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Existentialism *avant la lettre*: revisiting Henri Fauconnier and *The Soul of Malaya* in a wider context

Wilhelm Snyman^{a*}

^a School of Languages & Literatures; University of Cape Town; P/Bag X3; Rondebosch, 7707; Cape Town, South Africa.

ABSTRACT

The contention in this paper is that Henri Fauconnier's renowned novel *The Soul of Malaya* (*Malaisie*) written and set in colonial Malaya, deserves a closer reading within the context of the Modernist genre, and beyond. The novel's wider significance often has been overlooked in favour of viewing it as symptomatic of a colonial mindset. In part this is a fair assessment, but there are other aspects of this award-winning novel that deserve a deeper exploration and hence a wider readership and scholarship. Fauconnier's novel echoes much of what was to come after him. While the novel merits inclusion into the Modernist canon, *Malaisie* also – takes the reader of Camus, for example, into familiar territory. Existentialism and *Dasein* ("Being in the World") are central concerns which are deftly explored and articulated in this remarkable homage to humanity's quest for meaning.

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*Corresponding Author: Wilhelm Snyman. Tel.: +27216502683

E-mail address: Wilhelm.snyman@uct.ac.za

When the head-hunters were troublesome in the old days he set out to chastise them with a thrill of pride in his own behaviour (Maugham, W. Somerset, 2000:60).

The search for a place of perfection lies at the heart of the present discussion on Henri Fauconnier (1879-1973), an author who put Malaya, British colonial Malaya that is, at the heart of his foray into literature. It is this search – and, more specifically – the frustrated search for a perfect world, and the belief that at least a better world can exist – that lie at the heart of what one can call the “literature of impasse”.

Many authors we would describe as Modernist, explore the “dystopia” that the modern world had become. Fauconnier, like many of his contemporaries and those that came before and after him, is also concerned with the dystopia that is the world, and like them, he had lived through the First World War. In many respects, *The Soul of Malaya* or *Malaisie* to give it its French title, can be read as a reaction to that watershed conflict. Fauconnier lived through that war, and the war forms the catalyst of his novel. He only wrote one major novel, and some short stories in a collection entitled *Visions*. However, despite his primary professional involvement being in rubber planting, his only novel won him the prestigious Prix de Goncourt in 1930. And, except in Malaysia, he is largely a forgotten figure. He never achieved canonical status and yet, there is much to suggest that he deserves recognition, beyond the confines of “colonial literature”. He also deserves recognition beyond some of the reductive approaches that prefer to see him as an exemplar of the “Eurocentricism” which does often mar an accurate reflection of lands beyond Europe or North America.

In Fauconnier’s *Malaisie*, we see not so much a utopia as such, but a reaction against the dystopia that Europe had become for the author:

Non, je ne m’étonnais plus de vivre dans un autre monde qui était devenu le mien bien plus que l’Europe (Fauconnier, Bernard, 2003: 68). [No, I wasn’t surprised to be living in another world, that had become mine, much more so than Europe (author’s translation).]

Malaisie is as much about the First World War as it is about Malaya in that *Malaisie* is an obvious reaction to the cataclysmic dystopia of the First World War:

La guerre ne se raconte pas, dit mon père, elle se vit jusqu’à la mort pour la plupart. Blessés dans leur chair ou dans leur âme, ceux qui survivent, ne peuvent oublier les instants de souffrance dégradante qu’ils ont subis. Certains les rabâchent toute leur vie à la grande exaspération de leurs proches, enfants et petits-enfants, d’autres se taisent pour la vie mais en rêvent toutes les nuits d’atroces cauchemars. Le subconscient ne les lâche pas et les torture. Je fus de ceux-là. [...] Je l’ai seulement évoquée au début et à la fin de “Visions”, et une fois au commencement de “*Malaisie*” pour introduire l’histoire (Fauconnier, B., 2003: 113). [One doesn’t talk about the war, my father said; for the most part one lives it until death. Wounded in their flesh and in their soul, those who survive, cannot forget the moments of degrading suffering that they endured. Of course it gnaws at them for their entire lives, to the exasperation of those close to them, their children and grandchildren, others keep quiet about it but the dream about it every night in dreadful nightmares. The subconscious does not cease to torture them. I was among those. [...] I only mentioned the war at the beginning and at the end of *Visions* and once at the beginning of *Malaisie* to introduce the story (author’s translation).]

The world that Fauconnier evokes rekindles a long tradition of exoticism in French literature, which Henri Fauconnier (as recounted to his son, Bernard) alludes to when recalling his experience of Malaya: “Je commençais à m’habituer à l’exotisme, à mieux le percevoir, les yeux moins écarquillés” (Fauconnier, B.,

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