

Eric Walrond, *Tropic Death* and The Predicament of the Colonial Expatriate Writer

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In his review of *Tropic Death*, Langston Hughes stated that the “ease and accuracy of Mr. Walrond’s West Indian dialects support one in the belief that he knows very well the people of whom he writes.”¹⁾ Indeed, Eric Walrond’s connection to Caribbean laborers can be heard over and over again in their language, for characteristically, he presents them mainly through speech. And while they are present audibly as a community of active bearers of tragic experience, the unity of their language in crisis or confrontation articulates as well the idiom of Walrond’s own social consciousness. It is important to stress this aspect of Walrond’s connection to his characters, for it is not by a literary convention or impersonation that this characterization has been made. His connections between character and society and the physical environment are decisive. Walrond sees the harshness of laboring work within the realities of economic processes which are deeply connected in his imagination with natural processes. Thus, *Tropic Death* begins with “Drought” a natural affliction and disaster typical of underdeveloped areas. “Drought” opens with a mechanical image, to the noise of drills and the whistle of a time-clock, to the tones, tensions, and timelessness of a laborer’s working day.

The whistle blew for eleven o’clock. Throats parched, grim, sun-crazed blacks cutting stone on a white burning hillside dropped with a clang the hot, dust-pow-

1) “Marl-Dust and West Indian Sun,” review of *Tropic Death* by Langston Hughes. *New York Herald Tribune Books*, December 5, 1926.

ered drills and flew up over the rugged edges of the horizon to descent into a dry, waterless gut.²⁾

A tableau of work and place is evoked in this scene which also sounds the first note of a thematic conflict that invests *Tropic Death*: The exploitation of nature cannot be separated from the accompanying exploitation of men, which also serves to foreground a representation of the laborers themselves, in a specific Caribbean trope of land linked to labour, which historically has been interrelated to slavery and Indentured Servitude; reminding us that *Tropic Death* is imprinted with ambient cultures, situated in history and shaped by events. It is important to see *Tropic Death* in multiple contexts — historical, economic, political, cultural. Important too, is that parallels be drawn between characters' quandaries and the social macrocosm, a view which privileges the reader to see that the anguished destiny of the solitary protagonist in *Tropic Death*, comes to "figure" in Derrida's sense, the milieu, the social formation itself.

When the Spanish first arrived in Jamaica in 1509, the priest Bartolome de Las Casa reckoned in his *The Devastation of the Indies: A Brief Account* that there were one million Indian inhabitants. By 1520 they were virtually extinct. They were eliminated by "many outstanding cruelties, massacres and burnings of the people, or executing them by flinging them to fierce dogs, torturing and oppressing the survivors, condemning them to the hard labor of the mines, thus eradicating them from the earth, despoiling the land of those unfortunate and innocent people."³⁾ This is imperial history — arrival and annihilation, enslavement and settlement, imposed, made central to the process of European hegemony, were fundamental to the pattern of Caribbean colonial de-

2) Eric Walrond, "Drought," in *Tropic Death*, Liveright, 1926, p. 1.

3) Bartolome De Las Casa, *The Devastation of the Indies: A Brief Account*. Johns Hopkins University Press, p 113.

velopment, part of the grammar of imperial conquest. When the historian Eric Williams said the Caribbean was founded in a state of international rivalry, he meant that conflict was the Caribbean's natal state. Conflict is the generating image of *Tropic Death*. The conflictual, oppositional nature of Walrond's fiction is the symbolic representation of a deeper and darker complex of social, racial and ideological conflict, which Walrond saw as a predominant theme of Caribbean life. Walrond's perception of these conflicts was derived from the complicated experiences of his own life, of his nurture and education, of the irreducible fact of having been a colonial in empire at a historical moment when empire was in its primacy. *Tropic Death* is set within the dominion of empire.

Tropic Death, a collection of ten stories set in Walrond's former homelands is the book upon which Walrond's reputation as a writer rests. It was published in 1926, eight years after he had emigrated from Panama, the place where his writing career began as a reporter for Panama's major newspaper, *The Panama Star and Herald*. Walrond was twenty-eight when *Tropic Death's* appearance was critically received by an American literary establishment in enthusiastic agreement on the book's imaginative power, its originality, and humanism. Benjamin Brawley, in the *Southern Workman*, called *Tropic Death*, "the most important contribution made by a negro to American letters since the appearance of Dunbars's *Lyrics of Lowly Life*."⁴⁾ "It is a fine book," wrote Dos Passos to Walrond, "Like anything that deeply expresses the essence of any race it's much more human than it is racial."⁵⁾ Sterling Brown described *Tropic Death* as "a brilliantly impressionistic series of portraits of the author's native West Indies."⁶⁾ And the novelist Waldo Frank reviewing

4) Benjamin Brawley, review in the *Southern Workman*, Oct 13, 1926.

5) John Dos Passos, review in *New York World*, October 26, 1926.

6) Sterling Brown, review in *The Massachusetts Review*, September 27, 1926.

for *Opportunity* identified Walrond with the masters of American fiction when he stated: "How can I make clear that the basis of this book — the very substance of its language — relates it to Poe, Melville, Thoreau even — and to their contemporary successors."⁷⁾ As *Tropic Death* ran quickly into its second edition it was being extolled among the New York literati as another "heralding sign" to use Alain Locke's phrase, of the brilliant promise being unleashed in the Harlem Renaissance; yet another singular step in creative growth for the *New Negroes* on their way to gaining recognition, acceptance, and critical acclaim in American letters. No individual was more well-disposed to speak of Walrond's gifts than his publisher Horace Liveright, of Boni and Liveright, the publisher of Jean Toomer's *Cane* (1923) and Ernest Hemingway's *In Our Time* (1925). Just before the publication of *Tropic Death*, Liveright in discussing Walrond at a publicity party for the book, said, that he was struck by the "originality of his ideas...by the beautiful style and exceptional color which Mr. Walrond employed in his writings."⁸⁾ Later in 1927, after Liveright had read the first draft of Walrond's story of the Panama Canal, *The Big Ditch*, and his stories from *Opportunity*, he wrote in a letter of recommendation for Walrond to the Harmon Foundation that "his writing was the finest now being produced by any member of the coloured race."⁹⁾

Tropic Death, though, had its detractors. *The New Republic's* Robert Herrick felt that Walrond employed a "melodramatic interpretation of character familiar in the magazine story,"¹⁰⁾ a legitimate criticism other immediate reviewers made. Another reviewer, J. A. Rodgers, challenged Walrond's

7) Waldo Frank, "In Our Language," *Opportunity*, Nov 1926.

8) Horace Liveright, Fall Catalogue, Boni and Liveright, 1926.

9) Horace Liveright, letter to Walrond in Harmon Foundation File, Horace Liveright Papers in the New York Public Library. 1925.

10) Robert Herrick, review of *Tropic Death*. *The New Republic*. November 10, 1926.

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representation: "*Tropic Death* ...is no more balanced a picture of the life of the average dweller in the tropics than if one were to go to the mountains of Kentucky and Tennessee for a picture representative of American life."¹¹⁾ Placed in the context of 1926, *Tropic Death* revealed resemblance enough. As Caribbean scholar Gordon Lewis wrote in *The Growth of Caribbean Society*.

The Olivier-Semple Report on the sugar industry observed (1930) that no attempt had been made in that island [Barbados] from the date of the last Royal Commission report (1897) by either the associations for the encouragement and improvement of peasant and labourer's garden agriculture, with the result, as the report added, "that the [Barbadian] worker can be classed at best as only on a maintenance diet, and...there is no reason to doubt that many households live on the borderline of extreme poverty."¹²⁾

This is the situation of "Drought," where representation and reality merge. And even though the stories in *Tropic Death* modulate between the city and the country, there is no real movement up and down the class scale. Walrond's human landscape was indeed socially selective, more in accord with Theodor Adorno's judgement that "art is not a relic of the human subject."¹³⁾ Walrond's focus is on the peasantry and not on the planter-class, the creole middle-class or absentee landlords, which he has excluded, and which were so successful in ravaging and ruining the Caribbean. But, leaving aside Rogers' assumption of mimetic equivalent, that art should balance with life, the overriding consensus among the reviewers (Rodgers and Herrick conceding here) was that *Tropic Death's* deficiencies could not detract from the skill and sensitivity with which Walrond had projected the folkways of the Caribbean peasantry, which as one anonymous reviewer for *The New York Times* put it: "*Tropic Death* takes

11) J. A. Rodgers, review of *Tropic Death* in *The Pittsburgh Courier*. Oct 1926.

12) Gordon Lewis, *The Growth of the Modern West Indies*. Modern Reader Papers. 1969. p.89.

13) Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*. Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970. p. 53.

rank with Jean Toomer's *Cane* as a bravely beautiful collection of short stories by a man of negro blood. Eric Walrond illumines the life of the negro in the American tropics as Mr. Toomer visualized his ways of being in the southern country and northern cities of the United States. The two volumes give a complete picture of this transplanted race in America."¹⁴⁾

Like Toomer, the other master stylist of the Harlem Renaissance and slightly older peer (1894–1967), Walrond was able to bring to a basically provincial American audience a vision of a region geographically close but culturally remote. Though their *oeuvre's* are of an entirely different character in vision and tone, (Walrond's vision is harsher) with Walrond the more overtly political and polemical writer, both writers were able to render their experience of the Caribbean and African-America with a lyrical prose of indelible color, force, and truth. And though the auspicious achievements of *Cane* and *Tropic Death* should have secured success for their authors, they did not. During their literary careers longevity eluded both. Of the two, it is Walrond who remains the enigma, yet to be domesticated into any canon of literature. Toomer, celebrated since his posthumous rediscovery in the sixties has been fully canonized into the African-American literary tradition and has acquired a vital authority and audience. But Walrond has remained marginal with scholars, treated with circumspection and avoidance, rarely assessed, yet to be appreciated or studied seriously.

Whereas Toomer's ambiguity over his identity and engagement in mystical traditions and rejection of politics informed the spirit and subject-matter of his writings after *Cane*, (much like the later writings of Yeats) writings in marked departure from *Cane's* themes, tone, and sympathies, Walrond kept a unity and consistency to his repertoire after *Tropic Death*. From the young man

14) Anonymous reviewer, "Eric Walrond's Tales and Other New Works of Fiction," *The New York Times*, Oct 27, 1926.

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whose literary maturity coincided with the flowering of the Harlem Renaissance, to his last days in London, Walrond continually labored to express the themes representative of the Antillian world he first began to apprehend as a journalist in Panama, and brought to fruition in *Tropic Death*. From the beginning of his literary life to its end, Walrond continued to work with his Caribbean material — a life long absorption of it into the structures of all his aesthetic projects. And despite what critics said, race was never incidental to his work but central to it. Walrond never ceased to regard himself as a West Indian, a man who never lost his identification with his people, least of all their human predicament. “As a literary subject, white life has never had much interest for me,” he states in an interview for a Paris magazine in 1933. “My responsibility, and my *raison d’etre*, is to record the emotional history of my race, to portray its sufferings, its hopes, and its rebellions. For in them I find a pregnant source of feeling and pain. It’s there I derive the fundamentals of my art, and it is to the service of the black race that I consecrate my talents as a writer.”¹⁵⁾

No less than his own creation Walrond was a historical being albeit an artist. *Tropic Death* was written in a successful and crucial stage of his career as a writer, at a particular time in the changing relationship between Britain and the Caribbean and the U.S. and the Caribbean. As the Caribbean’s economic importance to Britain had been diminishing since the latter half of the nineteenth century with the decline in the sugar industry, the geopolitical significance of the Caribbean to America had been growing since 1898 (the year of Walrond’s birth) with the Cuban-Spanish War, and the annexation of Puerto Rico. In the first two and a half decades of the twentieth century America used the *Monroe Doctrine* (1823) as a pretext to militarily intervene in the Dominican Republic, Haiti, Panama, and Nicaragua, and bought the Virgin

15) Eric Walrond, interview, *Lectures du Soir*, (Paris), 4 Fevrier, 1933.

Islands *in toto* in 1917 for the strategic cover the harbor of St. Thomas would give the Panama Canal. The Caribbean, as Eric Williams claimed, had become the “American Mediterranean.” Walrond was well aware that the Caribbean was in a stormy sea of politics, and remains so as recent American invasions of Grenada (1983) and Panama (1989) make clear. In such exemplary pieces as “Autocracy in the Virgin Islands,” “The Men of the Cibao” (Haiti), “Subjection” (Panama), and “The Marine Occupation of Santo Domingo,” both in his fiction and journalism, Walrond contributed his voice to a nascent but growing opposition to America’s presence and Jim Crow policies in the region. Hence, part of the significance of a book like *Tropic Death* is that it is a very illuminating part of the human reality behind the British colonialization and American subordination of the region, made all the more interesting because Walrond was no mere onlooker in the American-Caribbean and Anglo-Caribbean situation, but as the body of his writing attests, an outspoken critic of it.

Eric Derwent Walrond was born on December 18, 1898 in Georgetown, British Guiana (now Guyana). He was one of four boys in a household of six children, but obscurity surrounds these siblings. His mother Ruth, a devout member of the Plymouth Brethren, traced her lineage back to a “thundering Scot and an African maiden,” Scottish emigre planter named Benjamin Joseph Proute, who founded his own village in St. George’s parish in Barbados called “Proute” or “Arise” as it is called in *Tropic Death* and contemporary Barbados. Benjamin married Matilda, “Babu,” an ex-slave who Walrond mentions in his journals as being of tribal royal lineage. Walrond’s father is lost to us as is his ancestry, (unlike Ruth who had a large extended family that stood out fairly distinctly) but evidence suggests that William was an early Garveyite. William was a tailor by trade and appears to have been rather successful since the Walrond family lived “in a large house with cool galleries” on New Market

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Street (where Walrond was born) in downtown Georgetown, the city which V.S. Naipaul described as “the most beautiful in the Caribbean.”¹⁶⁾ At the age of eight Walrond’s family moved to Barbados. The first year they lived with Ruth’s revered grandfather Joseph Benjamin Proute, “Dodo,” a legendary figure and the probable model for Captain Bellon in “The Vampire Bat”; and as Walrond recounts, “the sort of mulatto aristocrat only to be found in the West Indies.”¹⁷⁾ “Dodo,” was one of the oldest and most respected members of provincial society, and had been a member of the Legislative Council with a serious interest in politics and nationalism, an interest he passed on to his great-grandson. The following year the family moved to Black Rock, in the parish of St. Michael’s where as Walrond relates, they lived “on a quarter acre of land (all our own) for three or four years.”¹⁸⁾ Eric began attending St. Stephens Boys’ School and perhaps was very much like Gerald, the sensitive and introspective son of Sarah in the title story ‘Tropic Death.’ The experience of his years in Barbados appear to have been traumatic, but furnished him an enduring subject matter, the effects of migration and “uprootings” which he rendered with complexity and ambiguity throughout his life. In 1910 the family moved to the Isthmus of Panama, (which was the mecca of the Caribbean during the years the Panama Canal was being constructed, 1881–1914) following after William who emigrated a year earlier to open up a tailor shop. A year later the family moved again to Colon, “Silver City,” on the Atlantic side. Walrond first went to the Spanish Boys’ School, then a school conducted by the Wesleyan Mission, then Canal Zone Public schools, graduating in 1913. There after he continued his education under private tutors for

16) V.S. Naipaul, *The Middle Passage*. London. Andre Deutsch, 1962. p. 110.

17) Eric Walrond, interview with Frank Sullivan in Footnotes of Good Books (publication origin unknown), Walrond papers, Oct 1926.

18) *ibid.*

three years, the only way West Indians could get advanced education. He first started to work at the American Q.M.D. [Quarter Masters Department] in Monkey Hill, then in the Health Department at Cristobal where he made his first attempts to write stories, and finally as a reporter for the “West Indian Page” of *The Star and Herald* newspaper, getting nearer to the profession he wanted to embrace, that of a writer. Walrond worked on *The Star and Herald* from 1916–1918. He left the Caribbean with his family in 1918, never again to live there for any length of time although like Kipling and Proust, for the rest of his life he lived in his art on the memories of his early Caribbean years.

On 30 June 1918, Walrond and his family arrived in New York and settled in Brooklyn. On 2 July, Marcus Garvey, the Jamaican nationalist incorporated the headquarters of the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) in Harlem, and shortly after that, its main organ, the *Negro World*, which together inspired what the scholar Robert Hill has demonstrated was a “social movement unprecedented in black history for its sheer size and scope.”¹⁹⁾ Before the bitter realities of political power lead to his demise and deportation, Garvey was *the* central political figure in African-America. And for several years Walrond’s life was spent as *l’homme engage*, an “engaged man” in the politics and aspirations of Garvey’s movement. Walrond’s initial involvement with a circle of Garveyite intellectuals lead to work as an assistant editor of *The Weekly Review* (1919) a paper espousing Garveyite ideals, and then to collaborate in co-founding a short-lived paper, *The Brooklyn and Long Island Informer* (1920). Shortly after winning first prize in an essay contest that the *Negro World* sponsored, a piece on Africa entitled “A Senator’s Memoirs,” Walrond’s literary skills were rewarded by being offered a position as *Negro World’s* associate editor (1921–1923). Most of the themes and issues which Walrond

19) Robert Hill, introduction to *The Marcus Garvey and Universal Negro Improvement Association Papers*, vol. 1, University of California Press. p. Lxxxix.

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chose to concentrate on in his early apprenticeship writings for *Negro World*, as fulsome and fragmentary as some of them were, constitute subjects and affinities to topics he would broach throughout his life. His sympathy for what Dostoevsky called the “poor folk,” social injustice, race-relations, nationalism, colonialism, the impulses for freedom and social change, subjects he addressed over and over again, convey unmistakably that his Garvey years were clearly a formative experience and one which helped to imbue his work with a distinctive social-political consciousness. In 1920, Walrond married an attractive Jamaican, Edith Cadogan, who was the descendant of the owners of the Monkey Hill mentioned in “The Wharf Rats,” land on which part of the Panama Canal was built. Their marriage produced three girls but it was not a success. Edith and Eric separated before the birth of their third daughter. Edith returned to Jamaica (1924), happily expectant that Eric would follow shortly after, but their union was over. Walrond would never return. Edith, like T. S. Eliot’s wife, would spend years waiting for a husband who would never come home, nurturing a lost and betrayed love that would never be fulfilled nor forgotten. This failed marriage and early sorrow in his life — he was only twenty-six, Edith barely twenty-two — only confirmed his innate pessimism and essentially tragic view of human life. Edith would remarry, but Walrond never married again. The making and failing of this relationship, the loss of its stability, and the only real home Walrond would experience in adult life, has to be factored in as a determinant in the later difficulties and decline of his literary life.

Walrond received his academic training at City College and Columbia University (1921–1925), though he never received a degree. While studying at these institutions and in the course of his voracious reading of a wide range of literature, history, and writers like Nietzsche and Schopenhauer, he absorbed the German romantic vision of the classical world. The romantic themes of

tragedy, enigma, and melancholy took deep root in his mind and were to provide, in part, the basis for the creation of the Gothic, metaphysical nature of *Tropic Death*. But Walrond's debt to Poe is obvious. He prized Poe as one of his favorite authors and this is apparent in the motifs of murder, betrayal and the horrific that amplify the narrative formations of *Tropic Death*. Poe, the master of the short story form, struck a response in Walrond by his ability to visualize subjective, often irrational states of mind by representational means, his probing of the destruction of innocence, and his attraction to horror, which Walrond regarded as artistic terrain they both shared. When Walrond was asked in an interview after *Tropic Death's* publication, what immediate subject interested him, Walrond replied, "Horror."²⁰ Walrond as well drew upon the strengths of the tradition of the realist novel, to Dicken's underworld, to Hardy's tragedy, to the French social novels of Zola and Flaubert and Balzac's *La Comedie Humaine*. He drew upon the sketch form of Turgenev's *A Sportman's Sketches* and Dostoevsky's *House of the Dead*, which were drawn largely from Russian peasant life, of life at the lower depths, life on the bottom. Walrond's work conforms to this Russian prose tradition, even though one can find the traces of plot manipulation or melodrama as Robert Herrick described Walrond's literary preference, in depicting characters in moments of acute crisis and conflict in their social existence. Admittedly, Walrond's preference was for fluid dramatic plot constructions in which unexpected turns or events propel the action forward into grotesque climaxes. Characters are presented in dialogue and dramatic moments that take the place of a depiction of consciousness or analytic portraiture, while emphasis is made on their close relationship to their surroundings. But Walrond generally drew upon nineteenth century literature, much of it still of the country, of rural small settings that were still settled but attempting to come to terms with the deper-

20) Eric Walrond, interview (from the same Sullivan interview).

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sonalizing forces of industrial change and urban growth, with the problems of mobility, the individual and society, and what George Lukacs has described as an “inadequacy that is due to the soul’s being wider and larger than the destinies which life has to offer it.”²¹⁾

During this period, after Walrond broke ranks with Garvey, Walrond was affiliated with Charles Johnson’s *Opportunity*, organ of the Urban League, as its business manager (1925–1927) and a contributing editor of *New Masses*. But his affiliations did not interfere with his steady output of work of exceptional versatility - stories, essays, articles and criticism published in some of the major American publications of the day including *The New Republic*, *Vanity Fair*, *Forbes*, *Current History*, *Smart Set*, *World Tomorrow*, *Saturday Review of Literature* and *The Independent*. In 1927, Walrond’s “City Love” was included in *The American Caravan*, a premier anthology of writing that included pieces from modern prose masters like Hemingway, O’Neil, Stein and Toomer. Fascinated with people, Walrond met everyone. He enjoyed the friendship of singers Paul Robeson, Roland Hayes, Alberta Hunter and Josephine Baker; a liason with Nancy Cunard (later the personal acquaintance of the photographer Henri Cartier Bresson and members of The Bloomsbury Group) and the close confidence of Rudolph Dunbar, the first black conductor of the London Philharmonic Orchestra, Carl Van Vechten — all the leading figures of the Harlem Renaissance like Alain Locke and Countee Cullen, and some of whom, like Langston Hughes and Arna Bontemps, would remain his compatriots until his death. Walrond was active in literary, theatrical and artistic circles — with the avant-garde of New York and in reality shared some of the preoccupations of his avant-garde contemporaries. He was drawn to the stage and wrote about it when he had a brief flirtation with the beautiful and gifted actress Rose McClendon, and later in the 30s, as a publicity manager for a touring theatrical

21) George Lukacs, “Abstract Idealism,” *The Theory of the Novel*. MIT Press, 1987.

troupe in Europe. Some of his closest associates were artists like Augusta Savage, Raymond Barthes, Hale Woodruff, Palmer Hayden and Aaron Douglass who designed the original dust cover for *Tropic Death*; the Mexican muralist Miguel Covarrubias who illustrated Walrond's *Vanity Fair* pieces, and the Austrian painter Winold Reiss, whose portrait of Walrond (commissioned originally to accompany "Wharf Rats" for Alain Locke's *New Negro*, which Walrond withdrew) is now displayed in Fisk University's main library. It was through this coterie of artists, as different as they were complementary, that Walrond became conversant with contemporary art and experimented with assimilating the conceptual aspects of their work into his own; in an attempt to forge a style and imagery that expressed his vision of a Caribbean literary art, an art whose ethos, rather than subject matter was to be consonant with classicism's universal and timeless quality and appeal.

On the surface Walrond appeared successful but his years in New York were difficult ones, and his difficulties he tried to delineate. In 1922, he expresses his problems with different forms of discrimination in a story called "On Being Black," in *The New Republic*. By February 1923, some of Walrond's stories were having difficulties finding a publisher. Walrond submits four stories with Panamanian settings ("Voodoo's Vengeance," "The Consul's Clerk," "The Godless City," and "The Wharf Rats") to Robert Davis, editor of *Munsey's Magazine* and *Argosy Weekly*. The stories are flatly rejected. In a letter to Walrond's agent, Davis explains the rejection.

You are perfectly correct about Eric Walrond. He is quite the most promising young man I have seen in a long time. He has Hergesheimer's genius for color;...I never saw better atmosphere in anything. Of course he is violently irreverent. I can use nothing of the four manuscripts enclosed. He has let down the barriers without reserve.

It grieves me to let these manuscripts go back to you. In spite of which I am much concerned about his future. Can I have a talk with him when he returns to

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New York? I can explain to him in a few minutes how to turn his rich pen to profitable account....Nobody understands so well as he the people about whom he writes. I await with eagerness your consent to help.

I have no doubt there are many magazines that would publish these stories without changing a syllable. However, I cannot with safety present these bald though brilliant descriptions of men and women and manners — or the lack of manners, whichever you choose....I most sincerely thank you for sending the manuscripts, every line of which I read with care and interest. Believe me, most sincerely²²⁾

Jean Toomer once complained in a letter how Sherwood Anderson always wanted him to “feature Negro.” Walrond’s response to ‘feature Negro’ was to trim his fictive sails appropriately to avoid being capsized: he dashed off what he called “two disgusting darky stories” (“The Silver King” and “The Stolen Necklace”), which Davis published in *Argosy Weekly*. But his bill of complaint would continue to be articulated because his doubts remained about publishers and would continue to remain. In his article “The Negro Literati,” written in 1925, Walrond touches on a sensitive subject that bothered him a great deal in these early years of his career: being caught between his self-conception and the perception society held about him.

Of course it is pretty hard for anyone to live the creative life in the United States, but for the Negro I think it is doubly so. What right has a Negro anyhow, to think of the creative life at all, much more aspire to it? Isn’t he of a people who for countless generations have had to rely on others — preferably unsympathetic masters — for their thinking and dreaming and creating? Yet this very enforced affliction is destined, I believe within a comparatively brief period of time, to react to the enormous advantage of the blacks.²³⁾

There is a note of hope struck here, but it would prove elusive. If there was an ‘advantage’ it failed to gratify Walrond who by now felt himself to be

22) Robert Davis, editor of *Argosy All-Story Weekly*, letter to Walrond’s literary agent, Edna Underwood, in Walrond papers, 1927.

23) Eric Walrond, “The Negro Literati,” *Brentano’s Book Chat*, March/April 1925.

laboring against the grain. In an interview Walrond gave *The Cleveland Times* in 1927, he voices a mixture of Joycean 'anguish and anger' at what he feels is the corrupt state of affairs in the Harlem Renaissance.

The present feverish interest in the Negro is ephemeral...I am against building on a false foundation. I think the work of the Negro race should be judged by the same standard as the work of any other race — on its merit...The sudden exploitation of the Negro race is not a favor — it is a detriment. It is a fad and the artist, carried away with the publicity and applause does not give the best he has. He falls into the 'Barnum' idea of being a good show and forgets to work...Many of our artists are given theatrical contracts and once performed are never renewed, despite the fact that they were fulfilled with the highest artistry. That is evidence enough that the managers are opportunists and the public interest in the Negro's art is not substantial.²⁴⁾

The mask is off. Here, in this denunciation we can sense better than anywhere else, the force and the direction of the momentum that lead Walrond away from America. Walrond's quick thrust is in the same spirit as James Fenimore Cooper's condemnation one-hundred years before, in his Preface to *The Last of the Mohigans* (1826), when Cooper, as Richard Slotkin has written, castigated a "taste [which] appeared to control the literary marketplace, to the detriment of fiction deemed by Cooper (and others) to be 'realistic' about the difficulties and often harsh facts of history and life."²⁵⁾ This was Walrond's situation. Walrond like Cooper was contending for his kind of writing which emanated from a conception of realism and "historical truth" which went against the establishment's conception of art written by and about the Other. For a man that dearly valued the autonomy of his art as Walrond did, whose values about art were given an *a priori* affirmation in a view of character

24) Eric Walrond, interview, *The Cleveland Times*, 1927.

25) Richard Slotkin, introduction to James Fenimore Cooper's *The Last of the Mohigans*. Viking Penguin, 1986. p. 11.

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in social or cultural conflict, the whole issue of suppressing and deforming his art to cater to commercial-oriented expectations, to what Adorno called the “canon prohibitions” was galling. True, Walrond had been acutely anxious to be accepted, to compete successfully, but he was averse to having to expunge his work or have it edited to the extent that it not only undermined the independence of his mind and the integrity of his art — but the continued existence of *his* art. Concessions aside, Walrond wanted what any artist wants: freedom of subject and expression. He wished to be a writer but he would not prostitute whatever talent he had or have it patronized. Walrond had troubles like other writers but writing had always helped him achieve an equilibrium even when domestic turmoil had intruded into his literary life; when the reality of being the sole support of a wife and children staggered him, and threatened to overwhelm him, writing was his steadying influence. It was when his marriage was falling apart that *Tropic Death* started to take shape. The impulsion he received for the first composed story of the book “The Wharf Rats,” was drawn directly out of the trials of his personal and public life: his marriage is floundering, Garvey’s deportation is imminent. (In “The Wharf Rats,” the love situation fails, one of the main characters dies in the sea, pulled under by a shark). Writing had kept Walrond’s head above the surface, but the situation in America was such that it was becoming increasingly difficult to keep his literary life afloat. For Walrond, who was not yet thirty, the decision to leave America was not an easy one, though in later years his departure would be rationalized less as a necessary exile than principally as an alternative, *his* alternative to which he gave the appearance of freedom and self-liberation.

Walrond stayed in America roughly the duration of the Harlem Renaissance, from 1918 until 1929. In 1928, he was awarded the Harmon Award for Literature and a Zona Gale Fellowship to the University of Wisconsin for creative

writing. Subsequently, in 1929 he was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship for research and writing, the Foundation's second black recipient. The initial award of the Guggenheim Fellowship (and a renewal in 1930) carried him back to the Caribbean, then on to England and Europe. He returned briefly to America in 1931 to become involved with Theodore Dreiser's group, the National Committee for the Defense of Political Prisoners, on behalf of the legal defense of the Scottsboro Boys. The prejudice and injustice of the case was a matter of conscience with Walrond, as had been the Dreyfus Affair to Zola a quarter century earlier. On his return he was interviewed by *The Amsterdam News* where he revealed his feelings of life abroad:

Of course, I am glad to see old faces again, and to have the opportunity to talk with friends, but there is no particular thrill in being here again. There has been an inward change. Only urgent business brought me back to this country.

The south of France is the ideal place for the artist and the writer. In the solitude and quiet of that region one gets a perspective on the ultimate. He can see the intrinsic value of the thing he is doing. I wish more of the young Negro writers could do their work in that country. None of the difficulties and interruptions which infest Harlem are present there.²⁶⁾

At the end of 1931, his life half over, his 'business' finished, he left America for good. In the early thirties his letters, journals, and publications tell us he lived in Spain and the south of France and in various parts of the Continent until 1935, when he settled in England, where he lived until he died in 1966, the year which marked the end of Empire in the British Caribbean.

Reading *Tropic Death* today, written as it was some forty years before decolonialization and independence in the British Caribbean, we find it embodies much the same tribulations and turbulences of the contemporary Caribbean predicament. It is a work so thoroughly Caribbean, based as it is on a topographical and imaginative vision of a set of small sugar plantation soc-

26) Eric Walrond, interview, *Amsterdam News*, 1931.

ieties unique in the Western hemisphere. But as we read *Tropic Death* we should also keep in mind that as it developed in the twentieth century, the Caribbean novel and short story were forms less engaged in literary tradition than involvement in the social and endemic complexities of the region's historical experience. Thus Walrond, as a progenitor and contributor to the evolution of modern Caribbean literature, no less than Claude McKay (1890–1948) and C.L.R. James (1901–1989), was providing Caribbeans with a sense of their common past and shared identity with all its delimitations on character and fate. Consequently, *Tropic Death* needs to be set in the context of the Caribbean novel, from where it derives and developed. Historical accounts have informed us that novels have always been tied to national states, but the Caribbean novel was derived from the experience of colonialism before national states had begun to emerge from under colonial and imperial domination. Hence, when McKay, James and Walrond — all emigres whose voices are rooted in the resonances of the Caribbean diaspora — grounded their works in a nationalist vision, taking literary forms from America, Europe and Russia and fashioning them according to the dictates of Caribbean history and actualities, they were trying like Sir Walter Scott in England, and James Fennimore Cooper in America, to create a literary basis for a nascent nationalism in the Caribbean; trying to appropriate a mode of projecting the situation and identity of a people ruled by an imperial power, a people who had been the heirs of three centuries of slavery, colonialism and the plantation system, a long and sordid legacy of exploitation and subjugation.

Walrond's admirers like W. E. B. DuBois often spoke of his re-presentation of the Caribbean, of how he had responded to and imaginatively re-formulated the area's variegated origins and life. "Our knowledge of the West Indies," W. E. B. DuBois wrote, "has usually come from the words of English rulers and tourists and the chance observations of white Americans. Here is a book

[*Tropic Death*] of ten stories of death which, with impressionistic pen and little plot, show forth with singular vividness the life of black labourers of the West Indies. There is superstition, unusual dialect, singular economic glimpses; above all, there is truth and human sympathy.”²⁷⁾ “Sympathy” is the operative word here. For as Kenneth Ramchand has shown in *The West Indian Novel and its Background*, in the Caribbean colonial literature written by creoles before the twentieth century there was little if any “sympathy” given the Caribbean peasantry. When the peasantry was depicted, if at all, they were caricatures divested of humanity, the subject of derision and laughter, characters bearing little resemblance to fully fleshed out human beings capable of inducing empathy or identification with readers. And indeed, there was a formidable corpus of antagonistic texts — scholarship, racial and social theories, histories, and works of literature, written by outside commentators whose singularly unvaried racist imagery and vocabulary had an almost unshakeable influence in formulating and defining what the Caribbean was in the popular imagination. For from the time Sir Walter Raleigh’s expedition of *Discovery* first landed in Guiana in 1595 in search of “El Dorado,” the mythical City of Gold, until the last British Governors departed Barbados and British Guiana in 1966, a mutual, interdependent economy, functioning and history had evolved between the Crown and her colonies that had seemed as essential and permanent as a law of nature. And even though the British West Indian colonies would never become competitive with the role and importance that major colonies like India and Africa played in the imaginative life and culture of Britain, the list of eminent names who wrote about and dealt with the Caribbean is impressive, since it includes Daniel Defoe, William Wordsworth, Emily Bronte, Jane Austin, John Locke, Edmund Burke, Charles Montesquieu, David Hume, William Makepeace Thackeray, Thomas Macaulay

27) W. E. B. DuBois, review. *Crisis*

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and Conan Doyle. But what also must be borne in mind is what these authors accepted as fact was as Edward Said has written, “the distinction, the difference and in Gobineau’s phrase ‘the inequality of the races.’” This notion formed a central strand in their thought no less than it does in the attitudes expressed in representative works like *Lady Nugent’s Journal*, Edward Long’s *History of Jamaica*, Thomas Caryle’s *Occasional Discourse Upon the Nigger Question*, Anthony Trollope’s *The West Indies and the Spanish Main*, Anthony Froude’s *The English in the West Indies*, Benjamin Kidd’s *The Control of The Tropics*, Richard Ligon’s *History of Barbados* and Thomas Jefferson’s *Notes on the State of Virginia*, works which either implicitly or explicitly justify slavery, colonial exploitation, expansionism, and a domination that could be deterministically condoned on the grounds that its subjects were in Anthony Trollope’s edict, “a servile race, fitted by nature for the hardest physical work and apparently at present fitted for little else.”²⁸⁾

Tropic Death was in marked departure to these forbears. The chief distinction to be made with Walrond and imperial writers was *how* he saw the Caribbean. He did not just write about the Caribbean, he was *of* the colonial Caribbean, and his own strategic position toward this Caribbean did not entail *sui generis* — a hegemonic view of the dynamics between colonist and colonial; a dehistoricized, condescending consciousness rooted in the notion of the innate inferiority of Caribbeans. Walrond was not representing Empire in the way that imperialist fiction like Kipling’s *Kim*, Forster’s *Passage to India* and Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* represents Empire in what Salmund Rushdie has called “its conscious moral, cultural and political justification.”²⁹⁾ Walrond was writing from the other side of the colonial divide. Like Andre Gide’s ex-

28) Anthony Trollope, *The West Indies and the Spanish Main*. 1860.

29) Salmon Rushdie, “Imaginary Homelands,” in *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981–1991*. Viking Penguin. p. 40.

pose, *Travels in the Congo* (1926), Walrond was offering a deterrent world view of Empire: its human cost. *Tropic Death* portrays on a very fundamental level the consequences of colonialism. And the achievement of colonialism in the twentieth century Eric Williams asserts in *From Columbus to Castro*, was poverty. Colonialism is the defining context for *Tropic Death*, poverty its central motif and issue. The harsh and debilitating actualities of the life depicted in *Tropic Death* cannot be divorced from the massive colonial system which regulated and governed every sphere of it. And even though there is no explicit criticism, argument or analysis of colonialism in *Tropic Death*, what critics praised as “the notable absence of propaganda” in its pages; no individual-versus-the system topos; no scenes of mass unrest; no young nationalist like Garvey posing a political menace; or enlightened peasants of political will and consciousness like Manuel Jean Joseph, the martyr of Jacques Roumain’s *Masters of the Dew*; a character whose evolving consciousness forms part of a national collective history — neither are we in the world of Caliban’s island — ‘full of noises/Sounds, and sweet airs that give delight and hurt not.’ But something more needs to be said here with respect to rulers and the ruled.

Intrinsic to imperial literature was the ideology of imperialism’s unique *mission civilisatrice*, its inherent beneficence, that it was in the best destiny of Africa, Asia, the Americas, and the Caribbean and natives like Walrond to be ruled. This idea, reinforced doctrinally as it was by Social Darwinian precepts, was promoted and made palatable in part by the extraordinary aestheticism of imperial literature itself, in the consummate skill in which imperial writers were able to arouse their readers with the romantic aura of travel, exploration, war, conquest, and the righteousness of Just Rule over indigenous people in the overseas dominions. “For imperialism,” as John MacKenzie writes in *Propaganda and Empire*, “made spectacular theater.” Of course what the native felt or thought as a human and inhabitant enduring the reali-

ties of colonial domination was never allowed to enter the picture; and when a representative native opinion does intrude into the scenario, the voice heard is one that supports or replicates the view of the colonizer. Edward Said in a brilliantly argued chapter in his *Culture and Imperialism* on *Kim* provides a perfect example of this in his discussion of chapter 4 of *Kim*, when as Kim, the Widow of Kulu and the lama are en route to Saharunpore, a District Superintendent of police passes by and his appearance elicits the following from the old Widow.

Those be the sort to oversee justice. They know the land and the customs of the land. The others, all new from Europe, suckled by white women and learning our tongue from books, are worse than the pestilence. They do harm to kings.³⁰⁾

This view as Said argues would have been identical to that of the British Orientalist in India, who doubtless felt that English rulers were better for Indians than Indian rulers holding the reins of power — and nowhere in *Kim* does Kipling posit a character who contests this sort of judgement of the imperial status quo, simply because Kipling himself accepted that British rule was natural and normative, and the way things ought to be. This compliance and acceptance of colonial rule, though, was not an orthodoxy that Walrond endorsed. *Tropic Death* is consciously inscribed with views, affiliations and relations of power which show that colonials were not happily subservient to the condition of subordination; or the idea that the Caribbeans themselves were a nonpeople, inherently backward, intellectually undeveloped, uncivilized and undeserving of self-rule.

Regardless of politics or history, some things though about *Tropic Death* will strike every reader. It is a decidedly female book, with filial bonds between mothers and children — at its center. Assembled with them in these

30) Edward Said, "The Pleasures of Exile," *Culture and Imperialism*, Knopf, 1993. p. 148.

stories are a set of grieving, careworn women we find in Aeschylus, women who have clouds in their lives much like the one that hung over Edith's life. They are indeed, sad, unfortunate creatures who are all somehow debased, abandoned, or unsuitable for male attention like Miss Buckner, the madame of "The Palm Porch," or Seenie in "The White Snake," *a mala mujer*, a "bad woman" whose forbidden love like Becky's in *Cane*, has made her an outcast, a creature of pity. As such, then, these women embody the feelings of emptiness, disaster and loss which are essential motifs of Caribbean imaginative geography, one Walrond's entire oeuvre tended to represent. Of the men who appear in this book their skies too are of a leaden color. They are men who, to use Eric Auerbach's coinage, are of "delimited figurality." Men whose lives have been eroded and diminished by the emasculation of poverty, a condition poignantly dramatized in "Drought," in which Coggins Rum's life symbolizes the concrete hardship of being a laborer in a barren world of material destitution and dependency. Coggins must support his family on starvation wages while at the mercy of a shifting system of marginal hard labor. Coggins and workers like him, men without money or land or hope, have to regress to a more primitive way of life in order to survive, but just barely. On his return home from the quarry Coggins injures his foot on a nail. Coggins' injured foot becomes a symbol of his general paralysis and immobility to effect any meaningful change in his home. It is this situation that drives him into impotent rages of the sort that James Baldwin said possessed his own father, a man who "had lived and died in an intolerable spirit of bitterness."³¹⁾ For Coggins, like David Baldwin, is a deeply disappointed man who has no plausible hope of ever answering successfully the needs of his family; of ever attenuating the despondency and poverty that reigns in his home. Lucien in

31) James Joyce, letter to Nora Barnacle, in *James Joyce: A Biography* by Richard Ellmann. Random House. 1982. p 127.

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"*Tropic Death*" is afflicted with an illness that causes him to deteriorate, which furnishes the reader with a sense of how he too is losing possession of himself, a reduction that is destroying him. Lucien's morbidity is juxtaposed to the spiritual optimism of his wife Sarah who makes an effort to succor and inspire a sense of hope in him: 'the Lord will provide'; 'truss in de Lord'; 'the Lord works His wonders in a mysterious way.' Lucien entertains no illusions about grace or salvation. Lucien's acute sense of dislocation derives from the fact that he is an migrant, a tailor who has left his family behind and emigrated from Black Rock, Barbados to Bottle Alley, Colon, with the reasonable intention of making a profitable life in providing support services to the Canal Zone. But something has happened as he attempted to make his way in Bottle Alley. Through the process of his migration he has undergone changes that have left him with a significant bitterness and alienation. His hand has become infected and prevents him from working and providing for his family. The hand atrophies and refuses to heal, which is interpreted by some as a sign of immoral conduct and character, the literal representation of some evil thing he has done. Lucien the isolated individual, broods in torpid despair over the septic nature of the physical and psychological limitations now contaminating him. In a very real sense Lucien's wound represents the damage by which the whole experience of transplantation he is linked to and dependent upon has degraded and disabled his life, and given him that intense death in life consciousness. When Lucien upbraids Sarah for pressuring him with the same old story to get well she responds: 'Old? I will never be old! As long as I've got breath in my body. As long as I got my boy child to shield from de worle — from de filth and disease of this rotten, depraved place — as long as I got my fo' gal chirrun in B'bados in somebody else han' — um can't be a old story!' These words cut Lucien for this is not just the venting of a vapid piety or pessimism, but an indignant and powerful social recognition and rage at the

corrupting conditions of Canal Zone habitation, its separating, alien settlement on which a moral emphasis must be brought to bear. It is a crucial admission. Bottle Alley has ruined Lucien. Walrond represents the foot and hand, the two parts of the body most intimately connected with work, as disabled. The physical disabilities that men in *Tropic Death* suffer can be taken as symbols of a general unhealthiness in their societies; societies that obstruct them from living and functioning as normal human beings. But this sort of exclusive ordering of adult colonial life, Walrond makes clear, also has a deeply subjective effect on children. Gerald too is deeply affected by the personal experience of mobility and isolation, a displacement that creates for him an urgent kind of uncertainty about where he really belongs. When Gerald awakes one morning, he is momentarily confused. Is he in Black Rock or Bottle Alley? Where is he?

Ah, he was not on the ship. Nor was he at the tailor shop.
This must be — home.

Here it should be observed that the home for Walrond never occupies a central place of importance in his fiction as it does for V. S. Naipaul (*A House for Mr. Biswas*) or metaphorically in the poetry of Derek Walcott ('Ruins of a Great House'). With Walrond, localities exert a more potent spell over his imagination, in the subtle way they express a whole complicated state of things as they do in the short fiction of Joyce (*Dubliners*), Toomer (*Cane*), Hemingway (*In Our Time*), and Anderson (*Winesburg Ohio*). "How could I like the idea of home?"³² wrote Joyce to Nora Barnacle, when his home was so full of victimization, the "ill-treatment" of his mother. When the home appears in Walrond's writing it is characteristically seen as a place of torment and ten-

32) James Joyce, letter to Nora Barnacle, in *James Joyce: A Biography* by Richard Ellmann. Random House. 1982. p 127.

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sion, never a place of refuge or rest: Zink Diggs' home in "The Black Pin" (Barbados) burns down; Miss Buckner's home in "The Palm Porch" (Panama) is a brothel; Seenie in "The White Snake" is homeless (British Guiana), living with her baby Water Sprout in "a hut deep in the Guiana woods," where "cane trash crowned it." Her abode serves not only as the locale of her banishment and shame, but a poignant symbol of female derogation and disenfranchisement in a colonial situation. The home in *Tropic Death* is also the visible structure of a social order and economy that has alienated laborers from the land on which they live; where the explicit relationship between sustenance and survival, food and work, habitat and the life being lived in it are interrelations that tragically link protagonists to their environment. The home avails itself as an interpretative image: for everyone could see in the contrast between peasant hovel and Master's house, the great social disproportion, the difference between wealth and poverty, comfort and misery; the mean and brutal disparity of a society that greed created and continually sustained. Barbados where "Drought" is set, was a country (as were all the lands in *Tropic Death*) that was consciously created as a place of work: physically in the domination by the sugar estate, its settlements and mills; socially in the organization of homes, 'housing' around the estate, so that the dominating relation was always there, with the immediate social and physical consequences always apparent. Miss Cragwell in "The Vampire Bat," "was a Squat and stout... Ba'bajan creole — mixture of white and negro." Walrond does not say whether she is the product of a marriage or an affair between a native woman loved but never married by a white man. Thus, this suggestion of an intimate relationship confirms the intricate knot of a society consciously and unconsciously under overwhelming internal contradictions. Hence the problems of illegitimacy, love and marriage, social relationships and rituals in a small society stratified by divisions of race, by ideas of value associated with color and caste,

are acted out and abstracted, as in a novel by Jane Austen, in the home. On another more immediate existential level, the home in *Tropic Death*, is the site of misfortune, of a plight or struggle, as much as it is an interior social space of obsessions with survival in general but food in particular, as is the case with Seenie who is driven to despair because she cannot feed her child.

As a sort of aftermath to a night of studied rest, Seenie was dizzy, drowsy but she made sure of one eternal thing — Water Sprout had to be fed. Feeding him was her one active passion. It was the least, she felt she could do by him. Her ways may have been bad, her soul in doubtful retrospect, but Water Sprout had to eat — *hossah*, cane licker, green peas, anything.³³⁾

It is under Coggin's roof that penury and imminent death take shelter. His inability to stop his little Beryl's fatal obsession with eating dirt — *Cachexia Africana* — condemns him to watch her perish from strangulation. Coggins' imprecations are drowned out in the tragic and constricted world of Beryl's solitude. She sits on the ground, unspeaking, subjecting herself to a vigil-like form of self-abnegation and destruction. Her turning away from the practical will to live, her indifference to life, strikes the reader with an impression of deep pain and sadness, *un profundo dolore*. The image of this silent, small and solitary child, her mute incommunicability and powerlessness, to wit, seems to embody an imperial ideology which held Caribbeans as having no historical destiny and definition beyond marginality and silence; a people as historically barren as the dirt Beryl eats — and just as uprooted. Another implication of this image is that when an indigenous people are uprooted to a place they cannot assimilate or understand, where they feel alienated and hopeless — they die.

33) Eric Walrond, "The White Snake," in *Tropic Death*, Boni and Liveright, 1926. p. 189.

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Avoiding the jagged rocks in the gap, Beryl, her little body lost in the crocus bag frock jutting her skinny shoulders, began to cry. A gulping sensation came to Coggins when he saw Beryl crying. When Beryl cried, he felt like crying too... But he sternly heaped invective upon her. "Marl'll make yo' sick...tie up yo' guts, too. Tie up yo'guts like green guavas. Don't eat it, yo' hear, don't eat no mo' marl..." No sooner had they reached home than Sissie began. "Eaten marl again, like yo' is starved out," she landed a clout on Beryl's uncombed head. "go under de bed an' lay down befo' I crack yo' cocoanut..." Running a house on a dry-rot herring bone, a pint of stale, yellowless corn meal, a few spuds, yet proud, thumping the children around for eating scraps, for eating food cooked by hands other than hers...Sissie...³⁴⁾

In recent years a number of very finely crafted films about the predicament of indigent youth in Developing and Third World countries has attracted critical attention and appraisal by their portrayals; films like *Pixote* (Brazil), *Salaam Bombay* (India), *Roderigo D* (Columbia) and Euzhan Palcy's acclaimed *Sugar Cane Alley*, a film set in a 1930s plantation estate in Martinique, but one resonant with a sense of human triumph and transcendence. *Tropic Death*, by contrast, projects a closed, nontranscendent world of sad resignation. A world where human possibility and transcendence are constantly negated by a dehumanizing socio-economic system that denies the very hope of human development and transformation. If transcendence is achieved, it is a momentary one, at the moment of death. But with Beryl, the child-stoic, as with all the children of *Tropic Death*, something else attends. Walrond seemed to have retained a lifelong sympathy with himself as a boy beset by the adult world of a domineering great-grandfather, strict schoolmasters and parents whose authority whether kindly or useless, must be reckoned with. Hence, Walrond brings a Dickensian compassion and understanding to his depiction of children, but without ameliorating the fact that they too are victims, tragic figures traumatized and constantly intimidated by a punitive authoritarianism. The

34) Eric Walrond, "Drought," in *Tropic Death*. Boni and Liveright, 1926. p. 21.

motif of suffering children is a powerful one in *Tropic Death*. A case in point is in "The Wharf Rats." Ernest and Philip dive for coins thrown from a tourist liner (named ironically the *Exotica*) in the harbor of Colon. In some sense Ernest and Philip seem to resemble any of a number of young errant-spirits in the tradition of rebellious youths resisting authority found in the 'penny dreadfuls' that were so popular in England in the Victorian and Edwardian eras; stories dominated by plot-patterns of rescue, salvation and return, stories dear to children and ones with which Walrond as a boy was pleasurably familiar. In another sense, Ernest and Philip, full as they are with juvenile heroism, belong as well to a separated world of young male adventure we find in the stories of Mark Twain, Rudyard Kipling, R. L. Stevenson, Jules Verne and Conan Doyle. But here the analogy stops. Ernest does not return. For Walrond is not presenting the reader with an individualistic boy's adventure tale in which a schoolboy's cunning and skill, sense of discovery and excitement provides the major defining reality. Instead, Walrond provides an inverted form of adventure fiction that has been circumvented by what Caribbean scholar Orlando Patterson has described in another context as "the problem of fate, the complete absence of freedom in the face of the gods, and the utter tyranny of destiny."³⁵ The boys' tragic denouement is casually connected to their open defiance of the authority of their parents. Their fate much like that of the young Pentheus in Euripedes' *The Bacchae*, whose rejection and rebellion against Dionysiac authority results in his own terrible end, leaves the reader with a disturbing sense of imbalance at the representation of punishment, which was far in excess of what was violated and transgressed.

The death of Ernest also parallels the death of Captain Bellon in "The Vampire Bat," whose tragic blindness, no less than Ernest's, results in his failure to

35) Orlando Patterson, "The Greek Construction of Freedom," in *Freedom in the Making of Western Culture*, Basic Books. 1991. p. 48.

recognize the insinuating menace (a strong motif in the book) that prevails all around him. Bellon Prout's journey into a Barbadian gully at night is done in condescending defiance of Mother Cragwell's warning. Here Bellon personifies the typical colonist's attitude toward the colonial, which in Edmund Wilson's words, "brush[ed] away like cobwebs the native[s] myths and beliefs."³⁶⁾

"Mas' Prout," she said, Yo' bes' don't go down de gully to-night, yo hear?" "Why, what's happening in the gully, Mother Cragwell?" he smiled, spitting sugar cane. "Is the man in the canes prowling about? Or do you think the duppies will be haunting Rayside's tracks?" But the young Briton's banter chilled the old mulattress. "If yo' know what is good fo' yo'self, yo' bes' hear wha' Oi tell yo'", was all she said. "H'm! this tastes like good old West Indian rum!" he cried, taking another fig of the cane. "Did you burn it yourself, Mother Cragwell?" "Who, me? No, bo," she retorted, looking up. "Dah cane yo' got dey come from down de road." "What did they have a fire recently?" "Yes, bo. Las' night. The fire hags ketch it fire las night." "The who?" "Hey," the old woman drawled, shocked at the young man's density. "Hey, look at his boy, ni. Yo' don't fomembah wha' a fire hag is, no? An' he say hev gwine down the gully to-night." Bellon burst into a fit of ridiculing laughter. "Why, shame upon you, Mother Cragwell!" "Ent yo' got piece o' de ve'y cane in yo' mout' suckin'?" she cried, fazed, hurt. "Tommyrot! Some jealous squatter fired the brake, that's all." "Yo' believe dat?" challenged the old lady, "Orright den, go 'long. Go 'long, bo. All yo' buckras t'ink unna know mo' dan we neygahs. Go 'long down de gully 'bout yo' business, bo."³⁷⁾

Influenced not only by his own attachment to pre-industrial peasant cultures but also by readings in cultural anthropologists like Franz Boas (1858–1942), and works like W. E. B. Dubois' *The Souls of Black Folks*, Walrond achieves

36) Edmund Wilson, *Axel's Castle: A Study in the Imaginative Literature of 1870–1930*. Norton. 1941. p. 67.

37) Eric Walrond, "The Vampire Bat," in *Tropic Death*, Boni and Liveright, 1926. pp. 215–216.

dramatic tension by creating a clash between two cultures with diametrically opposed views of reality. Mother Cragwell represents the archaic, hierarchical universe of human prehistory, a stage of civilization typical of pre-industrial peasant cultures still found in developing and Third World societies. Bellon on the other hand, embodies an entirely different perspective, the rational, anti-mythic and pragmatic universe that colonist types like Colonel Creighton (*Kim*) and Ronny Heaslop (*A Passage to India*) are part of. While Bellon's inability to understand such a pre-industrial culture marks him as part of the modern world we all inhabit, his blindness to myth has separated him from the beneficial power of illusion, which is emblematic of his basic refusal to understand anything that cannot be reduced to terms which reason can accept. Hence his facile rationalism causes him to blunder on like Oedipus, into a mysterious and tragic destiny that ends, as in "The White Snake," at night in a cabin in the bush. In the portrayal of Bellon, Walrond underlines his belief that modern civilization has no understanding of what the metaphysical experience behind Miss Cragwell's beliefs actually represent. Bellon is a realist or so he thinks, for the ideas of this old "conjure" woman to him smack too strongly of superstition and the mythical powers of sorcery; a degeneration of Christianity, of order and authority of which, he as a just returned officer from the Boer War (1905), a colonial war, resists having violated. Also there is the historical fact that Bellon's presence abroad is affiliated with the violent seizure and sovereignty under which Britain subdues another colony in Africa, when, since the time of the Berlin Congress (1884-85) the "scramble" for the African continent was at its most intense. Bellon is the embodiment of the force and power that implanted both the material and moral control that Miss Cragwell subverts.

When Mother Cragwell poses the rhetorical-logical injunction, "Yo bes' don't go down de gully to-night, yo hear," she brings two well-structured binary al-

ternatives to the forefront of our attention: Bellon knows/Bellon doesn't know. Which of these two possibilities is to be actualized in the story is not implied casually by earlier scenes. Bellon is ignorant about "de Gully" which has a longstanding reputation for being haunted by obeah. Walrond uses a legend of obeah less as a revelation of Bellon's interior state of mind than to initiate an interpretation of a historical "fact," an explanation of why seemingly disconnected events occurred.

Once, the master of a vessel, taking a cargo of dry cocoanuts to a mulatto merchant on the other side of the coast, cheated; a few English crowns were at stake. But the trader was a high-priest of the *obeah*, and was silently aware of it. Forthwith he proceeded to invoke the magic of the obeah against the vessel.

At late dusk the returning vessel hoisted anchor. The festival rites, incident to her voyage, had drawn to the wharf, selling mango and grape, the mulatto courtesans of the river town. And the crew rained on them silver and gold, and bartered till the sun went down.

Upon reaching the vessel's deck the crew — the wine of lust red on their lips - grew noisy and gay at the sinking sun. From below they bought a cask of rum, part of the cheated trader's store, and drank of it. With a calabash they dipped and wallowed in it, finding it sweeter than falernum.

Stars bedecked the night and a torch was lit. The vessel rocked on, falling in with the trade winds.

The rum was a siren, it led one on. The cask was deep, immense, but the liquor shrank till the huskiest of the islanders had to be pummeled to lean over into it and dip the liquid out. With a score of itching throats there was a limit to the cask's largess, and the bottom was early plumbed. When they got to it, however, it was to find a rum soaked Negro corpse doubled up in the bottom!³⁸⁾

Even before the issue of the supernatural realm becomes a live one for him, the degree to which Bellon feels thwarted and tormented in his situation with Mother Cragwell, appears connected to the sense in which Bellon is guided by a kind of idealism which the dialogue propogates and constructs; an under-

38) *ibid.* pp. 229–230.

stated life-and-death trope of the devoted soldier who gives his life so that someone else might live. His moral effort - the rescue of an abandoned baby — is likely, while an evil outcome - a supernatural evil in this case — appears inevitable. By accentuating the incongruous and grotesque, Walrond seems as though he is parodying the canonized imagery of the soldier-hero. Bellon the warrior has now become stalked and haunted, haunted by obeah, as the temporal sequence leading up to Bellon's death grows in suspense, uncertainty and improbability. Bellon, like Othello (a soldier too) is bound by a chauvinistic sense of self which will be undermined and begin to disintegrate once he ventures into the interior of the gully where his sense of reality will be distorted and shaken as it does to Kurtz in the Congo of *The Heart of Darkness* and Adela in the Marabar Caves of *A Passage to India*. Adela's foray into an unknown, unmediated experience of an Other world and culture, will bring about a self-confrontation which inspires her mortal terror, her flight, and premature death. In "The Vampire Bat" as in these two works of imperial fiction inhabitants must die when their values collapse on contact with a harsher, antithetical reality.

At work here in all this is a very Kierkegaardian idea: life cannot be contained within rational categories; there is an elemental mystery to life which is inexhaustible and beyond reason. Corollary to this idea is an acute awareness on Walrond's part that the greater the suppression of emotive and psychic needs of the human spirit, the greater the potential for irrationality and violence of the kind that Dostoevsky's *House of the Dead* portrays. Walrond saw in the communal life of peonage that was imposed on plantation and manual workers, as Dostoevsky observed with the convicts in Siberia, just how terrible and agonizing life could become when basic human needs for freedom, rights and expression were stifled. The imagery that Walrond uses to try to convey the unsettling effects of these constricting social conditions on

the peasants' lives is manifested in the form of repulsive creatures and tropical insects (sharks, snakes, centipedes and bats) who constantly encroach into the physical and psychic domains of his characters and function to reinforce an iconography of fear, disgust and horror, for which there is a great need for self-defense from what Dostoevsky called "mystic terror." An example of this can be found in "The White Snake," in Seenie's quotidian existence.

On awakening on mornings Seenie indulged in a rite native to the Negroes of the region. She'd slip on a one-piece frock, and go outside to the rain water cask which had a zinc drain pouring off the cabin roof into it. There her toilet was done. And as sure as the sun rose, there'd be on the dewy ground, on the boughs and pine, lovely, quiescent, a gallant cordon of snakes. Now as she sped forward, the road shone with them. Gorgeously bedecked ones — two inches of blue, two of mauve, two of yellow — two of black. Some, the coral ones, a yard or more in length, lovely crown jewels. Green snakes, black snakes, reaching up to the shady bush and swamp — drowsy on the sandy pond.³⁹⁾

In the midst of an insignificant daily ritual, a humble scene reminiscent of ones that peasant painters like Millet, Brueghel and Van Gogh would have idealized, Walrond has deliberately neutralized any idealization or mystifying effect. The compositional structure and specificity of the scene forces us away from a traditional way of seeing only innocence in the country, an idyllic landscape. Instead we are compelled to look at the array of snakes, so their deadly, alluring beauty might be beheld; it directs our attention to what Walrond saw as the intimate relation of Caribbean life to death. Seenie's mode of existence each morning is constrained by the gauntlet of reptilian death she must mediate. Walrond's mode of execution, almost cinematic in style, is to use three visual planes to delineate the human drama implicit in the scene: in the background the dawn, the middle plane contains the woman, the snakes lie in

39) Eric Walrond, "The White Snake," in *Tropic Death*, Boni and Liveright, 1926. pp. 193-194.

the foreground. This method juxtaposes Edenic beauty and evil; a predatory exterior world of nature with an interior female state of being a prey which further underscores the sense of stoic pessimism which pervades the story. The literal journey Seenie must traverse each morning is less important than the figurative distance: Seenie has moved from childish innocence to Fallen womanhood, to suffer a loss in social status, to live in solitary anguish and abandonment. Flight is the exact counterpart (“she sped forward”) for Seenie’s emotions since this poor, desperate girl has been evicted from her community. Though undeveloped, “The White Snake” reveals a vision of how repressive social and traditional values can destroy an individual, especially a woman. Seenie, belongs to that tradition of women passed down from century to century, women consigned to ruin and living death. For Seenie like Hagar has been set outside the bounds of her community and like Hester Prynne in *The Scarlet Letter*, has been sacrificed to public mores; but unlike Hetty Sorrel in *Adam Bede* whose desperate isolation forces her to abandon her baby on a roadside, Seenie refuses to allow her disgrace or desperation to destroy her relationship with her child. Rather than a Marxist fable about the necessity for class struggle, or economic development, Walrond seems to imply that social reform would not transform the immediate situation of Seenie and her baby; no amount of social engineering or even revolution would alter the basic facts of her life — the solitude, loneliness, and alienation she experiences within the amorphous and unsympathetic body of Guianese humanity, who offer her neither solace nor sanctuary. Psychologically, Walrond’s story has only one resolution - the love between mother and child. But the story may also be seen as a pessimistic and fatalistic view of the Caribbean human condition as well as a parable on a futile, absurd and meaningless human predicament worthy of a Kafka novel. Here, as in all the stories of *Tropic Death*, the landscape or natural environment plays a dominant role in underlining the

insignificance and vulnerability of the protagonist. Also, Walrond's deploys the technique of delineating adult characters by playing their tragedy off against their children. Children throughout *Tropic Death* serve as counterparts of adult suffering: Coggins and Beryl, Sarah and Gerald, Cho and her child, Seenie and Water Sprout.

"The White Snake's" loosely constructed plot — the condition of a Fallen woman in colonial society, begins and ends with serpentine imagery. This is Walrond's unique way of seeing and showing, as the opening passage illustrates:

On the banks of a bilgy lamahau, the eeliest street-stream in Bordeaux, a row of Negro peasant lodgings warmly slept. It was a vile, backward crescent reeking in brats and fiendish lusts.⁴⁰⁾

The characteristics of the houses and their people are consciously exchanged. As in Dickens, the physical world with Walrond is always connected to humanity; with the perceptions of relations between those of subaltern status and the place assuming a physical shape, a gross figure. This is an image and method which Walrond repeats, as in the opening of "The Wharf Rats":

At the Atlantic end of the Canal the blacks were herded in boxcar huts in the jungles of "Silver City"; in the murky tenements periously poised on the narrow banks of Faulke's River; in the low, smelting cabins of Coco Te. The "Silver Quarters" harboured the inky ones, their wives and pickaninnies.⁴¹⁾

What Walrond makes emphatic in this description is what D.H. Lawrence wrote as "condemning workers to ugliness, ugliness, ugliness" in this new, semi-industrial society, 'Silver City,' created by those brought from villages throughout the Caribbean to construct the Panama Canal. The physical ef-

40) *ibid.* p. 185.

41) Ew, "The Wharf Rats," in *TD*. Boni and Liveright, 1926. p. 89.

fect of this unsettled, frontier-like society, “the negation of any natural beauty,” as Lawrence put it, derives from the social facts of enforced squalor and segregation; of living socially on the edge, the ‘banks,’ which bred a vile way of life, a continuous phenomenon like the river. This is what the young Marcus Garvey saw when he came to Colon in 1911. Garvey’s starting point was, then, familiar ground to Walrond. As first a resident and then a reporter, Walrond actually lived close to the human misery the Canal created, and did not like other Caribbean novelists like Herbert De Lisser, merely know it by report or occasional visit. Walrond’s response to the suffering he saw was deep and genuine, but it is not pity alone or repugnance that stands out so dramatically here. The rhetorical significance of Walrond’s descriptions, his method, in part, is that of documentary record, as may be seen in such details he employs as the carefully reproduced dialect, the carefully included details of food, drink and clothing, the description of the furniture, the writing out of the legends, within which an immediate meaning of the inhumanities of this society become authenticated. Hence, the real importance of Walrond’s origins and its influence on his art is not and cannot be a matter of retrospect from adult life. It is rather, that his first social responses were those, not of a man observing the process of colonialism, an imperial construction and its exploitation, but as one who was virtually born into it, vulnerable to it at an exposed point, and destined in time to address it. For Walrond the process had been lived, personal and painful, and as someone in the process, he was able to see adult men, women and children, grown to another way of life in the context and pressure of human deprivation and disappointment. This was not a theoretic but actual social experience. And true to his particular reading of Marxism, Walrond believed that both capitalism and orthodox Marxism aimed at the destruction of pre-industrial cultures he loved in the Caribbean, and the consequent alienation, the isolation of the individual derives not merely from

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working in a world where one's work product is controlled by an exploitive capitalist class, but it may also be caused by the loss of a sense of mythical identity, a sense of harmony with nature that is destroyed by a pragmatic, technological civilization.

Walrond viewed the fifty mile Panama Canal as *the* symbol of modern imperialism itself: the grand imperial enterprise, the waterway, after the order of the ancient Babalonian and Pharonic waterworks; the Roman viaducts; Suez. But for Walrond, the Panama Canal was really a parallel construction. On one side the erection itself, the crowning achievement of American civilization and engineering genius. On the other side, an edifice of racial categories and hierarchies, a micro-economy of subjection. The Canal not only bisected Panama in two, but as Vilma Newton's book *Silver Men* has skillfully demonstrated, since 1903 when the Canal Zone's administration was assumed by America, a caste system was instituted that classified all workers into two economic classes: 'gold' (white American) and 'silver' (Negro or white European), categories as virulently antagonistic as metaphysical forms of identity like Muslim and Hindu. 'Gold' employees were paid in American currency and 'silver' employees were paid in Panamanian currency, which was half the value of the American currency. America had transported its brand of segregation to the Canal Zone so effectively, that its separate and unequal administration infused every facet of the Canal's construction and maintenance. Race was inextricably linked to rank regardless of skill or seniority; race determined employment, a worker's privileges or privations, where and how they lived; the food they ate, its quality, distribution and site of consumption. 'Silver Men' were given unfurnished eating facilities which required them to stand when eating the unvaried and unpalatable food. Race also determined the medical attention a worker received which for 'Silver Men' was non-existent. 'Silver Men' were ineligible for paid sick or vacation leave. Sick or well, the

'Silver Man' worked or starved. 'Silver Men' had to work longer hours, accept more treacherous working conditions with a greater exposure to diseases and epidemics of yellow fever and malaria, which meant that their mortality rate was higher and life expectancy rate shorter than 'Gold Men.'

In the dialogue between Mother Cragwell and Bellon, Walrond skillfully displays not only a grasp of the folk speech that so impressed Langston Hughes, but a deliberately varied orthography between colonial and colonist. Walrond juxtaposes the refinement of expression in Bellon's exchanges with the vernacular expression of the old woman's creole which unmistakably translates her figure and class status in a more direct and felt individuation. The coexistence of this polite idiom with a coarse one is not just a question of the relation of lives whose upbringing and education were different but one of social organization: The colonial system had a vested interest in keeping Mother Cragwell ignorant; in keeping her subordinate to what Raymond Williams has called "a precise and dominating social relationship." It is a relationship Bellon's education serves.

Mas' Prout, the old woman exclaimed, wha' yo a do down yah dis time o' night?
Yo' na'h go home no?

Why, yes, Mother Cragwell, replied the officer jovially, can't a law-abiding colonist walk the King's highway after dark?⁴²⁾

Walrond's orthographic reconstruction attempts to present Caribbeans as they were with marked differences of effect, which we feel has made *Tropic Death*, at times, inaccessible. Understandably, Walrond wanted to use the full resources of the creole tongue to offer a descriptive, representative naturalism, as well as to record social and class divisions, as evidenced in the conversation between Bellon and the old woman. This relationship between realism and language was an important one for Walrond. As a Caribbean writer,

42) EW, "The Vampire Bat," in *TD*. Boni and Liveright, 1926. p. 215.

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Walrond could not ignore the divisions of Caribbean society into two social classes: the planter and middle classes which always used a sloven, provincial English, and the popular masses which used various dialects. In his representation of reality then, Walrond felt he need not depict only the reality of the ascendant bourgeoisie. Alternative realities existed, not inferior ones but different ones which he knew were usually ignored or repressed. In this he took a very strong cultural stance, refusing standard English for the dialect of the simple people, believing that authentic expression of the people's emotions could only be achieved using their own language. But creole dialect is understood with difficulty and to some audiences incomprehensible. It is as difficult to read as it is to aurally understand, which we feel works to mitigate the reader's enjoyment and understanding of the *Tropic Death*. Consequently, in the general discursive framework of *Tropic Death*, dialect functions to *Tropic Death's* detriment. Yet as an expressive tool to translate what Foucault called "the lyricism of marginality," dialect works well in transmitting the affiliation between language and identity. As Peter Roberts writes in *West Indians and their Languages*, "The social stratification of the plantation system created in each territory a spectrum of language varieties. The European language was the target language and acquisition and mastery of the target was in direct relation to social position and degree of social contact with speakers of the target."⁴³ The seeming intelligibility of creole speech is an index of how far removed these peasant speakers were from the center, just how oppressed they were. Language in *Tropic Death* is inscribed with the antagonism and contempt the masters had for the masses. Language in *Tropic Death* denotes social inequality; it denotes the inclusive racialist binary division and branding (coolies/Indians), (chinks/Chinese), (niggers/blacks), (bucks/Amer-Indi-

43) Peter Roberts, in the Introduction to *West Indians & Their Language*, Cambridge University Press, 1988. p. 8.

ans), (spics/Latins), (buckras/creole whites), and (chumbos/West Indians in Panama who could not speak Spanish). For these were not terms that like masks could be put on and taken off but assigned to each individual race group as though it were their 'true name' their 'true being' engrained in the consciousness, to classify and characterize him or her, those and them. Language in this context, expresses a racial taxonomy, a verbal proof and confirmation that whites were superior to the Others. Language in the colonial context was given a special character, a prime source and identifiable factor in what Adorno has called "the negativity of social conditions." From another perspective, George Lamming in *In the Castle of My Skin* (1958) has addressed this issue of language as being an important underlying element in the ideological pacification of potentially rebellious natives:

And if you were really educated, and you could command the language like a captain on a ship, if you could make the language do what you wanted it to do, say what you wanted it to say, then you didn't have to feel at all. You could do away with feeling. That's why everyone wanted to be educated. You didn't have to feel....Language was all you needed. It was like a knife. It knifed your feelings clean and proper, and put an end to any pop, pop, pop in your head.⁴⁴⁾

In "The Vampire Bat," Walrond not only displays his fascination with the underlying attitudes of the racial and social divisions of Caribbean dialects, but deceptive surfaces and the complex realities they obscure, a fascination that made the Gothic novel a natural genre for him. What Walrond invested in the structure of the situation in "The Vampire Bat" are the Gothic, supernatural elements that figure in some of the other stories of *Tropic Death*: the theme of the protagonist caught in the trap of their own innocence; the motif of the hidden; the image of enclosure; magical substitutions and metamorphoses; the disjunction between appearance and reality; hideous violence;

44) George Lamming, *In the Castle of My Skin*, Schocken, 1987. p. 70.

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blood and darkness; birth and death. For death, as the title implies is the book's principle theme, its organizing principle, its mortal subject matter. But it is not the sense of afflicted mortality that Mann depicted in *Death in Venice* or what Hemingway called *Death in Afternoon* — el corrida, the Spanish bullfight, or what Wole Soyinka summons up in *Death and the King's Horseman*. This is death in the Caribbean: Of life that meant death, living death; of half-alive and half-dead creatures, one within the other, as much objects as humans. A people whose human alienation and unsatisfied impulses was negotiated for some characters through Christianity, for others by being “wedded to the Obeah.” Obeah, the metaphysical system which helped the peasants come to terms with the poverty and precariousness of their lives, with an all too familiarity with death; helped them to ritualize death; integrate it; make it acceptable and give meaning to its pervasive aggression and proximity, its cruelty and certainty. But Walrond is also saying more with respect to destitution and death in life, especially in his urban imagery, in this vivid evocation of Bridgetown, Barbados in “*Tropic Death*,” at the end of the quay, on the moral margin of society.

He was alone and strangely aware of the life bubbling around Nelson's Square. Under the statue masses of country blacks had come, drinking in the slow draughts of wind struggling up from the sea. City urchins, who thrived on pilfering sewers or ridding the streets of cow dung which they marketed as manure; beggars, black street corner fixtures, their bodies limp and juicy with the scourge of elephantitis; cork-legged wayfarers, straw hats on their bowed crinkly heads; one-legged old women vending cane juice and hot sauce...⁴⁵⁾

What Walrond has projected here is not is not just a human depiction, but a moral view and valuation of the stupefying effects of colonial civilization, but Walrond continues.

45) EW, “Tropic Death,” in *TD*. Boni and Liveright, 1926. p. 238.

Scores of ragged black boys, Gerald's size and over, filled the Square, half-covered by the dust, snoring. Old boys, young boys, big boys, little boys; boys who'd stolen on the wharves at sundown and bored big holes in the wet sacks of brown sugar; boys who defied the cops, and the sun, and the foaming mules, or the ungodly long whip of the driver, and skimmed on to tin cups the thick brackish froth the heat had sent fomenting up through the cracks in the molasses casks; boys who'd been sent to the island jail for firing touch bams at birds lost in the bewildering city or for flipping pea-loaded popguns at the black, cork-hatted police...⁴⁶⁾

Even in what seems a purely descriptive passage, Walrond carefully selects the symbolic details ("the long ungodly whip"; "the island jail"; "cork-hatted police") that reinforces some of his main motifs about colonialism: its enforced cruelty, its terrible carcereal aspect, its inhumanity and degradation of the human spirit. This type of organic element is active throughout the structure of *Tropic Death* and is in conceptual continuity with the opening image of "Drought" which translates the idea that those laborers breaking stones were more like convicts breaking rocks. This symbolic accentuation in place of close analysis of interior states of mind, reveals Walrond's ability as an observer of the external world, the horrified observer of the institution of colonialism. It is from passages like that we can ascertain that probably from an early age Walrond was a child for whom nothing human and alien was hidden from his wide-open, intelligent eyes. His existence as a child was no doubt indefinably shaped by this curiosity, and the desire to know all about everything that happens in all the houses and yards, the thoroughfares and quays of the world around him: of even the vice and perversity and impoverishment that was so well-represented in his world, and which he related to his art. For the Bridgetown scene is not described with the disinterested objectivity of some human subject matter, but is seen from the perspective of a child, Gerald, who like Pip in *Great Expectations*, sees a lot but says little — the pity of a child

46) *ibid.* pp. 238–239.

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for other children. But what Gerald in his genteel abhorrence sees here are not children as he knows them, but dirty and diseased ‘urchins’ disembodied from the world of mothers, fathers and children like himself; beings who neither have a home nor the possibility of acquiring one. Gerald sees things that are usually hidden from children in developed societies: injustice, misery, abject poverty. Yet this soporific human debris on the “doorsteps of empire” to use Gordon Lewis’s phrase, on the verge of death of one sort or another, indeed, is a perfect symbol of the exhausted, stagnant state of the colonial economic system itself, which I believe Walrond is saying is not just producing sugar but is like a factory producing miscreants, delinquents, the homeless and a community of doomed humanity. C. L. R. James wrote some forty years after *Tropic Death*’s publication: “What has ruined the West Indies up to now is the Old Colonial System. It still exists. In 1963, it is not what it was in 1863 and in 1863 it was not what it was in 1663, but the essence of the system remains...No kind of economic regime has had so demoralising an effect upon the population as the sugar estate. None.”⁴⁷⁾

Walrond was writing about a much denied and suppressed life — that of West Indians, of whom he was one. But Walrond should also be understood, I think, as a writer who was part of a nationalist dynamic of anti-imperialistic resistance, whose affiliation with decolonization discourse was as much, “a defining part of his consciousness,” in R. W. B. Lewis’s terms, as it was to better known 20th century writers of nationalism and decolonialization like Fanon, Senghor, Tagore, Neruda, Yeats, Achebe and Césaire. I believe it is also important to note that Walrond’s nationalist sentiments were well-known among members of the Harlem Renaissance literati, especially with his friend Wallace Thurman, whose novel *Infants of the Spring* (1932) posits a militant

47) C. L. R. James, “A national Purpose for Carribean Peoples,” in *At the Rendezvous of Victory*. Allison & Busby, 1984. p. 143.

character, Cedric Williams, modeled after Walrond. *Tropic Death* itself was dedicated to Casper Holstein, a Virgin Islander and ardent advocate of West Indian autocracy, who Walrond praised in a piece for *Negro World* entitled, "Casper Holstein, Champion of the Oppressed." In 1985 the late Bruce Nugent, the 'gadfly' of the Harlem Renaissance and Walrond's friend, gave this account of Walrond in an interview:

Eric convinced me to go see the Scottsboro boys. He knew I could get in to see them when no one else could. And I did. Eric knew I was a dilettante, frivolous — a gadfly, not affiliated with a cause. Eric was clever, he knew no white man would suspect me of being anything except what I am — a dilettante...One of them had all his teeth knocked out. But, it was Eric who convince me to go. Eric was a race man. He acted on what he thought. He was committed to causes, dedicated, serious. He was militant. Eric and Claude McKay were the most militant of the Renaissance group, which I think had something to do with their backgrounds, their being West Indians.⁴⁸⁾

Although Walrond had been involved with the nationalist UNIA, and Johnson's more integrationist organization, the Urban League, organizations of conflicting ideologies and orientations, Walrond was no one's disciple; he stood apart, independent of ideology or grouping, as free as Cedric Williams says, to "pursue his own individual track...choosing his own path." But like many of the Caribbean intellectuals of his generation, Walrond considered himself a member of the Left, a student of European political history, who took politics seriously, even though he always stood on the periphery of political discourse. As a writer, Walrond was unwilling to conform to or be assimilated by the various ideological or literary groupings that made up the English scene; and he especially tried to avoid the polarized ideological debates he felt to be the trademark of the early twenties in America. As a result, his relations with other writers, especially exiled writers, were restrained. With re-

48) Interview with Bruce Nugen in 1985.

spect to race, Walrond's view was that traditional parties of Whigs and Tories, Democrats and Republicans failed to confront the specificity of racism and colonialism. His distrust of Marxism kept him from embracing it as had James, or from becoming entranced by Soviet Communism like McKay. He was never influenced by Marxism or Communism but Garveyism, even though Garvey inspired a mixture of pity and pride in Walrond. C. L. R. James stated in 1984 that when he first met Walrond in England in 1929, at a lecture James was giving on the 'Colonial Question' in Manchester, James said that he began to speak to Walrond about Marx, but Walrond cut him off and told him that 'Marx was not the one. Garvey is the man.' "He pointed to Garvey and Walrond was right because we are all [pan-African nationalists] descendants of Garvey." Yet even Garveyism was not a mold in which Walrond could pour his life. The weight of Walrond's expectations and experiences — bitter experiences — could never have kept that mold intact. But the indications seem to be clear though, that what enabled Nugent and James to speak retrospectively of Walrond in the manner in which they did and what enabled Thurman to sketch Walrond the way he did was that they rightfully recognized and identified Walrond as consciously belonging to an intellectual culture of emancipatory ideals, politics and address.

As a West Indian, Walrond's life bore the living traces of colonialism, and no disruption has so characterized Caribbean colonial experience and Walrond's life as the push and pull of migratory forces. The demographic history of the Caribbean has been dominated by migration, even simple minor ones like the transition from home to school and from school to the street-life of the city. V.S. Naipaul wrote in *Finding the Center*:

Half a writer's work, though, is the discovery of his subject. And a problem for me was that my life had been varied, full of upheavals and moves: from my grandmother's Hindu house in the country, still close to the rituals and social ways

of village India; to Port of Spain, the negro G. I. life of its street, the other, ordered life of my colonial English school, which was called Queens Royal.⁴⁹⁾

This art/life intersection has been particularly pronounced in Caribbean literature and forms one of its most canonically representational features. For the subject that has engaged Caribbean writers most assiduously, as it did Walrond, the great central theme of Caribbean writers is the nexus between emigration-exile-alienation — the Caribbean diaspora. It is a leitmotif of experience that has had the most profound impact on the sensibilities of Caribbean writers and can easily be discerned in the very titles of their exilic accounts: *A Long Way From Home* (McKay), *Voyage in the Dark* (Rhys), *Return to My Native Land* (Cesaire) *The Pleasures of Exile*, *The Emigrants* (Lamming), *Another Life* (Walcott), *The Lonely Londoners* (Selvon), *The Arrivants* (Braithwaite), *Mariners, Renegades and Castaways* (James) and *The Enigma of Arrival* (Naipaul). “For Caribbean literature,” writes Gordon Lewis, “like Jewish literature, has been a literature of exile.”⁵⁰⁾ It has been a literature that has been sharpened and affirmed by self-consciousness, by what Balzac defined the novel as being: “un drame dialogue,” those inner dramas of the soul and experience. But for the Caribbean writer there has been an additional problematic. Much like Americans such as Hawthorne, Emerson, and Henry James, who felt the need to define their national individuality by measuring themselves against European culture, Caribbean writers have examined the roots of their own culture, not so much under the successive waves of European influence, as under the *domination* of Europe, which becomes for artists like Derek Walcott an implicit and invoked presence *within* so many of his poems and the poet himself: “I’m just a red nigger who love the sea,” he has

49) V. S. Naipaul, *Finding the Center*. Knopf, 1984. p. 75.

50) Gordon Lewis, *The Growth of the Modern West Indies*. Modern Reader Papers. 1968. p. 200.

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written, "I have Dutch, nigger, and English in me, /and either I'm nobody, or I'm a nation."⁵¹⁾ Walcott's meditation on the question of his being and origins, his repeated self-interrogation of the manner in which Europe has been assimilated into him physically and psychically and his attempts to dramatize this symbiosis through his own reactions as a *representative* figure of the union, between the Caribbean and the Continent leads to the very threshold of Caribbean creativity, his own and to a large extent Walrond's: a creativity identified by the quest to locate an identity and affirm it; to come to terms with the heritage of slavery and servitude; the effects of colonialism; the diaspora and migration; the relation to an underdeveloped world, its poverty and the miseries its people have suffered. All of these historical actualities have given Caribbean creativity a generating form, meaning and concentration. It has inspired an attempt to constitute, to analyse, to define as Nietzsche put it, "what one is."

This tragic dialectic of the Caribbean artist's historical experience profoundly impinged upon Walrond's life, and has been expressed most characteristically in the West Indian pattern of migrations and movements (for West Indians moving usually meant survival) which conditioned his development and character; broke up his life into separate, independent episodes as complete and geographically distinct in themselves as the countries of *Tropic Death*: his first seven years in Guiana, the next five years in Barbados, then eight years in Panama, followed by roughly eleven years in America; six years in Europe, and finally the last thirty years in England where those years form a litany of changing homes and domiciles. Such an anomalous background! So full of changes and moves, when Walrond was really in and out of places more than *of anyplace* for very long. It is understandable then, that the experience that dominated Walrond's life — migration — should become the major theme of

51) Derek Walcott, "Omeros," in *Antilles: Fragments of Epic Memory*. FS & G. 1993. p. 34.

his art. The social effects of migration (intercolonial) are at the core of *Tropic Death* and accounts for the predominance of female characters in the stories set in Barbados. The men are absent because they have all moved on to find employment or emigrated to Panama to work as 'pick and shovel' men on 'The Big Ditch,' the Panama Canal. Migration (intercontinental) accounts for the heterogeneity of the population in the tales set in Panama and Guyana, for all the "Gold Men" and "Silver Men," for all the different races and mixtures of races, for all those considered to be lesser, inferior, dependent and subject.

Did Walrond ever really come to terms with the condition of exile? In the fifties, when he is alone and ailing as a "depression casualty" in Roundway Hospital in Divizes, England, as an editor of the hospital's literary journal, his health threatened, his literary life revives. In his confinement in the same county of Wiltshire, where Naipaul in *The Enigma of Arrival* found a setting that gave him "the impression of space, unoccupied land, the beginning of things,"⁵²⁾ Walrond searches out his own origins. He sets down to write stories as though he is uncovering himself bit by bit, starting with the center, the Caribbean. He does not write from an original and creative relationship to art: he writes to understand the meaning of his experience, of his life, and the life around him. His writing has a different meaning to him now from what it had near its beginning when he wrote *Tropic Death*. Writing now near the end of his life becomes an act of life: an act to prolong it, to reach out and engage what there remained of it. The fact of mortality, the imminence of death, the theme of *Tropic Death*, now becoming a lived reality, of the closing off of life's precious chances for change and achievement, came home to Walrond with instructive force. Walrond's sickness became a source of renewal, a period which inspired his greatest productivity since his Renaissance days in New

52) V. S. Naipaul, *The Enigma of Arrival*. Knopf, 1987. p.

York. The ambitions of the past like his youth are now gone, so, there is a nostalgic mode to which his writing in this period belongs. With sympathetic intuition he writes stories like "Cardiff Bound." The story is of colonial lives washed up (in all senses of the term) like flotsam into postwar Britain; and "From Georgetown to Roundway," the title itself a summation of his life, a life spent on the move from the very margins of empire to its center. His vision turns inward and backward. The locus of his imagination settles on retracing his migratory trail after the order of his experiences. His method is both chronological and developmental moving as it does from childhood, adolescence, maturity and senescence beginning with his birthplace and boyhood in Guyana in "A Piece of Hard Tack"; to Barbados in "The Servant Girl"; to Panama in "Morning in Colon"; and onward to America in "Success Story," and finally to London in "By the River Avon." All these stories express in various ways what Nietzsche explained in *Untimely Meditations*, "my innermost history, my *becoming*." Also the disjunction to unbecoming: the emergence of this writing is marking the end. Walrond's life was drawing to a close, the fragments of his past, the pieces of his life marking the progression and passage of his migratory life back to its earliest being and beginning were now being pieced together by the most powerful force that reined in his life: his art, his mission which were one and the same. But there is a constancy to this motif of movement: the Caribbean has become the site of origin and return. Walrond keeps what Richard Ellmann has called an "observing consciousness" as he peers out from his sanatorium like Hans Castorp in *The Magic Mountain*, brooding over the structure of exile, of the afflicted and alienated humanity, some of whom are alienated like himself, by nationality and color. Or, like Gerald at the dock at Bridgetown, the lonely young observer of life peering past the visible world of the disinherited and dislocated children, to the unseen world beyond where his father is, as he awaits his arrival

home. Or, perhaps, Walrond's vision is more impending and penetrating, more akin to Isaiah's, the great moral observer, when the prophet came to the port city of Tarkish, looked out over the stranded ships in the harbor — at the ships that never sailed.

Early in his life, Walrond lost something which he tried to transform and replace with words. But words could not replace the estrangement he had experienced when a youth, and then the pain and disillusionment of a failed marriage. Nor would words relieve the guilt that would come to burden and haunt Walrond's life in his latter years. He had abandoned a young, loving and devoted wife just when she needed him most — when she was pregnant. Like Sherwood Anderson, Walrond had sacrificed wife and family in the name of a "Muse," as his youngest daughter described it, that lead him away from the most important things in his life, things he was never able to recover or restore, less of all redeem. He would never be able to atone for depriving his daughters of their father when they were children, girls, young women and mothers: Decades, formative years, entire young lives passed away in silence and indifference from their father. He deprived Edith's life of happiness. He was responsible for plunging her life into long years of tears and bitterness, of cutting and wounding her so deeply, she never healed. Sonya in *Crime and Punishment* tells Raskolnikov to confess not just to the police in private, but to confess publicly, by kneeling down in the street to acknowledge his sin before the passing multitudes. Who could Walrond tell, if he could tell at all? Not long after Edith's departure, Walrond wrote to Carl Van Vechten in February, 1925. Walrond gives an interior view as he confides to Van Vechten in cathartic frankness, free now of domestic constraints but troubled by the particularity of those things which gave him pain and pleasure. The impulse to confess is there as his statements betray and the need to be consoled from the torments of his conscience, which he wants to transmute into some compre-

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hension or reconciliation with himself; some movement of moral-psychological re-evaluation, as critic and judge. He sums himself up.

I wonder if there is any way in the world for me to make amends. I am such a terrible searcher after things that are not always clear to me that I myself half of the time do not know what I am going to say or do next. It is a sorry condition to be in, I suppose, but it will probably mean that half of the people whom I care about most in the world will sooner or later pass me up entirely or graciously and charitably let it go at that...All of which is sometimes quite distressing to me. I have however managed to effect an escape in my work and the multitudinous things I am fond of, such as bumming around Harlem, sitting at the feet of women like Rose McClendon or absorbed in the inimitable chatter flying about one in an unabashed Negro Cabaret...⁵³⁾

“I wonder if there is any way in the world to make amends.” That is a significant admission. Whatever *daimon* drove Walrond to seek and to fulfill that singular “higher necessity” — it is safe to say he was misled. Perhaps he felt challenged to embody Nietzsche’s dictum that there was “no drearier and more repulsive creature than the man who has evaded his genius.”⁵⁴⁾ Perhaps. But we do not believe Walrond with reason and will ever found what he was looking for. Roughly a decade later, in 1940, he writes to Moe Allen, Secretary General of the Guggenheim Foundation to give an account of what had happened to his Guggenheim project, the letter full of the animus of *Kunstlerschuld*, (“artist-guilt”): “Unfortunately, as a depression casualty I have had my ups and downs; my quest for security in a world in which nothing is stable led me astray. Yet even now, everything more insecure than ever before, all my energies are being directed towards one end, namely to produce something which would in some small measure justify the confidence which the Founda-

53) Letter to Carl Van Vechten, in the Walrond papers, 1925.

54) Frederick Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy & Genealogy of Morals*. Doubleday, 1956. p. 212.

tion has generously reposed in me twelve years ago!"⁵⁵⁾ Writing to Moe Allen again in 1954: "still endeavoring to adhere to the project."⁵⁶⁾ And again in 1960, now with a time lapse of thirty years, the moral debt weighing heavily upon him, *The Big Ditch* never abandoned but never finished, he writes, "to try somehow and get on with some of my own long-neglected work...In spite of age and years of silence I have not lost sight of my objectives, or the high aims with which I set out as a Guggenheim Fellow such a long time ago."⁵⁷⁾

"Set out," the term is so telling. Like many of his generation and background Walrond set out like his 'Silver Men' on that old and timeless quest for a better life, or like the classical hero, on a quest for some elusive fleece or grail. A quest it would have appeared to have been accompanied by the archetypal tropes of redemption and moral edification, but Walrond found neither. Nor did fair winds bring him to shore or back home. Instead, the completing narrative circle of his life constituted a kind of final telos of waste, regret and unhappiness, so familiar a contour in the lives of his contemporaries in the Harlem Renaissance. But also, Walrond's life parallels many of the protagonists of the nineteenth century novel whose lives are compelled to follow after the fulfillment of dreams and ambitions which Fate is not inclined to smile kindly upon. Thomas Hardy's *Jude the Obscure* comes most readily to mind. Jude Fawley, like Eric Walrond was an ambitious, driven young man who marries a woman to whom he is ill-matched, who did not understand the complex pressures working in him. Jude has aspirations to be a scholar, Walrond to be a writer. Both wanted in to something they were denied. Both moved out and away from places and families and feelings which remained rooted inside them for life. Both were dreamers, relentless seekers,

55) Letter to Moe Allen, in the Guggenheim Foundation Files on Walrond, May, 1940.

56) *ibid.* November, 1954.

57) *ibid.* August, 1960.

whose illusions, old timeless illusions of loving fulfillment, personal satisfaction, human need and impulse eventually collide with a reality they themselves do not seem to understand or fully comprehend. They spend years wandering around, only to end their days in obscurity, the object of their ambitions unattained, their dreams of distinction and accomplishment unrealized. The idea of a vocation thwarted or damaged by a mistaken marriage is a theme in Walrond's unpublished first novel *Brine*, his confessional, his *Bildungsroman*, his expressed struggle to find himself when he was still in his twenties and still married, but a theme we can relate back to the notion of conflict in *Tropic Death*, to what Auerbach called "the ardor of the dramatic human struggle"⁵⁸⁾ the book represents.

In Christmas 1965, Walrond sends Langston Hughes a Christmas card. It was his last Christmas. Gone is the assertive, angular style of his former handwriting. Instead, the penmanship reveals a writer enfeebled with weakness and strain. "What a pleasant surprise, hearing from you! Ever since Arna Bontemps wrote that you were getting out an anthology of *Negro Short Stories*, I've had you very much in my thoughts. Many thanks for *Simple's Uncle Sam* with its treasured inscription, and the Christmas card. I will certainly be on the look out for 'The Prodigal Son' when he should come to London."⁵⁹⁾

Like 'The Prodigal Son,' a parable of departure, of loss, and of return, Walrond always had the longing of the emigrant and exile but was never able to achieve what the title of Thomas Hardy's novel was meant to convey in thought and feeling by, the return of the native. And even though he made a life for himself in England, he was never able to pick up the literary career he left behind in America. As a writer in England, Walrond lived in obscurity.

58) Eric Auerbach, *Mimesis*. Princeton University Press, 1953. p. 190.

59) Letter from Langston Hughes, in the Walrond papers, December, 1965.

He was unsuccessful in carving out for himself even a modest literary career. Only now and then filling in as a ghost writer here or guest editor there or an occasional anthologist of the work of other writers. Certainly, Walrond never succeeded in reaping any of the financial and critical rewards, to say nothing of the formidable achievements of a later, succeeding generation of Caribbean emigre writers claimed for themselves: Derek Walcott, the 1992 Nobel laureate in literature; V. S. Naipaul, knighthood, The Booker Prize, England's highest literary honor. Walcott and Naipaul lived by their writing, held visiting professorships in American faculties, lived to see dissertations written about their work and translations of it into other languages. Naipaul produced novels, essays and travel writing and was given space for his opinion on the cultural pages of newspapers and magazines on topics far beyond his expertise. Walcott's plays have been staged in leading performing arts centers throughout the world. But though Walrond stayed with the written word, he was left to be content solely with his legacy in the Harlem Renaissance, and like so many of Dicken's characters, a humdrum business career as an accountant in a trading house. "I have *dreamed* much," wrote Flaubert to George Sand, "and *done* very little."⁵⁸ Walrond's own sense of failure at his creative achievements, his great but incomplete summa on the Panama Canal never published, when it had occupied the greater part of his life, through all of its storm-tossed modalities, was in the end less a composition than his Calvary, his hangman. The massive deliberation in which he had chosen to write *The Big Ditch* only served to challenge Walrond until his death and gave the closing years of his life a penal character, like someone who has been condemned to death; someone always living with that *worry*, that dishonor: *The Big Ditch*, becoming like hard labor, *compulsory*, obligatory, enforced, a moral torture that placed an internal strain on him that could be construed as the root cause of the several heart attacks he suffered in the sixties and the one that finally killed him. This

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failure of satisfactory completion and closure rather than creation also raises the question of why Walrond vacillated and hesitated and *failed* to make up his mind to publish the work before it was too late. His reluctance to publish the work was a source of continuing conflict for him throughout his life and an issue of concern for others interested in its subject. In 1941, W. E. B. DuBois responds to an inquiry by a reporter from the Canal Zone on the need for a "study of the Isthmian Negro scene": "Answering your letter of November 18, I think there is no doubt of the need of a study of the Negro on the Isthmus. Eric Walrond once planned and partially finished a study called *The Big Ditch* which treated the Panama Canal and the various West Indian Negroes who worked on it. I have often wondered what became of that manuscript."⁶⁰ Twenty years later DuBois will have part of that lingering question resolved, as Walrond relates his encounter with the scholar in a letter.

Last October at the funeral of a mutual friend [George Padmore] I met Richard Wright for the first time. Later in the year Dr. W. E. B. DuBois was passing through London, and through a mutual Dutch friend [Rosey Poole] I had the pleasure of meeting him, also for the first time.

The solicitude of both Richard Wright and Dr. DuBois appeared early, and they both wanted to know in particular what had happened to "The Big Ditch". This was a reference to a project I have been under a crushing moral obligation to carry through to success, before I could begin to feel really free aesthetically within myself: that is, to write the story of what happened to the French in Panama.

I did not tell either Richard Wright or Dr. DuBois that the initial effort, which I once inflicted upon you and for which I hope you have forgiven me, was poorly conceived, based upon inadequate research and hurriedly produced.⁶¹

Walrond had a lifetime to set *The Big Ditch* on course. What really

60) Letter from W. E. B. DuBois in the W. E. B. DuBois file at the Schomburg collection, New York Public Library. December, 1941.

61) Letter from Walrond to Moe Allen, in the Guggenheim Foundation files on Walrond. August 1960.

happened? The late critic Sterling Brown said that "The Big Ditch had been suppressed."⁶²⁾ It is difficult to tell. Yet in its largest dimension, this question of Walrond's failure to fulfill his early and brilliant promise is best answered by the specifics of exile and ethnography; of Walrond's complex position as an author writing about the Caribbean to an audience who invariably saw the Caribbean as the backwater of natives; to his complex relationship to the Caribbean itself, between a way of looking at life, as observer and chronicler, and the fact of actual separation from it. To a degree, distance has never separated a writer from their subject, but there is a difference between *Tropic Death* and the stories written in the twenties which are set in a Caribbean emotionally closer and engaged, and the stories he wrote much later in England; the stories he left with his friend, the Dutch publisher Paul Bremen for publication, before Walrond died; stories of return, of re-visiting and re-interpreting the kind of ontogenetic history Walcott has evoked in *Another Life*, Braithwaite in *Rites of Passage*.

With *Tropic Death's* success Walrond had tried to extend and develop materials that had first inspired the book. The energies and interests generated by his Caribbean identification were sufficiently strong to sustain his attention, for the Caribbean world remained so much a part of his artistic memory that he had little difficulty in returning to it again and again. But once in England there was again the reality of rejection, the essence of which was directly linked to the ideology which held that blacks were an inferior race and that their culture was not inherently worthy of either preservation or respect. And this was a problem. For a directing spirit for Walrond was his desire to draw attention to an actual phase of Caribbean history which had gone largely unrecorded but which was undoubtedly there, as the peasants were *there* on the land, in the territories *Tropic Death* encompasses. It was especially im-

62) Interview with Sterling Brown, Wesleyan University. Fall 1984.

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portant to Walrond that he speak for the many who never got to speak for themselves in recorded ways, knowing full-well that they would not be readers of their own story. *Tropic Death*, the first collection of short stories on the pan-Caribbean had no antecedent in Caribbean literature. In it Walrond abstracted a fragment of the social history of the West Indians who emigrated to the Canal Zone, making an inclusion of people hitherto unacknowledged and unwritten about, or at best observed from a distance. *Tropic Death's* diversity aspired to integrate the various experiences of Walrond's early life into one coherent vision, a comprehension of its nature, a consciousness of who he was and where he had come from, and what his people were as they struggled to determine themselves.

Walrond's final journey ended on the morning of September 9th when he had a heart attack in a London train station. His death mirrored the way that he had spent half of his peripatetic life — in transit, on the move, between points of arrival and departure. *Tropic Death* begins and ends with the motif of arrival and departure. Even in death the confluence of Walrond's life and art formed a coherent continuum. The conclusion of Walrond's life, like the concluding scene of *Tropic Death*, reveals men whose illnesses forces them to come to grips with their lives, with the feelings of inadequacy, personal failure and unrealized potential that is so much a part of a destiny we all share, even if we have never experienced the social structure that made and marked their lives. There can be no doubt at all of Walrond's awareness of this or that he came to project these failures and tragedies into a fatalism, a common human condition. At the end of *Tropic Death* there is the physical reality of Lucien and Sarah together, the husband returned to the wife, the father come home to the family but on the verge of imminent departure again. It is significant that we see them this way for the whole emotional direction of stories in this book is towards insular, separated individuals who move in a circular path

from conflict to conflict, crisis to crisis; individuals living with the difficulties of being divided from what they love, deprived of what they need, disappointed by what they cannot change. This depersonalization is not just a process of development in characters, but aspects of Walrond's own experience which he has reconstituted and attributed to his creation: Lucien returned to his family, reconciled to his family. Through this persona, Walrond's enacts an identification of real relations and suffering, an exposure of his feelings through the imaginative process. Walrond returns imaginatively to his family, which is his acknowledgement of the self-reflexive nature of art, his recognition that art like love is redemptive. This structure of feeling was an integral part of a nostalgia Walrond never relinquished for the Caribbean of his childhood, the love of a place more than any other, an identification that was so evident, so essential, and so enduring for him and to his art, an art he made uniquely his own and ours.

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