

Postcards from Venice: Life and the City
in Paul Morand's *Venises*

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Reading and writing about autobiography is slippery business these days. Indeed, all forms of what might be termed “nominal” writing, texts that take as their object the elucidation of a proper name or names, have today been rendered elusive by the now-commonplace *mise en question* of the sign, and of the signifier in particular. Of course it is not so much the texts themselves that have changed as the reader and his or her level of confidence in the word. Hyper-tuned to the shifting modes of a writer’s conscious or unconscious rhetorical strategies and to the uncontrollable movement of the signifying process itself, today’s critical readers seem particularly attracted to that last frontier of referentiality: the proper name, as evidenced by the flurry of interest in autobiography and travel writing, for instance, over the past two decades. It has been an enterprise fraught with anxiety in its passage toward that postmodern destruction of the only remaining and most personal of defenses against the realization of a fragmented self: the assurance of identity, whether that of a person, place, or object, conferred by the name. But it proves to be an oddly exhilarating enterprise as well, as both the readers and writers of these texts explore and experiment with the possibilities opened up by the liberation, as it were, of the signifier.

A case in point is Paul Morand’s 1971 book *Venises*. An odd choice, at least at first glance, since Morand is probably best known as a thoroughly modernist and rather dilettantish writer-

cum-diplomat of the political right. And yet in *Venises* Morand plays with many of the ideas dear to poststructuralist and postmodern theory even as the text ultimately serves as caution to these theories by demonstrating once again that, in certain hands and under certain circumstances, the most liberating and exhilarating literary techniques can serve purposes far less admirable. Yes, *techniques*, for what Morand essentially does in *Venises* is to explicitly and self-consciously set into motion a slippery slope of referentiality, presenting the reader with a veritable onslaught of proper names that sparks a chain reaction of signification, the most obvious being that of Venice, quite possibly one of the most "significant" names in Western European literary history.

Representing a sort of hybrid genre, straddling autobiography and travel writing, *Venises* presents the reader not only with the proper names of Venice and Morand, but with a potentially inexhaustive effect of multiplication, encoded in the title, of both these names/signifiers. Venice, in its historical, artistic, political, and literary manifestations, produces a seemingly endless string of signifiers, just as the name Morand elicits, in the book, a plurality of Morands: adolescent, writer, diplomat, cosmopolite, globe-trotter, dilettante, Académicien, old man, and so on. Ironically, however, the one Morand that today most quickly springs to mind is absent: Morand the antisemite, xenophobe, and collaborator with the Vichy government.¹ And it is here that Morand's book begins to feel slippery, here in an elision or an absence that, after all, may well be the very site of the referent itself. *Venises* is, I argue, a literary enactment of the dispersal of the signifier figured in the dispersal of the self at the very moment of its consolidation. In the pages that follow, I trace Morand's simultaneous construction and destruction of the notion of a referential self as he pieces together his life in and around the city of Venice. By exploiting the complementary genres of autobiography and travel writing, in their positing of relations between the past and the present and between time and space, Morand creates a dialogue between the city and the self, an exchange facilitated by the hydraulic city of Venice.² For one might say that Morand, like Proust,

“does not say Venice by chance” (Tanner xvi) as he capitalizes on the ever-receding signifier of Venice in order to provide a space in which to elide that self, Morand the collaborator, that he wishes to disappear amid the pluralities of his city of Venice. I ultimately argue that this pluralistic relationship of the self and the city and its consequent “disappearing act” consciously implicates both the position and the experience of the reader not only of *Venises* but of nominal texts in general. Let us thus begin at the beginning with Morand’s initial problematizing of the relation of his life to the city of Venice.

Toute existence est une lettre postée anonymement; la mienne porte trois cachets: Paris, Londres, Venise; le sort m’y fixa, souvent à mon insu, mais certes pas à la légère.

Every existence is a letter posted anonymously; mine bears three postmarks: Paris, London, Venice; fate placed me there, often without my knowledge, but never capriciously. (8)

In the first sentence of *Venises*, Paul Morand signals a deliberate confusion of one of the traditional suppositions governing the genre of autobiography. Morand compares every existence, every life, and thus his life, to a letter mailed anonymously, a letter sent without return address. There is, then, no indication on the envelope, nor perhaps on the letter inside, of whom that existence belongs to. In contrast to the assurance of identity characteristic of more traditional autobiographies, life, or rather the task of representing one’s own, here emerges as an experience of depersonalization whose process and product forbid the attachment of a name: its author and/or subject’s name.

At the same time, a deeper issue seems to be at stake. The anonymity may also refer to an unknown: existence as a letter written or sent by an unidentifiable other, by someone or something else. This reading of Morand’s sentence is supported by his reference to a destiny (“le sort”) which operates without Morand’s knowledge (“à mon insu”). He would thus claim a certain innocence of or blindness not only to the workings of destiny but the purpose and meaning of his existence as well.

But Morand's letter does bear an identifying mark, three in fact, in the form of the postmarks of three cities: "la mienne porte trois cachets: Paris, Londres, Venise" 'mine bears three postmarks: paris, London, Venice.' Morand seems to suggest that the only name affixed, the only signature, is that of a city or cities. That the postmark might be called upon to stand in for the signature of the sender and/or author is supported by Morand's use of the term "cachet." In the modern age, this word refers primarily to the mark affixed, either by hand or by machine, to an envelope in order to indicate the place and date of its mailing. A "cachet" also, however, denotes what may otherwise be described as a "seal," an imprint bearing the insignia (e.g. coat-of-arms) or initials of its sender. In Morand's phrase, the modern, technological practice of the postmark does the work of its ancestor, the seal: the place and time of the postmark replace the seal as the "sign" of the sender.

In Morand's book *Venises*, however, it is a question not so much of the replacement of the one by the other as of a metaphorical substitution such that an implied tautology is created, on one level, between Morand and the city. For if Morand proposes to talk about his life by revealing, in essence, selected excerpts of the letter, he does so in a work that is as much a portrait of a city as a self portrait. Early in the book, Morand clearly signals an autobiographical intention and describes the parameters of this intention as eminently partial:

"C'est après la pluie qu'il faut voir Venise," répétait Whistler: c'est après la vie que je reviens m'y contempler. . . . Venise, ce n'est pas toute ma vie, mais quelques morceaux de ma vie, sans liens entre eux; les rides de l'eau s'effacent, les miennes pas.

"One must see Venice after the rain," repeated Whistler: it is after life that I return to contemplate myself in the city. Venice is not all of my life, but several scattered pieces of my life; the wrinkles on the water disappear, mine do not. (9-10)

Then, immediately following this statement of autobiographical intent, "I return there to contemplate myself," Morand continues with a phrase belonging more to the genre of travel writing or city portrait, commenting on the very idea of writing about Venice:

Je reste insensible au ridicule d'écrire sur Venise à l'heure où même la primauté de Londres et de Paris n'est plus qu'un souvenir, où les centres nerveux du monde sont des lieux sauvages: Djakarta, Saïgon, Katanga, Quemoy. . . .

I remain indifferent to the absurdity of writing about Venice at a time when even the preeminence of London or Paris is no more than a memory, when the nervous centers of the world are uncivilized places: Djakarta, Saïgon, Katanga, Quemoy. . . . (10)

Venises represents a sort of hybrid genre, both self-portrait and city portrait, one which will exploit possibilities available to each. Hence one of the pluralities signalled by the title: *Venises* is Morand and Venice, autobiography and travel writing.

It is fitting that Morand should choose to write about his life by writing about a city. All of his literary works, in one way or another, are about travel: voyages across space, in his earlier works, and voyages through time, in his post-war prose. He himself spent the greater part of his life traveling. He began publishing his travel journals in 1926 with *Rien que la terre*, the account of his 1925-26 voyage around the world via the Far East. This was the first of many such records of his numerous travels which would soon earn him the reputation of "globe-trotter": after the Orient, Africa and *Paris-Tombouctou* in 1928; in 1929, the West Indies and *Hiver-Caraïbe*. During the thirties, Morand turned to city portraits: *New York* (1930), *Londres* (1933), and *Bucharest* (1935). A fourth portrait, *Paris* (1997), was not published during his lifetime. Indeed, his life and works might be characterized as one long travelogue. The form of *Venises* itself reflects this itinerant tendency: "Venise, ce n'est pas toute ma vie, mais quelques morceaux de ma vie, sans lien entre eux" 'Venice is not all of my life, but several scattered pieces of my life,' (10). The book is composed of a series of fragments, each bearing a notation of place and date, as if imitating entries in a travel journal.

The initial gesture of disassociation from or depersonalization of his existence opens a space for his exploitation of the postmark of the city. *Venises*, then, may be read not only as a travel journal, but more specifically as a letter or series of letters from Venice, autobiographical in nature, each fragment of the text bear-

ing its own “postmark” in the form of a time and place notation. Or perhaps one should speak of postcards from Venice, depicting, on the one side, scenes from Venice and, on the other side, scenes from a life. Jacques Derrida’s comment “je suis une carte postale” ‘I am a postcard’ may, if not in its philosophical implications for Derrida’s reading of Freud, at least in its structure, repeat Morand’s gesture (Derrida 41).

Equally, Derrida’s explanation of his attraction to postcards is not without resonance in Morand’s project: “Ce que j’aime dans la carte postale, c’est que même sous enveloppe, c’est fait pour circuler comme une lettre ouverte mais illisible” ‘What I like about the post card is that even in an envelope, it is meant to circulate like an open but unreadable letter’ (16). Gregory Ulmer, reviewing Derrida’s book, speculates on what Derrida’s terms, in general, mean:

The post card and the signature (the proper name) share the character of being both readable and unreadable—the post card circulates, its message exposed to anyone who looks, but, whether because of the excess or the poverty of the message, it is meaningless (without interest) to all, even to the signer and recipient, who understand it to say no more than “I am here.” (Ulmer 42)

Without pretending that such an explanation exhausts all possible elements of what would no doubt be labelled today a “postcard theory,” the idea that one motivation for sending a post card is merely to say “I am here,” that is, literally, that “I am in the place depicted on the ‘front’ of the postcard,” is highly relevant as regards Morand’s text. Such a description parallels Morand’s evocation of the anonymity of existence in that there is no meaning or explanation of existence except in the message (the cachet) that “I am (was) here.” What Morand proposes to do in this book is to explain or describe the “I” in terms of the “here,” such that the “here” provides a meaningful structure to the “I.” “I am here” takes on a totalizing reflexivity and the postcards from Venice become, for Morand, as tautological as the signature. At the same time, this formulation, of course, brings into play the very notion of reference, rendering the signifiers “I” and “here” as unstable individually as in their reciprocal slippage.

Just as this formulation (I am here) figures the spatial relationship, inherent in the genre of travel writing, between Morand and the city, Morand simultaneously exploits a similar exchange, this time operating on a temporal plane, furnished by the genre of autobiography: namely, the generally if only recently accepted notion of the problematic relationship between the writer of the autobiography and the subject. It is not my intention here to explicitly open the question of identity, a problem extensively treated by Philippe Lejeune, among others.³ Rather, I would like to focus briefly on the issue as one of temporality: of the temporal distance between the writing subject and the subject written about, a distinction which may be thought of in terms of an autobiographical present and a represented past.

In *Venises*, Morand both accentuates and blurs such a distinction, as he offers a portrait of both what he was and what he is. The dual nature of such a project is mirrored by the text, on one level, in the dual generic status of *Venises* as both self-portrait and city portrait, the one a story of time (the time of Morand's life) and the other of place. The structure of the text itself figures such a duality in another way, more directly related to the present/past dialectic earlier noted. The fragments composing the text are, as I mentioned, preceded by a notation of their date and are arranged in chronological order. And yet within many of the fragments, Morand takes great liberty with chronology, persistently jumping both backward and forward in time within the individual fragments. Such a *va-et-vient* between the past and the present is characteristic of what Michel Beaujour has termed the "autoportrait," a genre, Beaujour argues, that distinguishes itself by just such chronological fluidity (Beaujour 9). Beaujour holds that while autobiography presents a biography, or life story progressing from birth to death, essentially a story of development, the autoportrait, on the other hand, constitutes instead a portrait of the subject in the present, with references to the past offered simply as explanations or illustrations of the present self. Consequently, the image of that self is characteristically introduced, at the beginning of the autoportrait, as what Beaujour calls a "void," an empty figure that the ensuing portrait will flesh out, and to which it will give both form and meaning (Beaujour 9).

Morand does indeed characterize his existence as a void, much as all existence emerges as anonymous in the opening sentence. His choice of Venice is logically justified since, in Morand's vision, the city too is literally situated in a void: "Venise résume dans son espace contraint ma durée sur terre, située elle aussi au milieu du vide, entre les eaux foetales et celles du Styx" "Venice sums up, in its constricted space, my time on earth; the city situated as well between the fetal waters and those of the Styx" (9). Morand binds his life and Venice in a sweeping identification of the spatial and the temporal, reminiscent of the time/place notation of the postmark, and then launches both into a void representing life as an empty space between birth and death. The literal and figurative exploitation of the waters of Venice, as both the actual waters feeding and draining the lagoon *and* the symbolic waters of birth and of the mythological river of death, situates Morand's metaphor in a sort of watery limbo, neither "here" nor "there." It is this limbo that serves both as a launching point for Morand's intricate interweaving of his constructions of the self and the city and as the figure for the void at the interior of this endeavor, namely the twelve-year gap in the text encompassing the Occupation of France and Morand's subsequent self-imposed exile.

Along a slightly different vein, but in accordance with this void and its overarching presence, Morand's present self emerges as suspended, alienated, in the sense of not belonging, of having no "place" which would guarantee its coherence:

Malhabile à servir, je n'ai plus rien à faire ici-bas, sinon à faire de la place.

Ill-suited to serve, I have nothing more to do here except to make room. (170)

J'ai été absent trop longtemps; chez moi se parle une langue étrangère que je n'entends plus; d'ailleurs il n'existe pas de dictionnaire.

I was absent too long; in my world they speak a foreign language that I no longer understand; besides, there is no dictionary. (172)

Morand has no place—neither a productive space nor a linguistic space. Most precisely, as suggested by the latter citation, he has no place in the present. He is an anachronism, a relic without a museum. The world simply goes on without him: “Ce monde d’hier, je le regarde sans ressentiment, ni regret; simplement il n’est plus; pour moi, du moins, car il continue, sans gêne, sans embarras . . .” ‘I gaze without resentment or regret at yesterday’s world; it quite simply no longer exists, not for me at least, because the world does go on, without embarrassment, without obstacle’ (170). *Venises* may be regarded as constituting, among other things, the making of a space. If he no longer has any function save that of “faire de la place,” this may indeed be his mission: not to “give up his place” so much as to literally *make* or *create* space. Morand’s story is indeed that of a place, or rather, of his relationship to a place, Venice, one which holds the key to the resolution of his temporal displacement in the present and its attendant crisis of identity. And yet this space also emerges as a non-space, a space both temporally and spatially empty and one which resists the plenitude of reference even as it is the play of reference itself that creates it.

This spatio-temporal concern is intimately linked to his use of Venice. From the beginning, Morand describes his relationship to the city in spatial terms: “Venise jalonne mes jours comme les espars à tête goudronnée balisent sa lagune; ce n’est, parmi d’autres, qu’un point de perspective” ‘Venice delimits my days like the lead-tipped spars mark its lagoon; it is only one perspective, among others’ (10). By providing only contours to his existence, just as the buoys of the lagoon mark its channels and indicate the limits of its passageways, Venice offers a limited perspective, certainly, but one that lends a spatial dimension to his life. Venice proves to be the perfect locale in which to situate a life, to give physical dimension to the temporal. This is nowhere more evident than in the passage quoted earlier: “Venise résume dans son espace contraint ma durée sur terre” ‘Venice sums up, in its constricted space, my time on earth,’ in which the city abridges or sums up duration, metaphorically assuring both a place for the self by virtue of its physical constraint and a place in

which the self may be told. At the same time, this spatial dimension also functions as a sort of autobiographical pact, setting out the limits of the story of his self as confined to the perspective of Venice.

If on one level, Venice thus provides a site or locale for Morand's autobiographical revelations, at the same time, the city comes to play the role of referent for such meditations. As much as it represents the vehicle, Venice also functions as the sign or the "other" whose relationship to and exchange with Morand confer meaning to the latter's identity. Far more than a static component in the book, Venice is portrayed as a motivating partner in Morand's enterprise, fully engaged in the "I am here" dialectic of the post card.

The dynamic of the interplay between Morand and his Venetian "other" is particularly perceptible in the manner in which Morand very subtly inserts himself, or rather a certain image of his self, into the city: "A Venise, je pense ma vie mieux qu'ailleurs; tant pis si je montre le nez dans un coin du tableau, comme Véronèse dans *La Maison de Lévi*" "I am better able to think my life in Venice, more so than elsewhere; too bad if I turn up in a corner of the painting, like Veronese in the *Feast in the House of Levi*" (33). Morand "paints" himself into the city as a figure in the scene, both as its observer and, like Veronese, as its creator. Morand's associative metaphor, however, displays what may be a highly revelatory and no doubt intentional error. For Veronese certainly does not relegate his self-portrait to a "corner" of his painting. Rather, *Feast in the House of Levi*, as it is known in English, depicts its creator in a central, even dominant position in front of the column separating the first and second panels of its tripartite composition representing the Last Supper. The figure of Veronese is not only situated in the foreground of the scene but is also proportionately larger than most of the other figures, including that of Christ himself in the central panel. Morand's relegation of his own figure vis-à-vis the tableau of Venice to a mere "corner" may thus be more a gesture of modesty made tongue-in-cheek, since such a "misreading" of Veronese's work seems unlikely for one who spent so much time in Venice, where the

painting is located. Morand seems to be indirectly asserting, rather, the centrality of his self-portrait in his portrait of Venice as observer of the city, as well as the position of a tertiary figure, a second spectator who is alone capable of remarking such a prominence of position and who occupies quite obviously the position of the reader/observer of *Venises*.

A similar image, recalling the terms used to describe the painting, recurs later in the book, but this time with an interesting twist: "De même qu'en 1917, j'avais vu Venise enfonce son coin d'ombre dans ma vie exilée . . ." 'Just as in 1917, I had seen Venice cast its shadow into my life of exile' (170). Here it is Venice that inserts itself into Morand's life as if into a painting of the latter, becoming in turn observer and creator. If Morand is a witness and a figure in the tableau of Venice, the reverse is equally true. The self-portrait and the city portrait are locked into a complementary and dynamic relation, each foregrounding the other and providing not only its narration but a response as well. Equally, an exchange has been effected in inverse relation to the earlier postulation of a concordance between Morand and a third figure, that of the reader, as dual spectators of the Venetian scene. Here, Venice is associated with the exterior position, further problematizing the question of the interlocutor. A slippage thus occurs not only in regard to the primary signifiers, Morand and Venice as the "subjects" of the scene, but also in response to the conundrum of these postcards' addressee: is it Venice, Morand, or the reader? Leaving aside for the moment the question of the implied reader, let us focus first on the exchange between the city and the self.

Many of the descriptions of Morand's relationship to Venice point to the role of the city as an entity which enters into exchange or intimate conversation with Morand:

Raconter le Paris d'alors n'est pas mon propos; il ne s'agit ici que d'un tête-à-tête avec Venise, ces pages n'ayant d'autre mouvement que celui de la vie sur ses flots.

To recount the Paris of that time is not my intent, it is only question here of an intimate rendez-vous with Venice, these pages

having no other movement than that of life on the city's swells.
(90)

Venise n'est que le fil d'un discours interrompu par de longs silences. . . .

Venice is but the thread of a discourse interrupted by long silences. (105)

Morand's encounter with Venice emerges as eminently dialogic, an exchange sustained between the autobiographical subject and the city and predicated on the dialogue of space and time as the city spatializes the time(s) of Morand's life.

Morand compounds this problem when, much as he calls upon Veronese to pictorially figure this dialogic relationship, he invokes literary history to the same end. In choosing Venice as the site of his last and most personal book, Morand not only writes the final chapter of his own literary production, but also positions himself in the long literary tradition of writing in and about that city, an act explicitly admitted to as a sort of ceremonial duty:

Les canaux de Venise sont noirs comme l'encre; c'est l'encre de Jean-Jacques, de Chateaubriand, de Barrès, de Proust; y tremper sa plume est plus qu'un devoir de français, un devoir tout court.

The canals of Venice are black like ink; the ink of Jean-Jacques, Chateaubriand, Barrès, Proust; to dip one's plume in the canals is more than the obligatory French-class exercise, it is quite simply an obligation. (33)

Morand's duty, on one level, emerges not only as an obligation to "do as the Romans do," to write the requisite French composition on Venice, but also as a responsibility to acknowledge those who dipped their pens before him. Most of Morand's descriptions or observations of Venice are doubled by a reference, either via direct citation or allusion, to another, previous observer of the city. Among others, Morand cites Montaigne, Casanova, Rousseau, Ruskin, Byron, Goethe, Balzac, Stendhal, Browning, Taine, Gautier, Proust, Barrès, Corvo and D. H. Lawrence. The effect is the overwhelming impression that one has before one's eyes not only Morand's Venice, but all the Venices of literary history.

Morand's use of his predecessors' voices often emerges in illustrative comparisons:

Bagués et roucoulants comme les pigeons de Saint-Marc passaient les pédérastes; Venise, "cité contre nature" (Chateaubriand), les avait toujours accueillis.

Bejeweled and cooing like the pigeons of Saint Mark's, the pederasts passed by: "Venice, city against nature" (Chateaubriand), had always welcomed them. (39)

Les cyprès ont grandi, roussi au vent de mer, les Frères melchites, "couleur barbe de météores" (Byron), ont blanchi.

The cypresses had grown, reddened by the sea breeze; the Melchite Brothers – "color of a meteor's beard" (Byron) – had whitened. (120)

En serré dans les *rii* de Venise comme un signet entre les pages; certaines rues si étroites que Browning se plaignait de n'y pouvoir ouvrir son parapluie.

Pressed in the streets of Venice like a bookmark between the pages; some streets so narrow that Browning complained of being unable to open his umbrella. (133)

Chateaubriand, Byron, and Browning are here quoted as illustrations of Morand's Venice, as though Morand adds to his own vision by layering onto it other Venices or, more precisely, by situating it in relation to the others. The third passage, revelatory not only of the relationship of the book as a whole to Venice but also of this "layering," presents the observer "pressed in the streets of Venice like a bookmark between the pages." Morand is likewise pressed between his own pages, those of *Venises*, just as Venice hems in or contains both his life and this book. The reference to Browning and his umbrella expands this metaphor by introducing another Venice: that of the English poet. Thus Morand would not only be within his book; he will be pressed between the pages of the larger book comprised of all visions, literary and other, of the city as well, a collection that ironically also serves to disperse the notion of Venice as a stable referent by juxtaposing variant after variant of the signified.

At the same time, a direct link is established between Morand and the earlier writer as he positions himself in his place, a maneuver made possible by their purely spatial coincidence. He observes the same "scene" as did the past figure: "Goethe, Taine ont, d'ici même, décrit ce survol; ils ont vu ces tables du café Quadri posées devant les Procuraties comme des dominos" "From this very spot, Goethe and Taine described this same vista; they saw these tables at the Quadri café placed like dominoes in front of the Procuraties" (179). This coincidence of site functions as a mnemonic structure which superimposes two different times on a single point. Michael Riffaterre, commenting on Chateaubriand's use of monuments, opposes the affective memory in the latter (which Proust later expands upon) to Chateaubriand's evocation of memory founded upon a monument. Affective memory, he argues, effectuates a disappearance of the present as it is absorbed into a total immersion in the past, and only serves to further isolate the individual, as it is unavailable or unintelligible to anyone else (139). Monumental memory, however,

is a memory shared by all mankind. . . . It enables anyone who contemplates it to find his counterpart, contemplating the same monument, and to find in his counterpart similarities to himself. These form a basis for an affinity and put an end to solitude. (141)

This affinity, it must be added, is also an affinity between the past and the present. The present remains intact, as a crucial component of the memory. This is definitely the case in Morand's citations or rememorations of his predecessors whose past observations are invariably coupled with a specific notation made by Morand in the present. If Goethe and Taine observed the same tables in front of the Café Quardi, it is Morand who supplies the image of the dominos in the above citation.

Perhaps even more illustrative of this technique is the following observation in which Morand merely enumerates his predecessors: "Le Burchiello était jadis le seul moyen de transport, celui de Montaigne, du Président De Brosses, de Goethe, de Casanova" "The Bruchiello was formerly the only means of transport, for Montaigne, the President de Brosses, Goethe, Casanova"

(106). This boat, the “Burchiello,” which for centuries has carried passengers from Padua to Venice, is at once one vessel and five: the four employed respectively by Montaigne, the *Président De Brosses*, Goethe and Casanova, and the one observed now by Morand. Whether or not it is a question of the same boat is irrelevant. Each “saw” a different boat and yet here, in Morand’s evocation, all collapse, as it were, into one multi-layered image. This image gives expression to a certain tension between Morand’s invitation, on the one hand, to read history “across” the centuries and, on the other, to consolidate specific moments in a collapse of temporal distance made feasible by a spatial coincidence. The resulting configuration resembles, to borrow Walter Benjamin’s expression, a constellation of fragments of time, here comprised of five “stars”: Montaigne, De Brosses, Goethe, Casanova, and Morand.⁴

Morand also invokes other Venices of the past in two other, more nuanced, ways: in his use of images that refer the reader to other literary Venices, and in his incorporation of certain themes that recur in Venetian contexts. His exclamation “Je suis veuf de l’Europe” ‘I am the widower of Europe’ (14) echoes Byron’s images of the Adriatic as widow of Venice in the fourth canto of “Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage,” much as the recurrent image of an oscillation between the palace and the prison (*piombi* and *pozzi*) evokes the first stanza of Byron’s Venetian canto.⁵ Morand’s references to the gondolas of Venice as coffins recall both Goethe and Mme de Staël, for whom they were “coffins or cradles, the first and last receptacles of man” (Tanner 48). Venice, for the young Morand, was the dreamed-of place, the promised land, the already written, already painted, just as it was for Byron, Stendhal, Proust and many others. Venice is desired, as one desires a woman: “Lors de ma première évacion, je me jetai sur l’Italie comme sur un corps de femme” ‘Upon my first escape, I threw myself onto Italy as onto the body of a woman’ (Morand, *Venises* 26). Here one thinks of the many narratives of desire in and of Venice: Stendhal, Thomas Mann, and Proust, whose desire for Albertine is both synonomous and incompatible with his desire of Venice.⁶ And like most literary Venices, the city begets images of ruin, decay,

and of drowning: “Venise se noie; c’est peut-être ce qui pouvait lui arriver de plus beau?” ‘Venice is drowning, perhaps the most beautiful of possible fates’ (201). This compendium or “anthology” of Venice’s role in literary history places Morand’s Venice in a dialogical position with regard to the city or cities evoked by his predecessors. At the same time, Morand’s own dialogue with the city is extended beyond the bounds of his life to an encounter with Venice’s own past.

One also notes here the persistence with which Morand repeatedly invokes the presence and position of the reader. By calling on the “monumental memory” lodged in the physical, historical, artistic, and literary Venices ceaselessly evoked here, he draws the reader into just that complicity or affinity described by Riffaterre. The reader is positioned as if peering over Morand’s shoulder, thereby not only sharing the view, as it were, but also implicated in the constellation created with previous views and viewers of the city. However, in the shattering of the temporal and spatial distances separating these identical panoramas, even as a consolidated vision forms à la Benjamin, a gap is opened in its wake. This gap, mirroring both the void created in the first pages of *Venises* and the twelve-year silence of the war years, is further widened by Morand’s modification of his relation to the city at a crucial point in time, an alteration which radically repositions the reader’s implied vantage point.

If on one level the relationship of the autobiographical subject and the city is dialogic, mirrored in the text as a discourse of the simultaneous consolidation and dispersion of time and space, on another level Morand, as interlocutor, withdraws, allowing Venice to emerge as a sort of surrogate charged with the task of speaking for Morand: “Je veux en avoir le coeur net; surmontant mon peu de goût pour moi-même, j’ai donc pris Venise comme confidente; elle répondra à ma place” ‘I want a clear conscience; overcoming my distaste for talking about myself, I have taken Venice as confidante, the city will respond in my place’ (33). In the context of *Venises*, this displacement signals that Venice will assume the responsibility of narration at certain points where Morand is unable or unwilling to do so. As noted earlier, Morand

insists upon the fragmentary nature of his encounter with Venice; those parts of his life not directly related to the city, then, are not to be told. Morand circumvents this restriction in several ways. For instance, during the absence occasioned by his military service from 1909-13, Morand “finds” Venice in the neighborhoods of London. Similarly, when separated from the city by his world travels, Venice’s structures are found mirrored in those of Bangkok. Each time, it is the plurality of the city as a physical “presence” which enables the narrative to continue. In a slightly different vein, Venice functions as a veritable surrogate immediately after the First World War, a period during which Morand was absent from the city and the story of which is “told” by the description of the physical ruin of the city. Morand rapidly notes the marks left by the war:

A Venise, à travers la coupole percée de Santa Maria, on apercevait le ciel bleu; l’Arsenal avait été touché, le Palais des Doges crevassé, Saint-Marc était étouffé sous cinq mètres de sacs de sable retenus par des madriers et des filets d’acier; disparus les chevaux de Quadriges! Roulés les Titiens; canaux sans gondoles, les pigeons, mangés.

In Venice, one could glimpse blue sky through the pierced cupola of Santa Maria; the Arsenal had been hit, the Palace of the Doges split open. Saint Mark’s was suffocating under five meters of sandbags held in place by timbers and steel mesh; the horses of the Quadriges were gone, the Titians rolled up, the pigeons eaten. (80-81)

This image of the physical ruin of Venice permits Morand, in what follows, to draw an analogy to the moral ruin he himself witnessed in Paris during the war. Again, the displacement of the physicality of the city allows Morand to violate his pact of fragmentation and to subtly restructure his dialogic relation (as well as the reader’s) with the city.

During the portion of the book situated in the 1930s, Venice as substitute functions in yet another way. Over the course of these fragments the autobiographical subject effectively disappears from the text as if reabsorbed into the city, as the narration veers toward memoir by privileging scattered observations about

Venice and the era over the account of Morand's life and activities during this time. Long passages describing the Brenta river and the Malcontenta, one of the villas lining its shores, followed by a brief analysis of Proust's encounter with Venice, are succeeded by a series of impressionistic notations and anecdotes, highly impersonal in content and tone:

Jadis le Gazzettino de Venise publiait la liste des gens tombés à l'eau dans la journée; cette rubrique a été supprimée. Choit-on moins?

Formerly the Venice Gazzettino published a daily list of people who had fallen into the canals; this rubric has been suppressed. Does one fall less? (129)

Midi, personne ne parle plus; les Vénitiens ont des spaghetti plein la bouche; il y ajoutent tant de fruits de mer que les nouilles deviennent algues.

Noon, no one speaks; the Venetians have mouths full of spaghetti, so much shellfish added that the noodles become seaweed. (131)

Au XIVE siècle, pendant deux heures, le Grand Canal s'est trouvé à sec, après un tremblement de terre.

In the sixteenth century, the Grand Canal was dry for two hours following an earthquake. (134)

Le dialecte vénitien s'illustre par sa lettre Z; le Grand Canal lui-même forme un Z.

The Venetian dialect is illustrated by its letter Z; the Grand Canal itself forms a Z. (136)

Morand continues this withdrawal throughout the fragments of the 1930s, relating the events of that decade in a terse manner reminiscent of historical annals:

Mort de Stavisky, apprise à Venise. L'U.R.S.S. entre à la S.D.N. Mort du roi Albert, assassinat de Dollfuss. Nuit des Longs Couteaux. Hindenburg. Hitler maître de l'Allemagne. Publication de *L'Armée de métier*, par de Gaulle, avec préface de Pétain.

Death of Stavisky, learned in Venice; the USSR enters the League of Nations. Death of King Albert, assassination of Dollfuss, Night of the Long Knives. Hindenburg. Hitler, Master of Germany. Publication of *L'Armée de métier* (*The Army of the Future*) by de Gaulle, prefaced by Pétain. (137)

This retreat culminates in Morand's twelve-year absence from Venice from 1939 to 1951, spanning the Second World War and Morand's exile in Switzerland, a period itself entirely absent from *Venises*. When Morand picks up the thread of the "discours" with Venice in 1951, only brief reference is made to the war and again via a description of the physical condition of the city immediately before its liberation in 1945, as reported by a friend who was there at the time.

The suspension of the dialogue between the autobiography and the city portrait, condensed into the monologue of Venice, results in a wholesale suspension of even the voice of the city during and after the war, as if frozen in space and time. Morand's abstraction of the city of Venice permits him to circumvent the autobiographical at a juncture whose story is not yet to be told. In a 1921 fragment, Morand, meditating on the exhilarating artistic liberty of the early 1920s, remarks:

Tout s'offrait, tout espérait être cueilli; tout le fut; les gros obstacles nous attendaient vingt ans plus tard! Autre histoire . . . Le temps n'est pas venu de la conter.

Everything offered itself (up), hoping to be reaped; everything was (reaped); The great obstacles were waiting for us twenty years later! Another story – the time has not yet come to tell it (96)

Indeed the time has not come, neither in this fragment, nor in *Venises*. The author of *Tais-toi* (1965) has learned to hold his tongue.

When Morand resumes his "conversation" with Venice in 1951, it becomes immediately apparent that the terms of the dialogue have changed radically. After evoking the Venice of 1945, described by his Venetian friend, Morand launches into the description of the masked ball at the Palazzo Labia given by his

friend “B.” in 1951, organized around the theme of Marco Polo’s return to Venice.⁷ The true impact of this parade of costumed figures lies in its thematizing of the “dead,” who are represented not only by the historical figures but by the people behind the masks as well, themselves long gone; hence one signification of the title of this section “Morte in maschera” (Masked Death). It is not only the costumed figures, however, who have (doubly) passed into another realm, but Morand as well:

Il serait ridicule de parler de cette dernière soirée comme une fillette de son premier bal, mais dès l’arrivée, je savais que je venais faire mes adieux à un monde; ermite par nécessité, seul depuis onze années, du haut de mes glaciers, je tombais tout à coup dans une échauffourée de plaisir, dans un glas de l’imaginaire. Un bal? Un bal en Italie, comme dans Stendhal!

would be ridiculous to speak of this last evening as a young girl speaks of her first ball, but as soon as I had arrived I knew I had come to make my goodbyes, to bid adieu to a world; hermit by necessity, alone for eleven years, from the heights of my glaciers I suddenly fell into an orgiastic free-for-all, into a death knell of the imaginary. A ball? A ball in Italy like in Stendhal! (160)

Morand’s return to Venice emerges as a sort of farewell appearance not only to the city, but to a world from which he has already withdrawn. Rather than a triumphal Marco Polo, Morand is little more than a ghost, taking his place among the represented figures already on the other side of life, as if in Stendhal’s Italian novel, *La Chartreuse de Parme*. The fragments comprising this third section all repeat, through various images, the scene of a radical and terrible rupture between the present and the past, one effectuated, perhaps not surprisingly, in the period spanning his twelve-year absence from Venice, a period so completely silenced in *Venises*.

In a passage quoted above, Morand describes this rupture as a fundamental breakdown in communication: “J’ai été absent trop longtemps; chez moi se parle une langue étrangère que je n’entends plus; d’ailleurs il n’existe pas de dictionnaire” ‘I was absent too long; in my world they speak a foreign language that I no longer understand, besides, there is no dictionary’ (172). This

expression of linguistic discord echoes a passage in “Parfaite de Saligny” (1946) in which the protagonist, Loup de Tincé, imprisoned for suspected counter-revolutionary activities in 1792, meditates on the new France being born, one which a priori excludes him: “Une France nouvelle qui déjà avait une autre figure, portait d’autres habits, parlait une langue neuve” ‘A new France that already had a different face, wore different clothes, spoke a new language’ (Morand, “Parfaite” 199). This new or “foreign” language, whether emerging in the aftermath of the French Revolution or following the Second World War, radically changes the terms of Morand’s dialogue with Venice. The “new” Venice, an obvious synecdoche of post-war Europe, is incomprehensible to Morand. Dialogue there is but a dialogue of alienation, separation and retreat.

The images of a dying Venice in the final pages of *Venises* posit the mutual destinies of the city and the author:

Parfois je cherche à me faire saigner, en m’imaginant que Venise meurt avant moi, qu’elle s’engloutit, n’ayant finalement rien exprimé, sur l’eau, de sa figure. . . . Venise se noie; c’est peut-être ce qui pouvait lui arriver de plus beau.

Occasionally I seek to torment myself, imagining that Venice dies before I die, that the city is swallowed up, never having left a trace of its countenance on its waters.... Venice is drowning, perhaps the most beautiful of possible fates. (200-01)

Morand’s masochistic rendition of the potential plight of Venice becomes a poignant echo of the death of the author, a theme, as earlier noted, that dominates the last half of *Venises*. But in this watery death, the most exquisite moment for Morand must lie in its totality. Venice disappears without a trace: “n’ayant rien exprimé . . . de sa figure” “never having left a trace [...] of its countenance.’ Is this not what Morand himself is paradoxically aiming at? For while he does leave a trace, without which *Venises* would be no more than a simple exercise in involution, he does succeed in effacing superficially what might well be the defining years of his life. And yet, as we have all “learned,” nothing is without a trace; indeed the “trace” itself emerges as the governing principle in all systems of signification. Thus, if the postcards from Venice do

emerge as ultimately "illisible" or unreadable, it is because the one postcard that might signal to the reader a mode of comprehension is absent, elided in the gap of the war. And yet this postcard in its absence proves to be the most persistent and most informative, bracketed as it is by the radical modifications of Morand's relationship to the city and thus to his self.⁸

Significantly, the book ends not with yet another vision of Venice but of the cemetery in Trieste where he will eventually be interred in the mausoleum of his wife's family. Trieste, the site of Stendhal's "exile" from Venice, as Morand points out, will be his own, final separation from the city:

Là, j'irai gésir, après ce long accident que fut ma vie. Ma cendre, sous ce sol; une inscription en grec en témoignera; je serai veillé par cette foi orthodoxe vers quoi Venise m'a conduit, une religion par bonheur immobile, qui parle encore le premier langage des Evangiles.

There I will lie, after this long accident that was my life. My ashes, under this soil; an inscription in Greek will bear witness; I will be watched over by that orthodox faith towards which Venice led me, a fortunately immobile religion still speaking the first language of the Gospels. (215)

Fittingly, this final postcard hails from Trieste and not Venice, thus signaling separation from the site of his existence and returning to the image of alienation seen at the beginning of *Venises*. Morand, Venice, and the reader are irrevocably separated: physically, temporally, and linguistically. This separation, again miming that of the blank wall surrounding the twelve-year gap, proves both satisfying and unnerving to the reader. On the one hand, Morand invites the reader to accede to a particularly intimate level by placing him in position to witness figuratively the autobiographically impossible: his own (Morand's) death, a privilege accessible only to an exterior observer who is no longer Venice but the ultimate intended recipient of the message. On the other, Morand seems to be denying this totalizing privilege by restricting access to those initiated in that "religion par bonheur immobile, qui parle encore le premier langage des Evangiles" 'a fortunately immobile religion still speaking the first language of the

Gospels' (215). It is not to a literal (since many people do read and speak Greek), but a figurative speaker that Morand refers, as the notion of a linguistic discord here recalls the impasse separating Morand from the post-war period. We, the post-war readers, no longer speak / comprehend the language of the pre-war period and are therefore incapable of or "uninitiated to" an understanding of what happened during that ever-crucial period of 1939-1945.

At the same time, and in concert with this impasse, Morand seems also to be echoing a certain trajectory across referential texts in general. Much as the reader is lured, positioned and ultimately left hanging by the interplay of signifiers in *Venises*, today's reader, equipped with and perhaps hindered by a hypersensitivity to this play, reaches a similar impasse of meaning. By enacting a process designed to engage the reader's "affinity" for proper names, Morand also points to the void inherent in the name as signifier. But what better way, after all, to figure at the textual and the meta-textual level what is both most "unreadable" and most central to reading itself?

Notes

1. Morand left his diplomatic post in London during the fateful summer of 1940, just days after De Gaulle's "Appel aux Français," and returned to France where he offered his services to Pétain's government. He served as head of the Censure Cinématographique and subsequently as Vichy's ambassador first to Romania, an Axis ally, and then to Switzerland. Morand's allegiance to Laval was not, as Guitard-Auviste suggests, limited to his family's long friendship with the former. Morand established himself early on as a writer of the right. His 1934 novel, *France-la-douce*, was an open attack on Jewish dominance of the film industry in France. In a 1933 article, "De l'air, de l'air . . ." he implored France not to be surpassed by Hitler in the "killing of vermin" (qtd. in Guitard-Auviste 183). During the war he contributed regularly to several collaborationist papers. For a brief discussion of Morand's role, see Pierre Hebey and Henry Rousso, as well as Philippe Sollers's preface to Morand's *New York*.

2. Little has been written directly on the theoretical relatedness of the genres of autobiography and travel writing. One such article by Adrien Pasquali raises fascinating issues about the formal aspects of such relatedness.

3. For a more thorough discussion of such questions, see Philippe Lejeune and Paul John Eakin.

4. Walter Benjamin's figure of a constellation formed by fragments of the past blasted out of the continuum of history perversely serves to describe Morand's figuration of the relation of the past to the present in all his (Morand's) post-war prose. On Benjamin's constellation, see his *Theses on the Philosophy of History*; on Morand's perverse reproduction of it, see my book, *Paul Morand: The Politics and Practice of Writing in Postwar France*.

5. I stood in Venice, on the 'Bridge of Sighs';
A palace and a prison on each hand:
I saw from out the wave her structures rise
As from the stroke of (the) Enchanter's wand. . . .
(Byron Canto IV)

6. On Proust's encounter with Venice, see Tanner's excellent study of Venice's place in literary history.

7. Morand's friend "B." was the Mexican millionaire Don Carlos de Bestegui who had purchased the Labia in 1949 for half a million dollars and spent almost a million in restoration. Of this infamous evening, the Aga Khan was reported to have said it was the best celebration since the coronation of King George in 1911 (Hibbert 320).

8. A similar textual / autobiographical gap appears in Henry Adams's *The Education of Henry Adams*. Paul John Eakin remarks that, in the case of Adam: "the twenty-year gap in the record, canceling both history and personal history, becomes instead the narrative's most striking symbol of the relation of the two . . . (Eakin 150).

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