident he proudly referred to in both the Harper’s and New Republic articles, Basso’s resentment grew, and as it did, his epithets for Long changed from “young and forceful radical” into “clown,” “paranoiac,” “superman,” “demagogue,” “fascist,” “dictator” and “Lucifer.”

In Basso’s last article on Long, which appeared nine years after the senator’s death, his harsh opinion had not mellowed: “I saw him... as a stripped-down example of the dictatorial idea whose only equipment was a brutal energy and the ability to sway thousands of people by the sound that rhetoric makes.”

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484 As for the hotel room incident, in the New Republic of 20 February 1935 (41) Basso wrote “I call Mr. Long my friend only because of our long acquaintance with each other. He once had me ushered out of his hotel room and once I was arrested by his National Guard.”

Basso’s articles on Long have a vituperative and at times paranoid tone, which, over the years, would not be mitigated. Long after the senator’s assassination, Basso would alert his readership whenever a new Long figure stood up. One such figure was Georgia’s governor, Eugene Talmadge. Governor of the state from 1926 to 1946, Talmadge, or “Farmer Gene” as he was nicknamed, thrived on Long’s political platform of agrarianism, populism and religious fundamentalism. When Talmadge became a leading figure in Southern politics and began to challenge Roosevelt, Basso wrote a biting profile in which he compared the Georgia governor to Huey Long and ridiculed him as a Fascist “cross between a ventriloquist’s dummy and a sour-faced owl.”

Sneering at the support Talmadge received from anti-New Deal factions such as the Southern industrialists and Hearst’s Liberty League, Basso warned against Talmadge’s essential redneck tendencies: “Talmadge is the first man in our history to declare for the presidency on a platform of hate -- hatred of radicals, hatred of reform and, lowest and most despicable of all, hatred of the Negro.”

Long’s heritage had left its mark on Louisiana too. Pointing out that Long’s henchmen had become the state’s officers, Basso admonished that a “dictator [had] gone but the dictatorship” remained. In another *New Republic* article, Basso called for punishment of the corrupt mayor of New Orleans, Robert Maestri, and his two accomplices and Long heirs, Seymour Weiss and Richard Leche. Always favoring a mediating role of the federal government, he appealed to Washington for help: “A great deal of what is rotten in Louisiana will have to be cleaned up locally; but the federal government, if it finally means business, can help a lot.”

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487 Ibid.


Basso's Long commentary covers more than a decade (1934-1946). Whenever there appeared a new Huey Long book, Basso was the *New Republic* authority to review it. His importance as a Long critic has not gone unnoticed. Robert E. Snyder remarks that in the late twenties and early thirties, "Hamilton Basso stood, along with Hodding Carter, Hilda Phelps Hammond, W.D. Robinson, and a host of others, at the forefront of those Louisianans who honestly and wholeheartedly believed that Huey Long's burgeoning power represented an abominable challenge to democratic concepts and institutions." In addition, Snyder notes that of these four Louisianans, Basso was "the only one to openly and consistently grind his ideological axe against Longism." Based on Basso's extended coverage of (and initial respect for) Long, the critic Ladell Payne even went so far as to suggest that Basso might have been the model for Jack Burden in Robert Penn Warren's *All the King's Men* (1946). And Russell B. Long, Huey's son, was so weary of Basso's swipes at his father, and in particular his Long profile in *Life* magazine, that he wrote an "In Defense of My Father" which he had read out in the U.S. Senate by Senator John Overton of Louisiana: "no man of our time has been more abused, vilified and misrepresented by the American press ... than my father ... he has been accused of being a ruthless dictator who would have destroyed our system of democratic government as well as with the charge as a noisy low-grade rabble rouser."

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491 Ibid.


But Huey Long did not only mesmerize the media. He is probably the most written about governor in the American political novel: the forties saw the publication of four Huey Long novels, Basso’s *Sun in Capricorn* (1942), John Dos Passos’s *Number One* (1943), Adria Locke Langley’s *A Lion is in the Streets* (1945) and Robert Penn Warren’s *All the King’s Men* (1946). Louis D. Rubin has written an extensive comparative analysis of these four novels; we, on the other hand, will only analyze *Sun in Capricorn* and interpret the novel against the background of Basso’s other works and his lifelong crusade against Long in his journalism.\(^{494}\)

The story of *Sun in Capricorn* is similar to that of *Cinnamon Seed*. Like Dekker, the novel’s hero, Hazzard, is orphaned at an early age and adopted by his uncle Thomas and aunt Caroline. Like Dekker too, Hazzard is a shiftless character who has no ambitions and finally quits his uncle’s law firm to become a full-time farmer. Hazzard’s antagonist is Gilgo Slade, an exaggerated version of *Cinnamon Seed*’s Harry Brand. As in Basso’s 1934 novel, where the Blackheaths’ fate is inversely proportional to Brand’s rise, in *Sun in Capricorn* the downfall of Hazzard’s family is intertwined with Slade’s rise. Or as Hazzard jokes: “Gilgo Slade was the central planet in our modest solar system. We told time by him as it were” (S, 40). Ironically, the day that Slade announces his candidacy for the U.S. Senate, Hazzard breaks the news that he wants to leave the law to raise mules.

While the novel has an undertone of mockery, which is primarily due to Hazzard’s ridicule of Slade and his overall cynical view of things, the book is committed to a suspenseful plot. When Hazzard falls in love with a married woman, Erin, he gives Slade the opportunity to do some mudslinging against his uncle, who also happens to be Slade’s political opponent in the race for the Senate. Though Hazzard and Erin try to escape the public eye, the evil has already been done with the loudmouthed Slade yelling over the radio that his opponent’s nephew is running around with a whore. The novel’s climax, which, because of its carnivalesque atmosphere, is somewhat reminiscent of the Mardi Gras parade in *Days Before Lent*, occurs

when Hazzard and Ern get stuck in the traffic of Slade’s roadshow. Cornered by a policeman who wants to arrest Ern for violating the moral code, Hazzard tries to find a way out by conceiving the madcap idea of murdering Slade. Before he can actually do so, Slade is assassinated by Quentin, Hazzard’s cousin and Thomas’ son. Like Long’s assassin, Quentin is mowed down by Slade’s bodyguards, and just as there were speculations as to why Long’s murderer committed his crime, so are there all sorts of rumors as to what Quentin’s motive might have been until, finally, the papers decide that he “had been temporarily insane and killed Gilgo in the unfortunate belief that he was avenging the family honor” (S, 264). The book ends with a conversation between two men who wonder whether Slade was “the greatest man since Jesus Christ” or simply “a smart bastard” (S, 266).

Basing Slade on Huey Long’s character and behavior, Basso tends towards exaggeration, preferring grotesque caricature to realistic characterization. Thus Gilgo’s mouth “must have been a foot wide” and his left foot has only three toes (S, 66). Slade’s physical deformity is an indication of his mental deformation. Basso further plays up the fact that Long was a conspicuous public figure who drew attention to himself by violating the conventional dress code and acting like a loon. Alan Brinkley writes: “Long remembered the value of buffoonery in winning national press attention during his term as governor. Once again, he played the clown: receiving the press in his hotel room wearing lavender silk pajamas; insisting that potlikker be added to the menu in the Senate dining room; wearing flamboyant pink shirts, purple ties and white suits to the Capitol.” Long’s pajamas episode is recounted in both Sun in Capricorn and Cinnamon Seed. In Sun in Capricorn, the hotel room reception assumes a fantastic kermis-like air. The room is filled with bizarre cocktail-drinking people who all wait

495 According to Robert E. Snyder this conversation fixes “in broad outline, the dichotomous conceptual framework within which all evaluations of Longism, literary as well as historical, have traditionally been constructed.” Louisiana Studies 15 (1976): 81.

for Gilgo to appear. When he finally does, the crowd is hushed, for Gilgo is wearing “a green silk dressing-gown and matching bedroom slippers that flapped against his naked heels” (S, 79). Underlining the vulgarity of the scene, Hazzard takes note of Gilgo’s indifference to the fact that “certain intimate parts of his body were almost completely exposed” (S, 88). Harry Brand, Basso’s earlier representation of Long, is marked by a similar lack of sophistication and manners. Not only does he wear “flashy neckties” and receives a French battleship crew in his nightshirt, like Long, he champions “corn-pone and pot-liquor as man’s highest gastronomical achievement.”

The ingenious psychology of Long’s campaign speeches, carnivalesque parades and the ballyhoo of his circus-like shows have been vividly recreated in the book. While Robert E. Snyder praised this aspect of the novel, writing that Sun in Capricorn “tells us a great deal about the concept of demagoguery and the minds of the people who use it,” Gordon Milne thought Basso’s power lay in his portrayal of Long’s “superb evangelism and common touch as well as his unbridled ambition and underhanded strategy.”

One of the novel’s reviewers, Gwen Bristow, was equally impressed, noting that Slade’s campaigning sent shivers down her spine: “[Basso] writes so vividly that anybody who remembers those wild campaigns cannot read these descriptions without a reminiscent shiver.”

In a letter to Cowley, Basso wrote that Sun in Capricorn meant to unveil the dynamics of dictatorship: “the leader, the group-

497 Both Basso and Warren borrowed from Long’s campaign speeches; Long’s “The people . . . and not Huey Long, rule the State” is remarkably similar to Stark’s “You are the state. You know what you need” (AKM, 110). Compare also Willie’s “Look at your pants. Have they got holes in the knees?” (AKM, 110) to Slade’s “How many of you good people have ONE suit of clothes?” (S, 254-55).


insignia, the sinister associates, the hollow hanger-ons, the worshipful dispossessed lower-middle class mass— they are all there . . . I sure in hell was not interested in writing a novel just about Huey Long.”

A political nightmare come true, *Sun in Capricorn*’s neurotic vision may have been fed by Basso’s own distress when he was writing parts of the book in Florida: while the world seemed to be coming loose at its seams with Hitler’s successful occupation of Europe and the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor, Basso’s private world was coming apart too. Fatigued and haunted by his marital problems, Basso’s bewilderment possibly fuelled Hazzard’s pessimism, cynicism and the novel’s paranoid vision of a democracy turned police state.

Though Basso conveys Long’s reign of terror masterfully, Gilgo’s character is flat and empty. He is a no more than a looming background presence and his physical disfigurements, his toes having been accidentally chopped off and snatched away by a hungry cat, endow him with the kind of grotesque absurdity that reminds one of the physically maimed characters of Flannery O’Connor and Carson McCullers. If one is to read *Sun in Capricorn* as an ambitious literary work, Gilgo’s one-dimensionality and physical absurdity certainly cripple the novel. This is further accentuated by Hazzard, who, like Gilgo, never develops into a round, convincing character. Although Hazzard has a strong point of view, because he is very critical of Slade, he remains a nonentity. Caught up in the simple plot of “man falls in love with woman and becomes the victim of a calumnious political campaign,” Hazzard’s colorless character turns the novel into a straightforward action novel, a novel of suspense or, to use Louis D. Rubin’s denigrating term, “a cheap thriller.”

While Hazzard has all the means of becoming a successful lawyer in his uncle’s law firm, he lacks ambition and is accused of laziness. Owning up to shiftlessness and feeling no


motivation, Hazzard is interested in neither career nor life: "I lived alone in the country, I rarely went anywhere, my principal amusement was playing the guitar-- and now I was going to raise mules" (S, 49). Like a typical Basso hero, Hazzard is a loner. His girlfriend, Erin, points this out to him more than once: "You're lonely-- you're so lonely it hurts to see" (S, 130); "[Erin] felt... in me-- a kind of loneliness; a sense of being solitary watchers on the peak of the summer night" (S, 112).

Due to Hazzard’s essential superficiality (he does not even have a last name), there is little character development to speak of. Yet, in the end, there is a hint of the hero’s growing individuation which he attains not so much through any sort of spiritual quest but through sexual awakening. Though Basso’s female characters have little intrinsic importance, they do contribute to the hero’s Bildung and inspire him to assume responsibility and be his own man. Not only does Hazzard describe his relationship with Erin as a “religious experience” (S, 153), he also learns that love leads to personal fulfillment: "I was afraid for a moment, aware of the loneliness she’d leave behind, and then I was not afraid. It was just as I had told her-- she had given me a wholeness I never had" (S, 224). While most of Basso’s heroes are fatherless, the individuation process does not always depend on the recovery of a father figure but is usually achieved through moments of revelation and experience in love.

Taking the novel’s weaknesses into account and considering that Sun in Capricorn cannot compete with Robert Penn Warren’s masterpiece, All the King’s Men, there remains little to be said for what one may well call Basso’s worst novel. However, as an attempt to lampoon an important episode in Louisiana’s political history, Sun in Capricorn is an interesting historical document. It is not so surprising that Basso, who, in article after article promulgated the dangers of Long, would explore, criticize and get carried away by the Long phenomenon once more in his 1942 novel. Thus one may agree with Robert Snyder who argued that the novel’s political significance outweighs the book’s gravest flaws.

In addition, the novel’s weaknesses may be understood if one sees Sun in Capricorn as a departure from Wine of the Country. Where the latter was supposed to blend the novel of ideas with intense psychological drama, Sun in Capricorn was not going to have the “emotion or
rhetoric” but would be “sober and critical.”

Basso wrote Perkins that he was trying to “tell this story simply, simply: no introversions, no long passages of philosophical comment let that be there, unwritten, between the lines.” Accordingly, there are no flashbacks in the novel, there is no editorializing, and no commentary about the South. Instead, we have a rapidly paced story and dialogues that are marked by a prosaic sobriety which brings Hemingway’s cablese to mind. Finally, regardless of Louis Rubin who spurned the novel from a purely aesthetic point of view and discarded the work as a “slight affair” and “indifferent art,” *Sun in Capricorn* does not pretend to be a great work of art but is a caustic caricature of Southern populism and demagoguery.

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502 Hamilton Basso, letter to Etolia S. Basso, 15 March 1942, Hamilton Basso Collection, Beinecke Library, New Haven.

503 Hamilton Basso, letter to Maxwell Perkins, 15 February 1942, Scribner’s Archives, Princeton.

*The Greenroom* appeared six years after Basso’s non-fiction work, *Mainstream*, and seven years after *Sun in Capricorn.* The time lag between *The Greenroom* and Basso’s earlier work is significant, for with this 1949 novel Basso abandoned his often used formula of the young intelligent Southerner coming to terms with himself and life in the small town. The protagonist, Rufus Jackson, is not even a Southerner but a young man from Arizona, a state the Bassos had explored on a number of trips in the forties. The novel is not set in the South either but takes place in Europe. In Basso’s only “international” novel, the reader finds himself in a village in the French Provence which bears a strong resemblance to St. Paul de Vence, the village where the Bassos had lived for a few months in the late thirties. The novel is also set in the late thirties; like the Bassos who left Europe as soon as the war became imminent, Rufus leaves when the Germans invade Austria.

Unlike Basso’s earlier heroes whose family history the reader comes to know as the story unfolds, Rufus remains a blank. All we know is that he is a widower in his mid-thirties who has a young daughter. A failed playwright, Rufus is an assistant-editor at a large publishing house. Overworked, like Basso was in the early forties, Rufus vacations in France and is kindly requested by his editor, Charlie Shannon, who greatly resembles Charles or “Charlie” Scribner, to find out if the famous American, and Nobel-Prize-winning novelist, Mrs Porter, is still working on her memoirs. The hero’s mission to probe the affairs of a famous and virtually inaccessible author would be recycled in *The View From Pompey’s Head* (1954). While the young man’s encounter with the novelist may have been inspired by Basso’s meeting of the Nobel Laureate, Sigrid Undset, the actual confrontation with Mrs Porter could have been modeled on Basso’s dealings with Mrs Wolfe: after Thomas Wolfe’s death, Perkins had asked

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Basso to find out if the Wolfe family held any of the writer’s papers. At the same time, Mrs Porter is unmistakably based on the grande dame of American letters, Edith Wharton.

Already upon Rufus’s first visit it becomes clear that Mrs Porter has an unpredictable temper. When Rufus inquires after her memoirs, she answers evasively that it is “a question of writing truly” (G, 37), a statement which leaves him clueless. Fortunately, he learns from Nora Marsh, the English girl who is staying with Mrs Porter, that her work is in progress. Nora is unhappily married to Mrs Porter’s nephew, the alcoholic and would-be artist, Charles. Highly protective of Charles, Mrs Porter has decided to save his marriage.

To complicate the plot, Rufus falls in love with Nora and consequently faces Mrs Porter’s antagonism and foul temper. On the night that Rufus and Nora decide to marry as soon as she will be able to settle the divorce, Charles shoots himself in the shoulder, an accident that Mrs Porter employs to accuse Rufus and Nora of driving her nephew to suicide. Although Rufus finds out that it was really a drunken accident and realizes that Mrs Porter is a pathetic old lady who conjures up one lie after another, he cannot persuade Nora to come with him to America. Her feelings of guilt, the call of wifely duty and her decision to stay with Charles, after he has promised to better his life, preclude a happy ending. The open ending saves the novel from falling to the level of the supermarket romance, yet, at the same time, Nora’s self-sacrificial role, which is typical of the martyr complex of the Basso female, is overly melodramatic.

The Greenroom proves once more that Basso was neither very successful in handling romance nor in portraying females his own age. Older women on the other hand, like Mrs Porter and the Princess de Cloville, and, in the early novels, characters like Aunt Olivia and Celia, are sharply drawn and intriguing. Like Edith Wharton, Mrs Porter spends her old age in a French mansion, and like the great novelist, she comes from an era and a society with which Rufus is unfamiliar. Having published her first novel around the turn of the century, she thinks that, to people of Rufus’s generation, she has come to “represent the same thing as gas lighting, Turkish corners, and silver pheasants with bonbons” (G, 32). Like Wharton too, Mrs Porter was married to an older husband and like the American novelist, whose quibbles with her publisher have recently been brought to attention again by Mark Aronson’s article...
“Wharton and the House of Scribner: The Novelist as a Pain in the Neck,” Mrs Leslie Porter is blamed by her publisher for always “causing a commotion” (G, 68). Van Wyck Brooks was particularly impressed with the Porter character: “what a feat it was to paint and not paint Edith Wharton, to create an entirely different person who was yet teasingly like the woman with the ‘small cold heart’ . . . Your Mrs Porter goes right on living long after one has read the book.”

Besides Mrs Porter’s coldness, her lack of charity, her evil machinations, her interference in other people’s lives and her desire for building walls, around her mansion and around herself, she exhibits a “fondness for drama” befitting that of an actress who prepares herself for the “big scene” (G, 147). Rufus notices Mrs Porter’s theatrical inclinations the moment he meets her; observing that “she likes to hold the centre of the stage,” the hero perceives Mrs Porter’s distress, her lying on the couch after Charles’s pseudo-suicide, as being arranged: “‘Act III, Scene II,’ his mind said sarcastically. ‘The big final scene’ . . . He recalled the opening line of what was generally considered her finest book, The Chronicles of Catherine. It was perhaps the most famous line she had ever written: ‘She began each day with a rehearsal, closeted in the greenroom of her soul’” (G, 63; 245).

The stage metaphor is a favorite of Basso’s; he used it extensively in In Their Own Image. However, while the stage metaphor in that book was used as a means for the rich to shut themselves off from the realities of the poor, in The Greenroom, Mrs Porter resorts to drama to

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506 Van Wyck Brooks, letter to Hamilton Basso, 26 August 1949, Hamilton Basso Collection, Beinecke Library, New Haven. Mrs Porter’s coldness is mentioned a few times. Nora is of the opinion that her coldness is a trademark of her books: “the way she punishes people; letting them mount to the stars, only in order to drag them down” (G, 99). Nora’s comment foreshadows Rufus’s fate for while Mrs Porter is initially taken with her American visitor and lends him her Ford, in the end, she becomes his bitter opponent and succeeds in hampering his winning of Nora.
conceal the essentially empty life that she leads. She is a "farceur," Rufus decides, "not a jester or buffoon... but in the sense of one who habitually indulges in mystifications... her life was more tragically empty than he would have ever believed" (G, 250-251). Though a great writer and a successful artist, Mrs Porter has failed as a human being. Her personal life is marked by a "lack and want of love." She tries, yet fails, to make up for this by clinging to Charles. In the end, she does not only alienate Rufus and Nora, but also the people--Charles and Philip Lennox, her estranged lover, who comes to prefer his coin collection to her--with whom she hoped to spend the rest of her days. As in a Hollywood drama à la Eric von Stroheim, Mrs Porter is ultimately left brooding in her mansion with a staff of grey-haired servants.

The Princess de Cloville, with whom Rufus builds up a warm and enriching relationship, is the anti-type of Mrs Porter. Though she looks like an ugly "cleaning woman," a description which demystifies Rufus's romanticized idea of the European aristocracy, she has authority and charm. As opposed to the fame and fortune that Mrs Porter accumulated through her art, the Princess squandered her family fortune gambling, a game of oblivion she indulges in to make herself forget she is no longer young and "fit for love" (G, 166). Notwithstanding the Princess's promiscuous past and a life which knows neither achievements nor success, she is a loving human being, who faithfully stays at the deathbed of her lover, Marquis de Vernay, and who lends a sympathetic ear to Rufus's problems. As such, she is a much nobler human being than the insincere and deceitful Mrs Porter.

In his discussion of *The Greenroom*, Millichap paid some attention to the Jamesian framework of the novel. The Jamesian premise of the innocent American, who gains his maturity once he is exposed to the ways and whims of the Old World, is germinally present in the book. The French peasant in the town square, who harps on the essential "immaturity" of Americans, underscores this idea. Likewise, the misbehavior of the "ugly American," Spike Carruthers, brings out this immaturity once more. Millichap takes it a step further, however, when he argues that the idea of *The Greenroom* may have actually been inspired by Henry James's *The American* (1877): Millichap believes that, like Christopher Newman, Rufus
Jackson is prevented by the family from marrying the woman of his dreams. But whereas Christopher is unable to read the hieroglyphics of the French family, the de Bellegardes, Rufus does not deal with a family but with a single woman, who is not even European but American.\footnote{507} Furthermore, although Rufus does play the innocent American when it comes to regarding “anything over a hundred years old as one of the relics of antiquity” \cite{G, 121} or having romanticized perceptions of European nobility, he is by no means the impressionable young man that Christopher Newman is.

On the contrary, having lost his wife and exhibiting a profound sense of responsibility as a parent, Rufus is a mature character who has none of the immaturity for which his countrymen are blamed. To bring out his good behavior and decency, the narrator sets him off against the misbehaving and boisterous Spike Carruthers. In fact, compared to Carruthers, Rufus is decent to the point of dullness. Also, his passive behavior vis-à-vis the manipulative Mrs Porter and his stoical resignation after he has given up Nora do not ring true. An explanation for the hero’s impassivity may be sought in the fact that we never really get to know him. Whereas Tony, Dekker, David and Jason have all been rounded out by their family history, flashbacks and the exposition of their ideas, Rufus’s portrait lacks such illumination. Hence, he is slightly colorless and flat. Because Rufus is neither a strong character nor a convincing innocent abroad, the supposed clash of cultures does not truly materialize. Consequently, it is difficult to see the novel in terms of a “Jamesian lesson that the New World is fallen as well as the Old, [and] that the American Adam must experience this fall in order to discover his mature place in life;” in the end, Rufus simply gets on with life and, though looking back sentimentally, he does not --like Isabel Archer and Christopher Newman-- appear to have undergone a profound change of character or to have learnt “his lesson.”\footnote{508}

\footnote{507} It would perhaps be better to suggest that Mrs Porter is an American “gone bad” and thus has more in common with the devious Gilbert Osmond, who together with Mme Merle, deceive the innocent Isabel Archer in Henry James’s \textit{Portrait of a Lady} \cite{1881}.

\footnote{508} Millichap, 97.
Where does this leave us in our final estimate of the novel? Both Ikerd’s and Millichap’s praise seems inflated. While the novel is tightly plotted and the characterization of Mrs Porter one of its strongest points, the book is shallow and commercial in its orientation. With The Greenroom, Basso’s oeuvre clearly took a new turn. Moving away from the serious subject matter of his thirties’ novels, Basso headed for fixed-formula trivialliteratur. He replaced the Southern setting and Southern hero with an altogether different milieu and protagonist, and omitted his customary editorializing and flashbacks to rely solely on straightforward narration. Thus, the social realism and the issues that Basso raised in his early novels made way for romance and mystery. The Greenroom forms a crossroads at which Basso’s Southern Bildungs and Erziehungsroman changed into a version of the popular mystery and detective novel.

To be sure, Basso’s inclination towards popular literature was something he was not fully aware of himself and one may suggest that both the death of Maxwell Perkins in 1946 and Basso’s transfer to Doubleday, a more commercially minded publisher than Scribner’s, pushed him in the direction of the bellettristic novel. In fact, in letters to Charles Scribner and his new editor at Doubleday’s, Basso would complain that he missed the sensitive supervision of Perkins and that all publishers were really only interested in sales. And while in the early years Basso would aim his ammunition at the intellectuals of his day, in later years, publishers became his target. Rufus’s view that “Publishing was looking for War and Peace and hoping to come across another Gone with the Wind. Publishing was too much talk... too many cocktails, too many experts, too many people who wanted advances, and too many young women who thought they were celebrities because they once sat four tables away from James Thurber or Ernest Hemingway.” (G, 31), as well as Mrs Porter’s condemnation of the commercial interests of publishers (“a book has become as much a commodity as a sack of potatoes” [G, 140]) are truthful reflections of Basso’s personal opinion of the publishing trade.

The Greenroom sold relatively well and was converted into a CBS radio play and a television play by the Canadian Broadcasting Company. Basso also asked the playwright Samuel Behrman, whom he must have known through the New Yorker, to dramatize the
novel. Behrman, however, could not do it. Though he thought the novel “a natural” for a play, he was "too worn out from the theater" to take it on. The majority of the reviewers were taken by the book’s charm, its picturesque setting and the powerful creation of Mrs Porter. Charles Poore of the *New York Times* called the book “a comedy of manners in the grand style.” But, although Basso had built up a reputation as a novelist of manners with his Southern novels of the thirties, *The Greenroom’s* mystery and maudlin romance do not warrant any comic relief and perhaps one should simply summarize Basso’s 1949 novel as an unpretentious but elegant drama of suspense.

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The story in a novel is like the backbone in a human being. It's essential to everything else. They knew that, the old fellows--Stendhal, Balzac, Dickens, Jane Austen, Tolstoi, Dostoievsky... The story is basic to them all, story after story. And I think that it is a lot of over-precious nonsense that the modern novelist has lost his audience: that for some reason compounded I think of a bad mixture of inability and, again, preciousness, plus what I have always thought a shocking amount of egocentricity and narcissism, they are above the audience, that the audience owes something to them and they nothing to the audience.

Hamilton Basso, letter to Van Wyck Brooks, 23 October 1954
Chapter VI: The Final Years: The Reward of Recognition

1. The Fifties: Belletristic Best-Sellers

In the fifties Basso's work achieved widespread popular appeal. The socio-critical articles of the New Republic and the New Yorker had given way to travel writing and general interest articles for Holiday and Life, and Basso's 1954 novel, The View From Pompey's Head, was an instant best-seller. Citing his son, Keith, who asked his father why he wrote for popular magazines if all people did was throw magazines away, Basso was no doubt sensitive to the commercial direction that his work had taken. When Malcolm Cowley accused him of "milking the big magazines," Basso admitted that he "would like to be able to do some of the things that all the intervening years have been a kind of preparation for. But there is always that living to earn!" He also said that if he had to earn his living "by writing the stuff that goes between the advertisements --pure commercialism--" he wanted to get paid for it: "And the bigger the pay the better, provided I don’t have to write what I don’t feel or believe."

Basso's selling out to the big magazines and mass audience caused isolation. Claiming that he was indifferent to Cowley's criticism that both his literary and political pursuits were marked by "simple-mindedness," he nonetheless resented "sitting on an island, isolated from the intellectual fashions and currents of the time, especially the currents that swirl around the rocks of literature and politics."


512 Ibid.
Most of Basso’s trips for *Holiday* came as a welcome break after the completion of another book. On the road or at sea, Basso sometimes complained that he missed his family but, though he may have insisted that “the only real ‘fun’ left to me, and the most ‘fun’ I have ever known, or ever care to know, is you [Toto], the boy, my house in the backyard [i.e. Basso’s outdoor study] and a real job of work to sink my teeth in,” he knew that his trips formed an excellent remedy for the “failure of nerve” he suffered whenever his writing had drained him.513 Besides being filled with travel impressions, his letters home occasionally convey feelings of rejuvenation: “under a sisal plant in one of the remotest places of Jamaica, I met and shook hands with a fellow I used to know. Myself it was; the self I thought was dead . . . This sunlight has found its way into the deepest part of my soul . . . I’ve been only half a man. Now I am whole and sound and complete again.”514

From the late forties to the early sixties Basso traveled cross country for *Holiday* and the *New Yorker* and visited faraway places such as Brazil, Cuba, Honduras, Jamaica, Samoa, Scandinavia and Yugoslavia. As Ikerd observed, in his *Holiday* pieces, which were later compiled in Basso’s book of travel stories, *A Quota of Seaweed* (1960), “Basso always tried to focus on the people . . . rather than on either the scenery or the economic, social or political conditions of the countries.”515 His contact with the people he met on his way can be explained by his genuine interest in people, a theme that also ran through his correspondence with Malcolm Cowley and Matthew Josephson. One could typify Basso’s travel writing, which includes his letters home and travel diaries, as anecdotal and witty documents revealing the writer’s eye for detail, his incisiveness and his great storytelling talent.

513 Hamilton Basso, letters to Etolia S. Basso, 23 March 1949; 15 April 1950, Hamilton Basso Collection, Beinecke Library, New Haven.

514 Hamilton Basso, letter to Etolia S. Basso, 7 April 1950, Hamilton Basso Collection, Beinecke Library, New Haven.

515 Ikerd, 133-134.
The trip which prompted *The View From Pompey’s Head* was made in January of 1951. Largely meant as a recuperative journey – Basso had fallen off his son’s horse and needed “thirty stitches” to put his face “back together again” – he revisited Savannah, Charleston and the islands off the Georgia and South Carolina coast. His return to the South was highly inspirational: not only did he come up with the idea of Southern Shintoism after a Southern belle told him at a Charleston dinner party that “We’re like the Japanese; we eat rice and worship our ancestors,” Basso also realized that the Charleston-Beaufort-Savannah triangle would be an excellent setting for his fictional town, Pompey’s Head. Interestingly, whereas Basso polished up the image of the plantation South in the *Holiday* article, writing that Savannah and its surroundings were the South “of the great mansions, of beautiful women and gallant men, of blooded horses, of purebred hounds, of Negroes working in the fields and of all the other elements that went into the creation of that rather Technicolor dream,” in his notebook he mocked the South, observing that one “can’t turn anywhere in the South without smelling that stale smell of gentility.” While glorifying Savannah’s architectural extraordinariness in the *Holiday* piece, in his notebook he made fun of the fact that Savannah prided itself on having never seen a lynching. Likewise, Basso’s criticism of Shintoism, or ancestor worship, was much less concealed in his notebook. Ridiculing Charlestonians’

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516 Hamilton Basso, “Why I Wrote the View,” *Literary Guild Review*, November 1954: 3. Before Hamilton Basso did the Savannah and the Golden Isles article, Carson McCullers had been asked to do it. According to McCullers’ biographer, Virginia Spencer Carr, the piece never came off successfully as the *Holiday* editor “objected that she put too much of Lillian Smith and Miss Smith’s social consciousness into [the] article . . . Most of the blame lay, however, thought Carson, on a prejudiced Southern editor who refused to see the South as it was.” Virginia Spencer Carr, *The Lonely Hunter: A Biography of Carson McCullers* (New York: Doubleday, 1976) 422.


obsession to trace back their ancestors to the founding fathers of the city, Basso observed that the Savannahians’ ancestors came out of “the debtor’s prisons of England” while “in New Orleans one never hears of an ancestress who was numbered among those famous juvenile delinquents of the early 1700s who were known as the ‘casket girls’ and sent over from France to provide...for the woman hungry colonists of Louisiana.”\textsuperscript{519} Having exiled himself in the North, Basso became more censorious of the South, though sometimes more so in his private than in his public writings.

Although it appears that, in later years, Basso was no longer as passionate about the South as he had been in the thirties, Southern matters were still on his mind. After the 1954 Supreme Court desegregation decision, Basso sent off letters to several newspapers to plead for careful steps in the implementation of desegregation. In a letter to the Editor of the \textit{New York Times}, which he had written after long conversations with Luther Hodges, governor-to-be of North Carolina, Basso condemned segregation but also asked for a moderate approach in desegregation so as to avert race riots.\textsuperscript{520} Congressman Stewart Udall of Arizona, who, on June 14th, 1955, introduced a bill to promote school integration through a Federal Aid Program, quoted extensively from the letter and thought that Basso’s comments had had “considerable influence” on his remarks and “the tenor” of his bill.\textsuperscript{521} The racial question in the South was never far from Basso’s mind and although he was not a conspicuous spokesman for black civil rights, the race issue surfaced as a significant motif in most of his Southern novels.

Another of Basso’s lasting preoccupations was the definition, and where necessary, redefinition of his art. He spoke on this subject at the official opening of the Westport library in 1957. The speech is the only full pronouncement of Basso’s artistic creed. Obviously written

\textsuperscript{519} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{520} Ikerd, 124.

\textsuperscript{521} Stewart L. Udall, letter to Hamilton Basso, 17 February 1956, Hamilton Basso Collection, Beinecke Library, New Haven.
to amuse the audience, the text can nonetheless be read as a convincing exposition of Basso's aesthetic persuasion and his contempt of elitist art. Claiming that a novel need not be intellectual in order to be "good" or literary, Basso explained that the standard of the good novel was set by its ability to "dislodge and abolish" the outer world, "erasing our vision of reality" and putting in "its place a much more intense vision of [its] own."\footnote{522} Drawing from literary examples, he argued that the ideal novel intended to entertain as well as edify, "leading us into the presence of truth."\footnote{523} \textit{The View From Pompey's Head}, a novel that placed Basso in the limelight of American letters, does just that, combining the novelist's urge to tell a good story with his desire to teach and tell his audience about the South.

\footnote{522}{Hamilton Basso, "Readers and Writers," speech delivered before the Friends of the Westport Library, 13 June 1957, ts., Hamilton Basso Collection, Tulane U, New Orleans, n. pag.}

\footnote{523}{Ibid.}
Comfortably placed on the *New York Times* best-seller list for forty weeks, *The View From Pompey's Head* (1954) incorporated the breakthrough that Basso had long been waiting for. Although he must have been extremely pleased with the book's sales, Basso was modest about its success. Keith, who remembers reading about the rocketing sales while being away at school, was astonished to find that, upon his return home, his parents neither talked about it nor had spent a cent of the money: "neither the climate nor the tempo of the household changed." Learning about the book's sales, Malcolm Cowley congratulated his friend generously, predicting that the book would not only sell well, but be translated and be made into a movie. Cowley's prediction came true and Ikerd wrote that after *The View From Pompey's Head*, Basso "was more than ever in demand to attend conferences, judge contests and contribute articles. For the first time he was enjoying fame."

However, just as one cannot truthfully argue that Herman Melville's *Typee* (1846) was a "better book" because it sold better than *Moby Dick* (1851), so is it equally impossible to claim that *The View From Pompey's Head* was Basso's masterpiece because it was so popular. Indeed, after a thorough reading and analysis of the work, one may be inclined to agree with James E. Rocks that this "well-known novel should not . . . be the only work for which Basso is primarily known or by which he is fundamentally judged." One should not see *The View From Pompey's Head* as the zenith of his literary career but as a book whose prime value lies in the writer's renewed preoccupation with the South and a resuscitation of Basso's old theme:

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525 Ikerd, 125.

the return of the native. Interestingly, the publication of *Pompey's Head* coincided with a number of articles in which Basso revisited the scenes of his New Orleans childhood.  

When critics inferred that Basso might have stolen the theme and his use of the flashback from writers like J.P. Marquand and Thomas Wolfe, he defended himself vigorously, pointing out that as early as 1934, long before Marquand used the device, he had employed the flashback. As for the return-of-the-native motif, Basso had used that in three of his earlier novels too and insisted that his renewed preoccupation with the theme in *Pompey's Head* came out of his personal experience "won over many years and occasionally at the cost of some pain." He further explained that the composition of *Pompey's Head* triggered "a few deeply felt observations about that part of the country to which I am united by the bonds of birth and affection. It was done in my own person and my own voice, to the very best of my ability."  

With *Pompey's Head*, Basso aimed to fuse his novel of character (*Relics and Angels* and *Courthouse Square*) with his novel of ideas (*Days Before Lent* and *Wine of the Country*). Foremost, *Pompey's Head* should be seen as a kind of "sequel" to *Courthouse Square*, for while Basso referred to *Courthouse Square* as a "boy's book," he felt *Pompey's Head* was a "man's book."  

The novel's opening finds its hero, Anson Page, in midlife and midcareer. Happily married to Meg and the father of two children, Anson is a promising lawyer and future partner of the law firm, Roberts, Guthrie, Barlowe & Paul. But he is not content. Moping in his New York apartment, he yearns for a Southern spring. His desire to go home again is satisfied when Mr. Barlowe sends him home, to Pompey's Head, a South Carolina town which derives its curious

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528 Hamilton Basso, letter to Mr. Highet, 29 March 1955, Hamilton Basso Collection, Beinecke Library, New Haven.

529 Ikerd, 125.
name from the classical Pompey whose profile resembles the jutting headland of the bluff “as seen from the river where it had first been sighted” by the town’s founders.\textsuperscript{530} Since Lucy Wales, wife of the famous novelist Garvin Wales, has pressed charges against Wales’s publisher, Duncan & Co, on the grounds of suspecting Wales’s editor, the deceased Phillip Greene, of embezzling twenty thousand dollars of her husband’s royalties, Anson has to find out whether Greene wrote checks to a certain Anna Jones, in Wales’s name or in his own. To resolve the matter, Anson is told to meet with the retired Wales who is quite inaccessible as he is virtually kept prisoner by his wife on an island off the South Carolina Coast. Because the plot revolves around the supposed innocence of Greene and the mysterious relationship between Greene, Wales and Anna Jones, the story attains a detective element in which Anson functions more like a private eye than a lawyer. The detective element may well have contributed to the book’s popularity with the public.

More so than in Basso’s preceding novels, \textit{The View From Pompey’s Head} employs Anson’s homecoming as an intense confrontation with the hero’s past. Once Anson gets off the train in Old Pompey, flashback follows flashback, a pattern which Louis Auchincloss parodied in “The Adventures of Johnny Flashback” in the \textit{Saturday Review}.\textsuperscript{531} As Anson introduces us to his past life in Pompey’s Head, we meet his family, who like the Barondesses, “lost a certain amount of caste” because they demanded justice for one of their black townsmen (PH, 3). Anson remembers how Clifford Small, an old Negro who worked in the hardware store of his father, was sweeping the sidewalk one day when Mr Henry Pettibone passed by. When Cliff happened to sweep some dust onto the passing Pettibone, the latter proved true to his

\textsuperscript{530} Hamilton Basso, \textit{The View From Pompey’s Head} (London: Collins, 1956) 60.

name (i.e. petty to the bone), bawled out Cliff and pushed him into the shopwindow. Cliff’s hand was so severely slashed that it had to be amputated, a tragedy which, though a little contrived, adds poignancy to the white man’s ongoing mutilation of the black man. Page senior, who felt protective of Cliff because of the Smalls’ past services to the Pages, encouraged Cliff to sue Pettibone for compensation, and a kind of mini-Scottsboro case ensued.

At the trial, Anson recalls, Pettibone’s defense was preposterous, his insistence on the importance of his caste revealing the town’s engrained prejudice: “One of the tacit assumptions of Pompey’s Head was that a person of consequence like Mr Pettibone, in relation to a Negro like Clifford Small --in relation, indeed, to almost any Negro-- could do no wrong . . . a hot temper always being understood to be one of the proper possessions of a Southern gentleman” (PH, 179). However, Cliff was rehabilitated when, at the very last moment in the trial, Midge Higgins took the stand and testified that Cliff could not have been drunk because on the morning of the incident, she had walked by, had dropped and spilled her purse and a sober Cliff had helped her pick it up. According to Anson, Midge’s testimony, the word of a white woman against the word of a white man, was enough for the jury to change its mind and award Cliff fifteen hundred dollars in damages. But while Anson’s wife Meg, who is not a Southerner, would like to see the outcome of the trial as a triumph of righteousness, Anson believes that the jury was swayed by what W.J. Cash called the cult of Southern Womanhood:

> if in Pompey’s Head there was an unspoken agreement that a person of consequence like Mr Henry Pettibone could do no wrong in relation to a Negro like Clifford Small, so was it understood that a lady always told the truth . . . even though Mr Pettibone was assessed the token payment of fifteen hundred dollars, and everybody understood it was a token payment, the jury, by upholding the principle that a lady never failed to tell the truth, was upholding him as well . . . And so it was incorrect to look upon the
Grateful for Midge's performance, Anson realized that though she might be a Channel girl (a working class girl), she was a true heroine. Though nearly engaged to Kit Robbins, Anson had a fling with Midge. The affair brings out Anson's double standard, for while he could not resist Midge's sensuality, he was disappointed that she gave in so easily to his advances and seemed so experienced in love-making. Likewise, though Anson felt great sympathy for Midge, his Shintoist leanings prevented him from "getting mixed up with a Channel girl."

In another flashback Anson further remembers that Kit, the girl that he was supposed to marry, turned out to be the worst Shintoist of them all when she told him cockily that his father did merely support Cliff because he hated Pettibone for "having the ancestors" that the Pages did not (PH, 185). Upon his discovery that Kit too was "wrapped in bandages as confining as the strips of silk with which the Chinese used to bind the feet of their female infants [and had] turned into a kind of cripple," Anson quit his law firm, took out all his savings and left for New York City.

Upon his return to Pompey's Head, Anson is sorely reminded of the mixed feelings he had for both Midge and Kit. To add to his emotional confusion, he becomes romantically involved with the girl next door, Dinah Blackford. Dinah, who had always been more of a little sister than a peer of Anson's, has grown into a pretty woman. Though she is a very sympathetic character, a consciousness of caste has not left her unaffected either: after her family lost its

532 W.J. Cash, *The Mind of the South* (1941; New York: Random, 1969). In his customary florid style, Cash writes on the cult of Southern Womanhood: "The upshot in this land of spreading notions of chivalry, was downright gynelatry. She was the South's Palladium, this Southern woman—the shield-bearing Athena gleaming whitely in the clouds, the standard for its rallying, the mystic symbol of its nationality in face of the foe. She was the lily-pure maid of Astolat and the hunting goddess of the Boeotian hill. And—she was the pitiful Mother of God. Merely to mention her was to send strong men into tears— or shouts... At the last, I venly believe, the ranks of the Confederacy went rolling into battle in the misty conviction that it was wholly for her that they fought" (89).
fortune, Dinah was “tired of living like trash and . . . wanted to be back where [she] belonged” and so she married a member of the nouveaux riches, former Channel boy, Mico Higgins (PH, 326).

Given Dinah’s loveless marriage and Anson’s midlife crisis, it is not surprising that the two end up making love. Whereas Pompey’s Head no longer meets with Anson’s sense of home and belonging, Dinah embodies home and the capturing of an otherwise irretrievable past: “She somehow represented the lost security of the house on Alwyn Street, together with all else that was lost, the whole lost world of Sonny Page, and she promised comfort and release” (PH, 321). Anson’s orgasm is both a sexual climax and a climax of personal fulfillment and release, in which past and present intermingle: “and when at last he possessed her, in a wholeness of possession he had never known or dreamed, past and present came thundering together and he was master and owner of it all. He seemed to have been released of a burden under which he had unknowingly labored all his life” (PH, 327).

But of course Anson did not return home to seek closure by means of midlife-crisis sex. His affair livens up the story, yet the reader is well aware that the hero has some business to take care of. Fortunately, Dinah is well-connected and introduces her lover to Lucy Wales. Upon his first visit to the Waleses’ Tamburlaine Island, Anson does not get to see Garvin Wales at all. Instead, he has to deal with Lucy, who, variously described as a “mean, poisonous, trouble-making bitch,” “evil in its most absolute form” and a “first class neurotic,” is an amplified version of the devious Mrs Porter in *The Greenroom* (PH, 46; 119; 318). When Anson tells Lucy about Anna Jones and asks who authorized the checks, she immediately assumes that Jones was Phillip Greene’s mistress and that her husband had nothing to do with it. Anson, however, wants an interview with Garvin but she tells him that he must come back another day.

When Anson returns to the island, he meets Wales, a difficult and reticent old man. Wales initially denies knowing anything about the checks, but when Anson mentions Anna Jones and insists that it is unfair to brand Greene as a thief, Wales confesses that he had wanted to cover it up because Anna Jones was his mulatto mother. Having escaped his cropper childhood by
becoming a famous writer, Wales did not want the world to know that his mother had turned up with her marriage certificate to prove that he was her son: “I’d got out, I’d managed to climb from that white-trash mud, and now I was back in it again! But worse! Now I was a nigger into the bargain, trash and nigger as well!” (PH, 340). Wales’s angry confession underscores the main theme of the book, or as Anson realizes: “Nobody... ever completely escaped. His father had called it Shintoism, which was as good a word as any, and what it offered was a kind of ready-made identity, something that could be slipped into a coat. Did it not explain them all?” (PH, 341). It certainly does explain Lucy’s behavior who, having eavesdropped on the conversation, calls Anson back to the island and makes up a story about her husband borrowing the money from Greene for a trip around the world. Her denial of the truth is rooted in Shintoism once more: “It was not deviousness and it was not madness. It was simply that she was Lucy Devereaux, and that, as Lucy Devereaux, she could not have been married all these years to the man whose mother was Anna Jones” (PH, 348). It is the Waleses’ Shintoist keeping up of appearances that Anson finally comes to associate with the mindset or “view” from Pompey’s Head.

When Anson says goodbye to Dinah and she asks him about his encounter with the Waleses, he sticks with Lucy’s story. In fact, her story is rather convenient because it saves him from telling the truth to his employer as well. This is a significant weakness of Anson’s character, just as is his remarkable lack of guilt over his one night stand with Dinah. Equally difficult to comprehend is his indifferent farewell to Dinah; having declared his love to her and having called her “his girl,” his subsequent “try to get to New York. I forgot to give you my address, but you can always find us in the phone book” is particularly shallow and contradictory (PH, 350). Likewise, the characterization of the Waleses is unpersuasive: they are almost too wicked to be true.

In addition to these character flaws, one of the novel’s prime weaknesses is its heavy reliance on the flashback. Anson’s past may be interesting for the reader’s understanding of his homecoming feelings, yet the world of the past fails to connect with the world of the present. Rather than illuminating the actual story and plot, Anson’s flashbacks seem merely
symptomatic of his sentimental hunger for the past. Furthermore, although the subplot of the
Pettibone case has clearly been inserted to illustrate the flawed Southern justice system and
Shintoism in practice, the trial is a trifle predictable.

The book becomes more rewarding when placed within the overall framework of Basso’s
life and work. Evidently, Anson’s life has a few things in common with Basso’s and that of
his earlier heroes. For instance, the hero’s feelings for his father and grandfather are strikingly
similar to Basso’s own. Thus while Basso extolled his grandfather over his father, Anson
boasts about the business instinct of his New England grandfather and belittles his father for
not having been the businessman his grandfather was. Like Basso too, who told Edmund
Wilson that he was trying to make up for the failures of his father, Anson’s escape from
Pompey’s Head is said to have been partly triggered by his desire to atone for his father’s
mistakes (PH, 321). Additionally, Anson’s sense of double exile must have been close to
Basso’s own feelings: when Meg refers to her husband as a “lapsed Southerner,” who has left
the South but is still “full of complications” because of it, we may readily assume that the hero
shares these sentiments with his creator.

Anson also resembles Tony Clezac and David Barondess. The scenes of the hero’s return to
his childhood home on Alwyn Street and his difficult socializing with his former friends
remind one of Tony’s homecoming and social awkwardness. Likewise, Anson’s remark that if
“he had not left Pompey’s Head before his father died, he would . . . have wanted to stay and
look after his mother [and] would have had to keep on working at Garrick & Leigh whether he
liked it or not. His life would have been different and he would now be a different person,”
reverberates with Tony’s family obligations upon his return home (PH, 286).

Even more striking is the resemblance with David Barondess. Like David (and Wolfe’s
Eugene Gant), Anson returns a man and like David too, he experiences disappointing feelings
of alienation and “homelessness.” Besides feeling “just as much a stranger in Pompey’s Head
as” he felt himself to be a stranger in New York City, Anson notes that “everything was the
same and nothing was the same. It was like returning to a house you had rented to strangers
and coming upon the changes they had made --it was the same house and the same rooms, and
the clock in the hall had the same measured tick, but some of the furniture had been rearranged and the pictures were hung differently, and there was the lingering presence of alien shapes that made the house theirs, not yours" (PH, 76). Like David too, Anson is struck by the "unreality" of the South but where David still had not made up his mind about whether he wanted to stay home or leave again, Anson has become a disenchanted Southerner who describes his native region as

a kind of never-never land . . . the moss in the trees, the way the sun sets, the haze on the river and those fogs we get just before dawn, the magnolias in the moonlight and sometimes not only the magnolias but the mocking-birds as well --it's not real, only there it's real, and so the true reality is somehow lost and nothing seems improbable but the world as it actually is. We had too much of it . . . It led us astray . . . the moonlight-and-magnolia dream . . . It's over now, dead and gone for ever, but Mulberry betrays you into thinking that it isn't . . .

Because of Mulberry, we're sort of anachronisms, you and I. (PH, 323-324)

Anson is a mature version of David and we may disagree with Ikerd who believed that 
Pompey's Head is another novel in which the "young man" is "in conflict with society."533 Whereas David is still wrapped up in a tug-of-war with his hometown, Anson is through with conflict; merely in conflict with himself, he returns to his hometown to see his rejection of the South confirmed and his homesickness cured.

Finally, what makes Pompey's Head especially intriguing is the inspiration it drew from Basso's involvement with the Perkins-Wolfe relationship. Phillip Greene, who is described as a "man with more discoveries to his name than any editor in the business" and as a "truly private person" whose "solitarness . . . set him apart from other men," is an unequivocal look-

533 Ikerd, 125.
alike of the private Maxwell Perkins (PH, 23; 103). Greene’s relationship with Wales, which
is not only seen as “one of the legends of American publishing” but also as something that “had
become Duncan & Co’s holiest possession,” is obviously modeled on the Perkins-Wolfe
friendship: “no two men could have possibly been closer”(PH, 29; 92). Like Wolfe, Wales is
lost without Greene’s supervision, and had it not been for Greene’s steadfast resolve, Wales’s
first novel would have never seen the light of day. While Greene bears an almost uncanny
resemblance to Perkins, which comes out even more in the manuscript version of the novel,
Wales is an amalgam of Thomas Wolfe, Eugene O’Neill and Ernest Hemingway. For
example, Wales’s “latent brutality, not vicious [but] more on the order of a willingness to slug
it out in a bar-room brawl,” as well as Southerners’ conviction that Wales’s books gave the
South a bad name clearly remind one of Wolfe. On the other hand, Wales’s adventures as a
“gold hunter, seaman and soldier” and his marriage to an extremely domineering wife turn him

The following passage from the manuscript was omitted in the published novel,
apparently because Greene came too close to Perkins: “The riddle of Philip Greene, however,
was not too difficult to come by. He was a man passionately devoted to the cause of literature.
Moreover, he was a New Englander of the old breed. Born into a society which once held that
the minister and the parson were of a higher worth than the merchant and the banker, and
reared in a family which persisted in that view long after it had gone down in New England’s
general decline, he had a certain austerity of outlook which caused him to regard cocktail
parties, official luncheons, and P.E.N. dinners as a rather frivolous waste of time. He didn’t
like them and he didn’t particularly like the people who habitually went to them. He wanted
neither to see nor be seen. His whole ambition was to help authors do their best work . . .
There was more to it than that, however. Philip Greene was counsellor, confessor, banker,
friend. All authors are troubled creatures and in Philip Greene they found someone in whom
they could endlessly confide. It sometimes seemed to Anson, after he came to know Greene,
that most of his time was given to concerns that in most cases were only incidental to the job
at hand—somebody had fallen in love with somebody’s wife; somebody else was depressed
because she had received such a brief letter in regard to the first half of her new novel;
somebody ... ‘What Phil had,’ Bliss said, ‘and what most people don’t have, was the ability to
give.’” (“The View From Pompey’s Head,” ts., 169-170, Hamilton Basso Collection,
Beinecke Library, New Haven).
into a possible *alter ego* of Eugene O’Neill. At the same time, Anson’s and his colleagues’ opinion that Wales’s novels consistently deal with his adolescent fantasies, is reminiscent of Basso’s critique that Hemingway was too old to be having wet dreams.

*The View From Pompey’s Head* received rave reviews. The critics praised the novel as Basso’s “best” and Arthur Mizener wrote that he had come away from the book “feeling, not that we have seen something like a vision as with Faulkner, but that we have been listening to an amused and compassionate man who knows more about America than all the sociologists and advertising men put together.” However, from a late twentieth-century point of view, the novel has dated considerably. In spite of its successful preoccupation with Southern Shintoism and its fictionalization of the novelist’s experiences with Maxwell Perkins and Thomas Wolfe, the Southern allure and atmosphere of works like *Cinnamon Seed* and *Courthouse Square* are traded in for a bland detective narrative, which, albeit deftly delivered, lacks the power and the passion of the early novels. Nevertheless, when the novel was brought out again in 1985, Jonathan Yardley of the *Washington Post Book Review* hailed the book as “a novel of Southern manners to rank with, if not above, the work of Ellen Glasgow, and a consideration of Southern social stratification worthy of Howard Odom [sic] or W.J.Cash.” Yardley must not have been familiar with Basso’s thirties’ novels for, as a Southern novel, *Pompey’s Head* adds very little to what Basso had already accomplished in his earlier work.


The Light Infantry Ball, the second part of a trilogy that Basso never finished, is a sequel to The View From Pompey's Head in its attempt to retrace Pompey's Head's Southern vices, its Shintoism and racism to the town's antebellum origins. Lee Barker, Basso's editor at Doubleday, summarized the theme of the novel as "the way in which slavery destroyed the South from a moral and emotional point of view long before Sherman's armies did it from a physical one." Basso elucidated the theme in an elaborate synopsis for the novel.537

Drawing from Mary Chesnut and W.J. Cash, Basso argued that the plantation legend was an incomplete and unfair representation of antebellum society, its prime misconception lying in its intentional slighting of the tensions that slavery and secession evoked. By upholding what John Calhoun called the "positive" blessing of that "peculiar institution," the South isolated itself by becoming an anachronism in a world that had come to see slavery as an unacceptable social institution:

The South lay behind slavery as behind a chain of mountains. For all practical purposes, every contemporary current was shut out. Deliberately. Not to shut them out would have involved a questioning of slavery in the light of the world's opinion at the time. And slavery could not be questioned any longer. To do so, would be to realize its conflict with the modern world, which, lest it be stripped naked of its whole mythos, was what the South must deliberately refuse to realize. Its choice made, it must perforce deny the present and retreat further and further into the past. On its feudal base, it erected a feudal society. It adopted Sir Walter Scott as its spokesman and attempted to reenact, because of the necessities of

537 Lee Barker, letter to Hamilton Basso, 16 March 1955, Hamilton Basso Collection, Beinecke Library, New Haven. In this letter Barker summarizes the conversation they had had about The Light Infantry Ball.
its own myth, the myth of the golden age of chivalry. And in large part succeeded. The plantation South was the last great fief, and its men and women the last sons and daughters of Launcelot and Elaine. Unless we understand this, we understand nothing.\textsuperscript{538}

In \textit{The Light Infantry Ball} Basso tried to bring out the impact that slavery and secession had had on the individual in particular and Southern society at large. Thus the hero of the novel, John Bottomley, the scion of a prominent planter’s family, has to reconcile his abolitionist sentiments, preached to him by his Northern college professors, with the pro-slavery arguments of his community and family, and is finally faced with the choice of either speaking his mind and running the risk of “being regarded as an enemy of society, and perhaps challenged to a duel, or, more temperately, he could keep his mouth shut.”\textsuperscript{539} By 1860, Basso writes, “most mouths were kept shut,” and John, loyal to the ideas of his family and community, sides with the South, joins the Confederate administration and fights in the Rebel army.

\textit{The Light Infantry Ball} itself is less attractive than Basso’s prospectus for the book. The novel opens with a duel. At the light infantry ball, John Bottomley is challenged by the villain of the book, the social climber and megalomaniac, Ules Monckton. Like the Blackheaths and the Barondesses, the Bottomleys embody the planter’s family in decline. Thus, John, the heir, goes soft on his slaves and is portrayed as a much weaker personality than his domineering father. John’s dipsomaniacal brother, Cameron, is not a great asset to the family either: he flees town after a brief romance with a Channel girl and his murder of her interfering brother. John’s mother suffers from bad nerves. Her screams in the middle of the night do not

\textsuperscript{538} Hamilton Basso, “Indigo Hundred, The Social Atmosphere of Pompey’s Head,” notes for \textit{The Light Infantry Ball}, ts., Hamilton Basso Collection, Beinecke Library, New Haven.

\textsuperscript{539} Ibid.
only reveal her fear of the retribution of black slaves, but her belief that the house is on fire also adumbrates the fate of the plantation South. Like her husband, she dies at the end of the war, their deaths symbolizing the end of the antebellum era.\textsuperscript{540} John’s only sister, Missie, does not safeguard the Bottomleys’ plantation dynasty either when she marries a middle-class doctor instead of a planter.

Unlike the disintegrating Bottomley family, the Moncktons are, like the Brands and the Slades, the new rulers of the South. While Gup Monckton, as editor of the town’s only newspaper, \textit{The News}, molds and manipulates Pompey’s public opinion, Ules tries to sway the sentiments of the city’s administrators by preaching his fanatical secessionist views to members of the Agricultural Society. But his success as a public speaker remains limited and once the war breaks out, he becomes a kind of evil Beauregard, who wants to conquer the North and the rest of the Americas to convert these lands into slaveholding territories.\textsuperscript{541} When the war draws to its close and defeat seems inevitable, Monckton fights on with the zeal of a madman and tries to set up guerilla forces to strike back at the Union army. With the Bottomleys’ decline and fall and the Moncktons’ rise to power, it is of some symbolic significance that at the duel, Ules shoots John in the shoulder and sets the Bottomleys’ pride and plantation, Indigo Hundred, on fire. Like the mad woman in the attic, Monckton dies a dramatic death in the flames.

The story of the Bottomleys and the Moncktons, playing against the backdrop of secession fever, the war and the South’s capitulation, is interspersed with insights into John’s unhappy love life. Like Tony and Anson, the hero first falls in love with the wrong woman. Utterly infatuated with Missie’s teacher, Lydia Chadwick, John is devastated when she marries the much older Senator Stanhope, whose daughter, Arabella, chides John for being in love with

\textsuperscript{540} Notice that in \textit{Cinnamon Seed} the \textit{pater familias} also dies at the close of the war.

\textsuperscript{541} Ules Monckton is the epitome of the Southern “fire-eaters”: they were the most fanatical supporters of slavery. Before he started \textit{The Light Infantry Ball}, Basso had planned, but never finished, a book on the fire-eaters.
her stepmother. Lydia is a female version of Ules Monckton, her marriage to Stanhope being the mere means to an end: like Ules, she is not only a social climber but also has political ambitions. John is blinded by his love for her but like a hero in a Tolstoy novel, he seeks solace in the agricultural life of his plantation, Deerskin, after Lydia marries Stanhope. Needless to say, the town gossips that John buried himself at Deerskin and nicknames him a “hermit” and a “recluse.”

While John is found fretting at Deerskin and is tempted by what Basso would call the “availability” of the black woman, Cameron visits him to borrow money. Cameron is to announce his engagement on the eve of the light infantry ball, but he disappears and leaves his family clueless. Functioning as another one of Basso’s private eyes, John unravels the mystery of his brother’s disappearance when he sees Cameron’s saddle in Allbright’s barber shop. Like Alcide Fauget, Allbright is a successful free mulatto, who assists Cameron in his flight from town. John, however, resents Allbright: having found out that the slick barber is really his father’s half-brother, he does not want to be reminded of his family’s miscegenation and treats the overly ingratiating barber with contempt. When Allbright refuses to identify the saddle as Cameron’s, John leaves the shop angrily. In the end, John has to change his tune: as in a case of mistaken identities, Allbright, like Epstein in the manuscript version of *Relics and Angels*, Sam in *Cinnamon Seed*, and Alcide in *Courthouse Square*, turns out to be a truly noble character whose philanthropy the hero does not acknowledge until the end.

At the outbreak of the war, John is called back to Indigo Hundred. Like Basso in the forties, John would have liked to be on the battlefield but ends up behind a desk, functioning as Stanhope’s secretary. Unlike Basso’s other heroes who, despite their family’s demands, manage to hold onto their hearts’ desires, John obediently complies with his father’s and the community’s wishes. Wanting to become an author or architect after college, John becomes a planter instead because his father tells him to. Likewise, when his father and the Senator urge him to become Stanhope’s assistant, John becomes a clerk even though he wants to be a soldier. John is not only passive and wooden --he was described as a “stick” by the *Times*
Literary Supplement reviewer— he is also a weak hero.\textsuperscript{542} His passive resistance, his disinclination to hold slaves combined with his unwillingness to change the status quo, his lusting for women slaves and his pathetic dive into Lydia's shirtwaist when she stumbles over some geraniums, turn him into a wavering and unsympathetic hero. Most reviewers commented on John's weaknesses and when Basso's friend and Southern critic, Broadus Mitchell, criticized the hero's many inconsistencies, Basso claimed that John was never intended as an "especially heroic hero," while his "low-boiling point in relation to that slave girl . . . and Lydia Stanhope's bosom" were simply illustrations of the "way he was": "he had to be a rather sex-starved man. And surely we can agree that the South, more than any part of the country, takes a kind of dank, humid view about sex-- always, at least in John Bottomley's day, the easy availability of the Negro woman, and at the same time, the sulphurous Calvanistic [sic] image of hell, fire and brimstone."\textsuperscript{543}

Notwithstanding Basso's cogent justification, John's psychic tendency to see through things and solve mysteries overnight is highly unconvincing. Thus, one look at the Channel girl is apparently enough for John to know that Cameron killed her brother. Likewise, when John's clerk rouses the suspicion that Stanhope might be smuggling cotton, one glance at Lydia is sufficient for him to come to the conclusion that Stanhope is indeed smuggling and that Lydia is his accomplice. Besides these contrived epiphanies, John is extremely volatile in his emotions. While he is continually depressed over his failure to have an amorous relationship with Lydia, once he finds out that she has a hand in the smuggling conspiracy, he bans her from his thoughts completely. Fleeing into the arms of the pretty Arabella with whom he had always had a teasing brother-sister relationship (like Anson and Dinah), he asks her to marry him after one single kiss. The novel's romance, perhaps aggravated by the exaggerated

\textsuperscript{542} "Agincourt and After," \textit{Times Literary Supplement}, 4 December 1959: 705.

\textsuperscript{543} Hamilton Basso, letter to Broadus Mitchell, 22 September 1959, Hamilton Basso Collection, Beinecke Library, New Haven.
chivalry of antebellum times, is of a Danielle Steel quality and, as such, a definite let-down for the serious reader.

The novel’s finale, which echoes the ending of *Gone with the Wind* (1936), is equally disappointing because of its overcharged dramatization. When the haggard-looking John returns to Indigo Hundred, Ules is about to set the house on fire after an impassioned speech from the porch. Allbright tries to stop him but Ules shoots him in the chest, and while Missie holds the fatally wounded mulatto in her arms and the house bursts into flames, Arabella seeks comfort in John’s arms, telling him that “There’ll be another light infantry ball” (LIB, 476). As with John’s characterization, this ending was misinterpreted as Basso’s supposed allegiance to the preservation of antebellum society. Basso, however, meant the opposite with Arabella’s statement: “as I wrote that line, and then puzzled it, into wanting to come as close as possible to the right note, the exact pitch, I thought it had an ironic tinge. As I still do. Standing where Arabella stood, I could see the South as trying to have another light infantry ball, vainly and foolishly attempting to pretend that it had not walked into oblivion.”

Another misconception on the part of the critics was the assumption that *The Light Infantry Ball* was a historical novel. While Riley Hughes described the novel as a “book of deft historical perceptions,” and Earl W. Foell suggested less complimentarily that it is a “historical reconstruction” with operetta characters, Granville Hicks claimed that the book is not the “kind of superior historical novel it was obviously intended to be.” However, already in 1954, when Basso was drawing up the first plans for the novel, he was telling Van Wyck Brooks that he wanted to take the families of *Pompey’s Head* and “go back to Pompey’s Head during the

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544 Ibid.

Civil War, writing a modern novel in that setting.” Similarly, in his letter to Broadus Mitchell, he wrote that he detested the historical novel and tried to “overcome” the genre by avoiding “a single historical character on the stage.” In conversation with Lee Barker, Basso had further stressed that, though the novel was set in the nineteenth century, *The Light Infantry Ball* was in “no sense a historical novel.” The question of course remains whether one can define a novel as “modern” when it draws so elaborately and accurately from plantation and Civil War history. Clearly, Basso had done a great deal of historical research and the Southern newspapers of the 1860s among his notes for *The Light Infantry Ball* indicate that the novel was not drawn from the imagination alone.

Malcolm Cowley was one of the few reviewers who understood what Basso really wanted to do with his Civil War novel. Possibly, he and Basso had spoken about the book before it came out. Never calling it a historical novel, Cowley argued that the author’s aim was “not to evoke the pastness of the past, not to celebrate the pageantry and valor that have gone with the wind, but rather to seek in the past for the seeds of the present.” Also, Cowley was the only critic who understood that Ules Monckton, representing the group of fanatic secessionists and fire-eaters who were responsible for the tragedy of the South, was in fact a more important character than John. In spite of Cowley’s perceptive critique, and Basso’s appreciation of his

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547 Hamilton Basso, letter to Broadus Mitchell, 22 September 1959, Hamilton Basso Collection, Beinecke Library, New Haven.

548 Lee Barker, letter to Hamilton Basso, 16 March 1955, Hamilton Basso Collection, Beinecke Library, New Haven.


550 Ibid.
friend's review, Cowley did not lavish praise on the novel. On the contrary, the review has a negative undertone which he may have tempered on account of his friendship with Basso. Thus while pointing out the writer's serious intentions, Cowley did not relish the novel's "costume romance," "detective story," and "theatrical" ending. Curiously, although Basso thanked Cowley in a first letter written from the Holland-America Line, in a later letter he referred to the review again and asked Cowley why he had cleaned out the "sewer." It is possible that Basso had first read the review in haste, because of his trip to Scandinavia, and then, upon rereading it, had become disgruntled with his friend's tone.

In fact, Basso was upset with most of the critics. Some of them commended the novelist's knowledgeable analysis of antebellum society and secessionist politics, yet most deplored the creation of John Bottomley and the novel's cheap romance. Few understood, as did his friend Newton Arvin, that Basso had tried to treat "the war years from the Southern point of view without special pleading, melodramatic sentimentality, and a nagging defensiveness; and . . . to generate . . . a kind of imaginative sympathy with the South of that intensely tragic moment that all the Confederate romanticizing literature from now on till Doomsday could never evoke." Basso's attempt to view the Southern plantation legend from a different angle was perhaps not as successful as he had hoped, but the novel was nonetheless applauded by Caroline Tunstall of the Herald Tribune Book Review, who spoke of the writer's courageous "new approach to the subject" of Southern myth.

Although critics like Cowley, Arvin and Tunstall recognized and honored Basso's objective in that The Light Infantry Ball was to serve as a "corrective," countering the "customary,


552 Newton Arvin, letter to Hamilton Basso, 8 June 1959, Hamilton Basso Collection, Beinecke Library, New Haven.

conventional picture of the ante-bellum South," the majority of critics placed the novel in the *Gone With the Wind* tradition, which, ironically, was precisely the school that Basso had always been writing against. In spite of his desire to tell the truth about the South, Basso's Southern realism of the thirties settled into Southern pessimism on the one hand and Southern mythologization on the other hand. Where in his thirties' work Southern virtues and vices are usually seen in perspective, in his later work that perspective is gone, the South having turned into a locale of nightmares and madness (*Wine of the Country*), political paranoia and despotic populism (*Sun in Capricorn*) and finally Shintoism (*The View from Pompey's Head*). At the same time, the South is also presented as the very setting of moonlight, magnolias, romantic love and Civil War intrigues (*The Light Infantry Ball*). Tossed between homesickness and the realization that he could not go home again, Basso's objectivity faded. In his fiction of the forties and fifties, the South is a land of extremes and, whereas some exiled writers manage to understand their country of origin better once they have the distance and detachment of living elsewhere, in Basso's case, exile was detrimental to his fictionalization of the South. Rather than keeping up his rebellion against the plantation legend, he, albeit unintentionally, reinvented the old myths, a phenomenon that surfaces most painfully in *The Light Infantry Ball*. Thence, due to its many ambiguities and flaws, the book is not at all representative of either Basso's actual views of the South or his distinction as a novelist.

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554 Hamilton Basso, letter to Broadus Mitchell, 22 September 1959, Hamilton Basso Collection, Beinecke Library, New Haven.
After his completion of *The Light Infantry Ball*, Basso went to Europe to pen a travelogue on Scandinavia. His letters home disclose that he was no longer the avid traveler he had been even a few years earlier. Bored as always by landscapes, he did not care for the fjords and was shocked by the anti-American spirit of the Scandinavians. He observed that he no longer got on with the natives, and with the Swedes in particular, who, according to him, did not smile enough: “I’m a great smiler when I am in foreign parts, as you know, and I can always tell myself, truthfully, that in Tahiti and Samoa I did get along with the natives --Here though-- Oh rats!”

Cooped up for long periods on board ship, Basso was always greatly interested in his fellow passengers. On his Scandinavian trip he compared them to the Dutchmen he and Toto had met on their trips aboard the *Rotterdam* and the *Maasdam*; “I remember the Dutch as being more gay—‘the jolly Dutchman; the dumb Swede; the bone-head Norwegian’—perjorative [sic] symbols, each one . . . and yet they sometimes ring true.”

The letters from Scandinavia are overshadowed by a kind of travel fatigue; Basso confessed that he did not “care to come abroad again. I can’t deny my own country (which is for one thing the only country I’ll ever have) and yet I cringe from an identification with these American tourists who are now beginning to arrive— the noisy, loudmouthed ones; the first batch of unclean beatniks.”

His tour of Northern Europe knew few crescendos with the

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555 Hamilton Basso, letter to Etolia S. Basso, 19 June 1960, Hamilton Basso Collection, Beinecke Library, New Haven.

556 Hamilton Basso, letter to Etolia S. Basso, 23 May 1960, Hamilton Basso Collection, Beinecke Library, New Haven.

557 Hamilton Basso, letter to Etolia S. Basso, 6 June 1960, Hamilton Basso Collection, Beinecke Library, New Haven. In a letter to Toto of 4 July 1960, Basso admired the Scandinavian welfare state and its educational system: “there is much that we can learn from these people, if only we would . . . there is not a single slum in all of Scandinavia, or a
exception of his first midsummer night witnessed "aboard the Oslo Fjord when on toward three o'clock in the morning the sky still was luminous and the sea was inky black-- that was the one and only bang: it registered in the same region as that sisal-with-humming birds in Jamaica... that first light night... was the only time I've been away: when the accustomed and the familiar fell behind, and for an instant... I was different than before." Some of Basso's ennui may be explained by his warm-blooded Italian-American disposition. Conditioned by the exotic environment of Louisiana bayous and the city of New Orleans, Basso appeared to relate better to Tahitians, Cubans and Latin Americans than that he did to the more reserved, and sometimes cold, Scandinavians.

With his Scandinavian travelogue he finished *A Quota of Seaweed* (1960), a book of travel pieces of which the majority had come out already in the *New Yorker*. Looking back on his oeuvre, Basso would come to think favorably of his two non-fiction books, *A Quota of Seaweed* and *Mainstream*. He may have even preferred these books to what he considered his weaker novels, like *Relics and Angels* and *Sun in Capricorn*. The contemporary reader would agree, placing Basso's non-fiction work, his journalism and his short stories on a higher plane than some of his novels. As comes out very clearly in the letters and the travel diaries, Basso's talent was sometimes better suited for "the shorter distance than the longer distance," an expression Basso himself used to contrast Henry James's shorter fiction to his novels.

In 1961 Basso made his last extended trip abroad and realized that he had really grown tired of travel; his trip to Trinidad was the worst of all his foreign travel. In his letters home, Basso
complained of the oppressive heat, the dirt and the jam-packed streets of Trinidad. The letters are depressing and the darkness and fatigue that Basso found so hard to “explain” to his wife may have been an early foreboding of the lung cancer which would be diagnosed one and a half years later. Besides his mental and physical exhaustion, he was extremely upset with the colonial and racist mentality of Trinidad’s white elite “what has got me down, after but one day of socializing, is the worms-in-the-milk-bottle quality of the lighter skinned society: . . . when whites try to live in these climatically and ethnically non-white societies, they sort of get ‘rendered’ and boiled down, spiritually, by the heat. and then all these globules of this and that come to the surface-- . . . in some way or other, despite high tea and dressing for dinner and so forth, people simply go ‘bush’.” Always sensitive to the insensitivities of whites vis-à-vis blacks, Basso did not pretend or strike a pose when he told his wife that he preferred a chat with the natives to sherry with the white patriciate.560

What also irked Basso was that, after the success of Pompey’s Head, he was recognized as a famous writer: “they have discovered that a ‘writer’ (damn the word!) can like Shakespeare’s jew [sic] laugh, weep, rejoice and so on, which has finally alleviated their original unease [but] I can be a dangerous man. Just as dangerous as if I presented the classic conventional image of the ‘writer,’ unwashed and superior and flagrantly immoral, instead of this ultra-protective coloring it has pleased me to adopt.”561 On his trip to Trinidad he was followed around by an inquisitive couple whom he named “Mr and Mrs Joe from Toledo.” After they had found out Basso was a writer, Mrs Joe kept asking him what he thought of the new design of the Saturday Evening Post, “which she and Joe emphatically didn’t like . . . Such decent, decent


561 Hamilton Basso, letter to Etolia S. Basso, 6 November 1961, Hamilton Basso Collection, Beinecke Library, New Haven.
people—” Basso sighed, “and such a woeful handicap, whenever they set foot abroad; and also, I am afraid when they stay at home.”

To steer clear of both American tourists and Trinidad’s upper crust, Basso avoided cocktail parties and kept mostly to himself. Trying to relax to get rid of the weariness in his bones, he was already planning his next novel which was to take place in Tahiti. He gave the first draft the tentative title “The Swing of the Compass,” and when he was homewardbound, he told Toto: “I was able to ‘see’ one vitally important episode close to the end of the book . . . I ‘saw’ the whole first part that is already written and the question is this-- whence came it out? The four S-s? The heat heavy enough to touch? Les negres comme le Congo? . . . My sullen privacy for nearly a week? . . . Or Mrs Joe from Toledo?”

The unfinished manuscript of “The Swing of the Compass” shows that Basso was still interested in the detective element but also tried to be innovative by using a polyphonic narrative for the first time. The story begins in the faculty room of a college campus where Professor Guildford has sherry with the young historian, Andrew Tenniel. Guildford tells Tenniel that a rich widow will donate a million dollars to the college if one of the professors writes a biography of her cousin, the forgotten botanist, Wallace Pembroke Graves. Graves died in the Pacific where he attempted to lay out a kind of South Seas Kew Gardens. Guildford encourages Tenniel to do the job.

Although Meredith Beers, a fellow scholar whom Guildford calls a “constipated ape,” is one of the likely candidates for the book, the widow, Mrs Maitland, favors Tenniel because she admired his article about the colonial gardens of America. The tension and petty arguments between Tenniel and Beers, who, like the closet scholar, Casaubon, in George Eliot’s Middlemarch (1871), has written a kind of “Key to All Mythologies” and who, like the New

562 Hamilton Basso, letter to Etolia S. Basso, 4 November 1961, Hamilton Basso Collection, Beinecke Library, New Haven.

563 Hamilton Basso, letter to Etolia S. Basso, 18 November 1961, Hamilton Basso Collection, Beinecke Library, New Haven.
Critics, claims that “a novel should exist as a poem exists, in itself, independent of any external references, even psychology,” evince Basso’s satirical view of universities and stuffy intellectuals.

In fact, Tenniel’s scholarly insecurities and mockery of academe remind one of Kingsley Amis’s *Lucky Jim* (1954), a novel Basso may well have read. Like Basso, who was sometimes embarrassed to admit he was a writer, Tenniel is not solemn about his own profession either and, like Tait Ravenwill in *Wine of the Country*, he fears the Ivory Tower life that Guildford leads: “Here it was, [Tenniel] thought, the classic example-- the insulated, impractical academic; the ‘professor’ in quotation marks; the foolish fellow who spent his own time and other people’s money ferreting out knowledge as wearisome as it was useless.”

While Tenniel starts his research, the reader meets Michele Sarlat, a French woman, who, after an unhappy childhood and disastrous marriage to a war-time traitor, is tired of fending for herself and marries the childless widower, Lindvall. The couple live on Akivani (Basso’s fictional name for Tahiti). The link with Tenniel’s story is laid when we learn that Lindvall owns the Graves gardens. Michele has typical Basso traits—her mother having died in childbirth and her father having been killed at sea, she is an “orphaned” heroine and like Dekker and Hazzard, she is raised by an aunt and uncle in Paris. Also, like the typical Basso grandfather, Michele’s grandfather, Joseph Quinet, takes on mythical proportions. Michele remembers him as someone who hobnobbed with the impressionists in Paris and who, like another Gauguin, left for Tahiti, to paint and plant. The tie with her grandfather is strong.

Because of the several paintings from brush of her grandfather, which were as much part of the atmosphere of her childhood in the

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564 Hamilton Basso, “The Swing of the Compass,” ts., Hamilton Basso Collection, Beinecke Library, New Haven, 211. The manuscript of the novel was not handed to the library until 1971, after Etoha Basso had tried to sell it to Viking.

Rue Labineau as her lofty balcony and the bells of St. Sulpice, she felt closer to him, more identified and lineal, than she did to her mother. It was not difficult to summon up the image of her grandfather (generally he was seated at one of the sidewalk tables of the Nouvelles Athenes in the company of those great ones, agreeing, dissenting, signalling to a waiter for another drink), whereas her mother, no matter how hard she tried to visualize her, remained a shadowy, wraithlike figure lost in the forlorn ghostliness of that deserted house no more than a mile down the road.566

Like her literary brother, David Barondess, Michele likes to dwell on the past. Like him too, she is melancholic, lonely and homesick. Beyond that we know very little of her as the manuscript was never finished.

What we do get to see, however, is Tenniel’s quest for biographical facts. Aided by the various interviews he has with people who knew Graves, the reader gradually conceives a portrait of the botanist. Tenniel’s interviews are undoubtedly inspired by the interviews Basso had done for his New Yorker profiles. Interestingly, rather than submitting his fictional interviewees to the conventional question and answer game, he allows them long dramatic monologues which gives the narrative its polyphonic nature. Though not as arcane as the monologues in some of Faulkner’s novels, the effect is the same: on the basis of the different speakers’ conflicting impressions of, and experiences with Graves, the reader has to distil the identity of the real Graves, who, all in all, appears to have been an eccentric and self-indulgent doppelgänger of Garvin Wales. The use of the multiple viewpoint suited Basso well: having a keen ear for dialogue, he made the interviewees sound so natural that the different monologues appear to be direct transcripts from taped interviews.

Unfortunately, Basso never completed the manuscript so we do not know how the novel would have ended. Knowing that Michele married out of convenience and knowing that

566 “The Swing of the Compass,” 199.
Tenniel is divorced and unhappy in love, it is likely that, with Tenniel's research leading him to Lindvall, the two are bound to meet and fall in love. But there are many questions left unanswered: what will the confrontation between Lindvall and Tenniel be like? What will Tenniel find out about Graves and why does Ralph Maitland, a relative of Graves, insist on the family's right to privacy and threaten to sue Tenniel if he publishes?

Like *Pompey's Head*, "The Swing of the Compass" has a mystery plot, the "detective" here being a historian. As in *Pompey's Head* too, Basso relies heavily on the flashback which explains but mostly slows down the action. All quibbles aside, "The Swing of the Compass" shows promise and potential. Its hero and heroine, Andrew and Michele, are neither the wooden characters of *The Light Infantry Ball* nor the hollow society figures of *A Touch of the Dragon* (1964), the novel Basso switched to after he had put aside "The Swing of the Compass." Instead, Andrew and Michele are much rounder characters. While Michele seems sensitive and intelligent, Andrew is a much more stimulating character than the stiff John Bottomley and the shallow Sebastian Venables in *A Touch of the Dragon*. This may be explained by the fact that Basso identified more easily with a shy historian than with a plantation squire or a society beau.

However incomplete the manuscript, Basso had clearly regained the old vigor and verve of his thirties' novels in which character, atmosphere and feeling took precedence over plot and story. "The Swing of the Compass" feels genuine where *The View From Pompey's Head*, *The Light Infantry Ball* and *A Touch of the Dragon* feel forced and artificial. In part, the authentic flavor derives from Basso's successful and natural handling of the polyphonic narrative but in part also, the story's strength seems to come from his recapturing of that poetic voice with which he had been out of touch. Thus the natural beauty of Akivani is akin to the local color enchantment of the Louisiana landscapes of Basso's thirties' novels: "For all practical purposes, her eyes opened on the island of Akivani. The ceaseless murmur of the reef, the crash of a coconut falling to the earth, the slatting of palm trees in the wind, the waiting silence..."
before a rain, the voice of a native girl singing far away."

Admittedly, one’s judgement may be colored by an unrealistic overestimation of an unfinished work, yet the 378 pages of the manuscript give us more than an inkling of how the novel might have turned out. In retrospect, one can only regret that Basso did not finish a novel that combined the virtues of both his early and later talent.

When Basso was diagnosed with cancer in 1963, he abandoned the Tahitian novel and turned a long short story, “Edwina,” into a short novel which was to bear the title *A Touch of the Dragon* (1964). When Malcolm Cowley held a eulogy at Basso’s funeral, he noted that the novel was written under sentence of death, a feat representing Basso’s willingness to sacrifice “his life to his literary integrity and his passion for honest craftsmanship. Like his friend Thomas Wolfe, he was a hero and martyr of the act of writing.” While it is undeniably true that the smooth and light narrative seems unaffected by Basso’s impending death, this deathbed novel is not as Clarence Ikerd believes, “one of the finest novels.”

Due to its forced social comedy and satiric delineation of a dull upper crust milieu, this polished novel of manners is a tedious prolongation of *In Their Own Image* (1935).

The narrator, Sebastian Venables, is not a hero of momentous action but a Jamesian observer. While Sebastian’s failures as a writer and a husband serve as a kind of sideline to the novel’s plot, the book’s topos is Edwina Deydier’s ruthless rise to power. Set against the

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568 Apparently, “Edwina” was a short story which Basso had submitted to *Harper’s* in 1960: “they liked the story, but they said it was too long for one issue and did not lend itself to being split up” (Ikerd, 133).


570 Ikerd, 135.
background of Midwestern high society, which seems equally interested in ancestor worship as Southern society, Sebastian witnesses Edwina’s ascent to the top. She achieves this by writing a dog column for a society magazine and by marrying the pretentious literary critic, Covington Leeds. Leeds’s rediscovery of the ignored writer, Gervase Peale, becomes one of the pillars to Edwina’s glory but when Peale turns out to be an impostor, something which Leeds failed to uncover, Edwina gets rid of her husband, just as she disposes herself of her elkhounds when they no longer serve the furthering of her “career.” As Edwina is a compounded caricature of all the traits that Lydia Stanhope, Ules Monckton, Lucy Wales and Mrs Porter exhibited, she is evil personified. The novel ends with a tennis match held on a Caribbean island where Edwina’s crowd vacations. As fanatical on the tennis court as she is in real life, Edwina beats her opponent, the wife of the English governor, who, because of a heart condition, drops dead after the match. Edwina marries the governor and thus finally satisfies her “voracious” ambition for power, status and control.

As In Their Own Image, A Touch of the Dragon is greatly weakened by its cardboard characters. Even Edwina, who receives most of the attention, is a shallow creation. Though she is positively evil, she is more often irritating. Behaving like a spoiled child and using her money as a prop to achieve her goals, she hovers like some evil spirit over Sebastian who knows neither money nor goals in his life. Sebastian’s sense of failure and his wife’s difficulty to conceive may be related to Edwina’s curse, the touch of the dragon, Edwina being the dragon lady. The hero actually wonders if “[Edwina] might not be akin to one of the unfortunate chilling persons we read about in the books of demonology that belong to the same period as the old rectangular maps, a creature who casts no shadow and has no soul”(TD, 204). However, once Edwina has reached her goal, Susan, Sebastian’s second wife, announces she is pregnant, and the narrator and his wife are set to live happily ever after.

Despite the wicked shadow that Edwina casts over other people’s lives, her diabolical nature is attenuated by her extreme silliness: for instance, she pours a carton of milk and cracks an egg over her own head when she is angry with someone else. Her malice is further weakened by her essential phoniness because, like Mrs Porter and the pretenders of In Their Own Image,
she hides behind a façade: "just as she lived beyond her cultural means, so did Edwina overextend her emotional capital. There were these feelings she believed she ought to have -- feelings about politics, feelings about books . . . She was like an actor who, after a shattering display of violent emotion -- Othello, for example -- wipes away his agony with his greasepaint" (TD, 36-37). Because of Edwina's capricious character, it is difficult to take her seriously and whereas Mrs Porter, Lydia Stanhope and Lucy Wales are consistently evil, Edwina neither persuades nor impresses the reader.

The reviews were mixed. Those who recommended the novel admired Edwina's creation and labeled the book as "entertaining." Those who thought the book was slick rather than entertaining, criticized Edwina's superficiality, or as one of the reviewers wondered: "I cannot for the life of me see what the late Hamilton Basso was about in deploying all that taste and skill for the production of such a poisoned-chocolate-box villainness as his Edwina Deydier, whose upper-suburban bitchiness could only be properly handled . . . in the old-fashioned kind of woman's magazine." However much Edwina was applauded or sneered at, none of the reviewers took note of the implied sexism of Edwina's creation, for Sebastian seems to argue that female ambition is improper and blemishes feminine beauty. Accordingly, although the narrator cannot but admit that Edwina has the potential to be beautiful, her zeal and hard work turn her into a freak. Covington Leeds, on the other hand, who is equally ambitious and despicable, is nonetheless a much more dignified character than the overbearing Edwina who, not surprisingly, is said to be taller than most men. Regrettably, Edwina's portrayal, together with the marginal delineation of the majority of Basso's female characters, confirms that Basso, though a firm supporter of black emancipation, was blind to the plight of women.

As for Covington Leeds, he is a kind of Harold Stearns gone astray. Like Stearns, who reiterated the theme of the artistic aridity of American soil, Leeds harps on his "disenchantment with the contemporary culture of the United States" (TD, 123). Like Stearns too, whose

promise soured, Leeds is “awarded... a top-most place among the writers of the war
generation who had failed to live up to their promise” (TD, 124) Leeds represents the kind of
literary critic and poet that Basso detested so much and, as can be expected, Sebastian voices
his creator’s opinions when he deplores the academic seriousness of literary criticism, and
describes Leeds’s claptrap writings as “snake oil,” and as being obsessed with the theme of the
“barren wasteland of contemporary culture and the sad lot of the artist” (TD, 24; 162).
Sebastian also scoffs at Leeds’s division of novelists into “two all-inclusive categories, ‘wet
flies’ and ‘dry flies’ --‘dry fly’ novelists being those who sought to attract the reader by the
‘superficial lure of surface appeal’ (Dickens and Trollope being cited as examples), while the
‘wet fly’ novelists (Proust, Joyce and D.H. Lawrence) were described as seeking a more valid
engagement in the darker, murkier, more meaningful depths of human experience” (TD, 240)
Leeds’ sympathy lies with the “wet flies,” and together with Edwina, who champions Joyce as
the Picasso of the novel, the couple “stand as representatives of the new age, the modern man
and woman.” In contrast to Leeds and Edwina, who embrace the avant garde, Sebastian feels
as Basso may have felt in the company of Malcolm Cowley and Matthew Josephson, that is,
“old-fashioned almost to the point of being [a] pathetically backward primitive, who, by some
freakish piece of luck, had managed to survive” (TD, 62-63; 114).

Although Sebastian occasionally resembles his creator when he discusses literature and art,
he is not a commendable character at all. While the reader cannot truly hate Edwina as she fails
to be an antagonist in the full sense of the word, the reader does not feel much sympathy for
Sebastian either. As an insubstantial character, Sebastian is simply too weak, or as Elizabeth
Janeway argued: “Edwina needs a fullfledged, involved character to oppose her and bring the
book to a climax, just as the dragon needs a dragon killer. But this dragon simply stubs her toe
while St. George stands by and reports the details.” 572 Part of Sebastian’s sketchiness lies in
his being a sideline commentator rather than an active protagonist.

1964: 33.
Incidentally, *Sun in Capricorn* and *A Touch of the Dragon* are Basso’s only novels that have first-person narrators. Not so at ease as with the third person point of view, Basso may have wanted to avert the intimacy of a first-person narration by turning Hazzard and Sebastian into characters who do not take themselves too seriously. In this way, he directs the reader’s attention to their absurd and monomaniacal opponents, Gilgo and Edwina. Like Hazzard, Sebastian is unambitious, passive and weak. Whether it is their embitterment or simply their outlook on life, there is an undertone of mockery in everything they say. The reader may even consider them unreliable narrators and, in this respect, Sebastian certainly resembles Fitzgerald’s Nick Carraway, who is also an outsider-observer of the seemingly cushiony lives of the idle rich in *The Great Gatsby* (1925).

Another facet of Sebastian’s poor conception is that, although he seems to have a few things in common with Anson Page and Rufus Jackson, who also have to deal with malevolent ladies, where Anson and Rufus have a clear assignment and reason to meet with their antagonists, Sebastian has no such sense of mission but merely studies his subject. He does not even get entangled with Edwina at any point but, being of marginal importance to her set, he “could only watch her progress from a distance, like a dweller in an Alpine valley who gazes at a solitary climber high upon the peaks” (*TD*, 62). It is this distance and the reader’s sure knowledge that Sebastian will never be truly confronted with the dragon lady, that robs the novel of its suspense. Sebastian’s prolonged fascination and obsession with Edwina even become a little wearisome, his observations being no more than an extended study into the perversity of the ambitious female.

Neither a continuation of what Basso had written, nor the promise of a new departure, *A Touch of the Dragon* should not be seen as a summation of the novelist’s career. Because the publication of the novel coincided with Basso’s death, some reviewers took the opportunity to acclaim his entire oeuvre but, unfortunately, based his importance as a writer on his later and more popular books. Thus most critics discussed Basso’s entertaining ability or, as the
William B. Hill was more inclined towards compliment and called Basso an “artistic novelist [who] does not splash words on paper, does not try to be esoteric, uses none of the common devices for getting attention; he does plot a novel carefully and he writes beautiful prose.”

Hill further referred to Basso’s “careful craftsmanship,” a term that Cowley would also use in his eulogy. Though surely a flattering epithet, “craftsmanship” does not equal “genius” or “exceptional talent,” nor does it purport any sort of lasting legacy.

More praise came from William Barrett, who told his readers that Basso “never screams or roars at the reader; his is the quiet voice of a man of the world speaking calmly of the things and people he has observed dispassionately but sympathetically.” Some critics associated this style with the pitch of the *New Yorker*, or as John Coleman put it: “In many ways [Basso] must have been an editor’s delight: his tone so uncannily caught the ideal *New Yorker* tone of alert but well-bred and slightly withdrawn worldliness. It was ‘civilised’ without being too committed to civilisation.”

In his *Journals*, John Cheever also alluded to this “civilized” style which he ascribed to the influence of the *New Yorker*’s first editor, Harold Ross: “[Ross] taught me that decorum can be a mode of language --born of our need to speak with one another-- and a language that, having been learned, was in no way constraining.”

Finally, one should note that Basso’s last novel was not brought out by Doubleday but by Viking. Although Basso’s editor at Doubleday, Lee Barker, wanted to publish the book, Basso

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felt pressured as Barker was hoping for the same kind of best-seller that *Pompey's Head* had been. Finding Barker's preoccupation with "book-clubs, motion pictures, and best-sellerdom too wholly at odds" with his "own approach to writing," Basso explained in a letter:

>. . the nub of the matter, however, is that I don't want to write another "big" novel-- not by any definition of bigness that hinges on weight or bulk or the number of printed pages. As a writer, I am interested in as many readers as I can get. I am wholly disinterested however, in "aiming" for a readership, or trying . . . to give the reader what he wants. In what I have written since I came to my belated maturity, leaving aside the question of merit, I have tried to express certain values-- values completely at odds with those implied by the very term "big novel." In short, I have nothing in my mind or trunk that I feel, quite hard-headedly, that Doubleday would really care to publish.578

Nine months before his death, Basso's cancer was declared terminal and as he was finishing the last pages of his novel, he tried to keep up his spirits. Joking and entertaining the nurses, he told them that he was not sick at all. Borrowing from Native American mythology, he informed his doctors that they should no longer worry as the Medicine Men on the Apache Reservation, where Keith worked as an anthropologist, had held a "sing" for him to exorcise "Malakai" or the evil spirit.579 In the same upbeat frame of mind, Keith wrote his father a little poem to congratulate him with the completion of *A Touch of the Dragon*:

\[\text{578} \text{ Hamilton Basso, letters to Lee Barker, 29 June and 17 July 1962, Hamilton Basso Collection, Beinecke Library, New Haven.}\]

\[\text{579} \text{ Etoila S. Basso, letter to the author, 28 May 1992.}\]
And now he can roam
Or even go home
Til Viking comes through with the galley.

He may sit and go about musin’
On the tale of Sebastian and Susan
Now that it’s done
He should have some fun
Maybe he’ll blow, and go crusin’

When Basso was hospitalized in January of 1964, Peter de Vries joked that his friend’s “apparently handsome reaction to radiation” was going to stand him in good stead and while Basso’s health deteriorated quickly, *A Touch of the Dragon* was published in March. In April, he had to return to the hospital and de Vries mourned that the world was “unravelling like an old sock,” as all his friends around him were falling ill. Hopeful until the very end, letting Cowley know that “if I get well . . . I want to drop everything I have done in the past -- that’s the effect of an illness like this-- and strike in some new direction,” Basso died on May 13th, 1964, in New Haven Hospital, Connecticut. When Keith was asked about his father’s death, he replied: “His final thoughts, I’m almost certain, were of my mother, and as

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580 Keith Basso, letter to Hamilton Basso, 9 October 1963, files of Etolia S. Basso, Tempe.


582 Malcolm Cowley, eulogy delivered at Basso’s funeral, Malcolm Cowley Collection, Newberry Library, Chicago.
death approached he gave no sign of fear. He had suffered enormously, and I like to think he
was grateful when at last there was no pain.”

Born and bred in the South but buried in New
England, Hamilton Basso, that “medium-size man with graying hair, a strong nose, a quick
and easy smile and a courteous affability,” rests in peace. After thirty-one years of virtual
neglect of his most important work, his legacy may get lost in the many cracks of the American
canon. But the books remain, and with them, Basso’s unique testimony of a Southerner, who
repeatedly tried, but eventually could not go home again.


Yet, as he stood for the last time by the angels of his father’s porch, it seemed as if the Square already were far and lost; or, I should say, he was like a man who stands upon a hill above the town he has left, yet does not say, “The town is near,” but turns his eyes upon the distant soaring ranges.

Thomas Wolfe, *Look Homeward, Angel*
Conclusion

It took a Norwegian scholar to rediscover the canonical power of Kate Chopin sixty years after her masterpiece, *The Awakening* (1899) was first published. It took the joint effort of Lavinia Dickinson and Thomas Wentworth Higginson to give the world Emily Dickinson's brilliant poems upon which only few people had laid eyes in her lifetime. It took more than thirty years for Herman Melville to be recognized as one of America's foremost authors, and after his death in 1916, it took Henry James, who had never really gone out of fashion in his lifetime, two decades to be reconsidered by the critics.

At the mercy of relatives, revisionists, well-meaning critics and industrious Ph.D students, the artist can neither safeguard nor predict the direction his legacy will take and time is finally the determining factor in his survival or neglect. Although Basso was never a Chopin, Dickinson, Melville or James, his work deserves more attention than it has received thus far. While it is questionable whether any of Basso's work will ever be reprinted, in this dissertation I have shown that his importance as a writer, intellectual and literary critic have been unduly slighted.

Although Basso's versatility was occasionally a curse as it scattered his time and talent as a novelist, his non-fiction attests political-historical merit and reveals his social commitment, sharp political instinct and his abiding interest in the South. Often lashing out at societal wrongs and inequalities, Basso did not always write to please the establishment or the people in the South, but listened to his own conscience. A liberal but never a radical, an intellectual but never a closet scholar, a political thinker but never a dogmatist, and a Southerner but most often a "lapsed Southerner," Basso did not only become an articulate voice within the *New Republic* and the *New Yorker* but also used his art as an outlet for his political, literary and deeply felt personal views. Thus while in the *New Republic* he would challenge particular public figures such as Huey Long, Father Coughlin and William Randolph Hearst, in his fiction he would grind his axe against generic public vices such as racism, intolerance, Shintoism and intellectual pretense. Rather than serving a purely aesthetic purpose,
his art is propelled by his love of people, his novels dealing repeatedly with the plight of the lonely individual versus a powerful, and often, insensitive society.

Equally relevant, though perhaps not so conspicuous as his progressive and "protesting" voice, is the modest, yet meaningful role Basso played in the life of his more famous contemporaries. Sitting at the feet of Sherwood Anderson in the French Quarter and going for walks with William Faulkner on the New Orleans wharves, Basso found himself at the core of a generation of American writers who put American Literature on the world map. Working with Maxwell Perkins, the godfather of that same generation, Basso was destined to meet F. Scott Fitzgerald and Thomas Wolfe, both of whom happened to live near Basso shortly before their deaths in 1940 and 1938. Especially Basso's relationship with Wolfe, a relationship that all of Wolfe's biographers have ignored, is fascinating and has fed my belief that Basso, after Perkins, may have been one of Wolfe's closest friends. Besides these literary friendships, Basso also had a close relationship with well-known and, in their own day, influential literary and cultural critics such as Van Wyck Brooks, Malcolm Cowley, Matthew Josephson and Edmund Wilson.

Basso's importance as a Southern novelist outweighs his significance as an American author. Of his Southern novels, the thirties' novels, and especially Cinnamon Seed, Courthouse Square and Days Before Lent deserve our renewed interest and consideration. Much has been said already about Basso's identity as a Southern author yet his most outstanding quality is his Southern otherness. Scolding the Agrarians for breeding plantation anachronisms out of the dead land, and criticizing writers like Erskine Caldwell and William Faulkner for cultivating the other extreme of the Southern grotesque and Southern decay, Basso strived for Southern realism and moderation, and thus, in some degree, secluded himself from the early Southern Renascence writers.

At the same time, Basso was unquestionably a product of his generation because, like most Southern writers who came of age in the 1920s, he "left home for a time, focused his eye on a changing South, an industrializing South, but looked as well at a South that was slipping away, and the result was a creative mixture of detachment and involvement -- an escape from,
then an attempt to return to the southern community." Like most of his Southern contemporaries too, one finds in Basso “numerous attempts . . . to define [and] describe the Southern Temper, the Southern Mind [as well as] efforts to capture the Southerner, to define him or her (and one feels, in most cases, him) before he slipped away ” And since Basso and his generation were essentially the grandchildren (and great-grandchildren) of Johnny Reb, one also retraces in Basso “a greater attention to the past, an acceptance of man’s finiteness, his penchant for failure [and] a tragic sense” which are “more characteristic of the Southerner than of other Americans ” Lastly, Basso shares his belief in such determinants as place, community, family and the past, with “the most notable southern writers, white and black, of the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s” who “were far more conscious of place, family, community, religion and its social manifestations, and the power of the past in the present than were the nonsouthern American writers "

Basso’s later works and best-sellers do not justify any accolades or singling out as outstanding Southern or American literature. Although he started out as writer who had a distinct and promising voice in the Southern Renascence, Basso ended up a little ordinarily, becoming a combination of what Herbert Gold called a “Cataloguer” (i.e. an observer like John O’Hara) and a “Common Style Fellow,” who, as a “just-plain-Bill of literature . . . produced an upper-middle class soap opera for the readers of Luce magazines and subscribers to the Book of the Month Club’s service.” While the fifties and sixties saw the rise of postmodernism and the emergence of the novel of American minorities, Basso leaned towards preserving the novel of manners and perpetuated the realistic tradition of writers such as John O’Hara, James Gould Cozzens and J.P. Marquand.

Regrettably, critics’ final evaluation of Basso’s oeuvre has primarily been based on the


ment of his later and best-selling novels, which were not necessarily the books he should be remembered for or judged by. Because critics ignored his thirties' novels and categorized him as a bellettrist, Basso quickly vanished from the landscape of American literature altogether. If he had continued to work in the vein of his thirties' novels and had perfected his craft in that direction, he might have gone on the record more eminently. Regardless of the promise of his later, non-Southern but unfinished novel, "The Swing of the Compass," Basso's domain was the South, and his theme the Southerner, who, in his attempt to come to terms with his picturesque, but frequently flawed hometown, experienced feelings of delight, disenchantment and finally, double exile. Like no other before him, and no other after him, Basso captured the central dilemma of a Southern generation that found itself in the process of outgrowing its Dixie environment.
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This bibliography covers all of Basso’s writings (published and unpublished), his letters and the letters of various correspondents. Because Basso’s manuscript materials and the letters by and to Basso can be found in different American archives, I have listed these sources by the name of the Rare Book Collections where they can be found. Other primary sources include interviews with relatives and letters to the author.

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