For the most part of the nineteenth century, the relation between romance and imperialism was symbiotic: imperial expansion provided new sites and material for literary romances. Nevertheless, as the rationalizing processes that eradicated adventure at home began reaching remote corners of the world, imperialism suddenly became the enemy of romance. This study attempts to reassess Henri Fauconnier’s *Malaisie* (1930), a novel that was canonized at the time of its publication for its literary mission to re-evaluate colonial realities. To a certain extent Fauconnier’s narrative does articulate a model of romance that exposed the absurdity and vanity of political engagement and the superiority of spiritual to imperial vocations. However, while *Malaisie* may have represented the Other space as testing ground for self-illumination and spiritual re-awakening my reading exposes the complexities and ambiguities that characterize literary geographies of adventure.

In 1909, Pierre Mille, writer, journalist and critic claimed that French colonial literature was non-existent. Mille dismissed the works of Pierre Loti, Claude Farrère, Jules Boissière etc. as “littérature du tourisme colonial,” and harshly criticized the lyrical sentimentalism of these authors. He firmly felt that they were but unimaginative imitations of the characteristic styles of more renowned Romanticists like Chateaubriand, Bernadin St Pierre, Leconte de Lisle etc.1 Mille’s reaction may have appeared harsh but as a matter of fact, during the period 1930–35, representations of colonialism did undergo an

important transformation in a number of French novels by writers like Rolan Dorgelès, Léon Werth, André Gide and André Malraux who contributed to the creation of a new kind of exotic literature.\(^2\) The success of Henri Fauconnier’s *Malaisie* \(^3\) which won the Prix Goncourt in 1930\(^4\) attests this renewed interest in literary colonialism and exoticism at the time.

The exotic nature of *Malaisie’s* locale was indeed alluring, but the apparent ethno-philosophical dimension of the novel won Fauconnier the accolades. Most critics like Jean Vignaud believed fervently that unlike exotic novelists, Henri Fauconnier, “grand poète de la prose ethno-philosophique”\(^5\) had made a sincere attempt to “penetrate” the beliefs and the poetic secrets and the very soul of the natives:

Nous n’avons pas affaire ici à l’un de ces romanciers exotiques, de ces touristes amateurs qui traverse un pays comme un train et note ce qu’il aperçoit d’une portière ou d’une fenêtre de palais, mais à un homme …qui loin de chercher dans les indigènes des dissemblances, s’efforce de les aimer pour les comprendre et apprend leur langue pour pénétrer les secrets de leur poésie, de leurs croyances, de leurs âmes…”\(^6\)

The autobiographical nature of the experiences recounted in the narrative could have contributed in part towards the popularity and instant recognition that the author earned.\(^7\) Henri Fauconnier was a very successful planter in Malaya. He arrived in the region in 1905; by 1906 he had invested in two rubber plantations and in 1910 the “Société des Plantations Fauconnier & Posth was founded in Brussels. Arguably, the autobiographical links and the colonial realism of the texts contributed to enhancing the ultimate literary value of *Malaisie*. At the same time, as a canonized text *Malaisie*, also had the power to affect popular perceptions of real places and peoples.\(^8\) The power to write is linked to the power to map and to affirm certain readings of the landscape. For the most part of the nineteenth century, the relation between romance and imperialism was symbiotic in that the imperial expansion provided new sites and material for literary romances. Nevertheless, as the rationalizing processes that eradicated adventure at home began reaching remote corners of the world, imperialism suddenly became the enemy of romance. This study argues that at a point in French literary history, when the roman exotique was considered a decadent genre, *Malaisie* invited the readers to re-enter unrationalized zones

\(^2\) Copin calls it “une étape importante dans le renouvellement de l’exotisme.” Copin (1996), 90.
\(^4\) It is no coincidence then if in 1930 both *Malaisie* and *La Voie royale* had competed for the prestigious Prix Goncourt. While Fauconnier achieved this recognition with his first work, Malraux had to wait three more years for his Goncourt. The political events in Indochina around 1928–1930 (the peasant revolt, the Yen Bay massacre etc.) may have had a part to play in choosing a novel with a more politically neutral setting.
\(^6\) “Prix Goncourt” in Fauconnier (1996), 222.
\(^7\) See Pierre Labrousse “Retour en Malaisie de Henri Fauconnier” in *Archipel*, 54, 1997, 221. Labrousse provides biographical details of the “planter”. Labrousse in his own words has based his reading of the text as “une entreprise de reconquête de sa liberté par un écrivain” on information retrieved from family archives (correspondence, press reviews etc).