

***Scarred landscapes, hybrid spaces,  
and the pitfalls of technological modernity  
in Paul Morand's U.S.A.-1927***

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**Abstract**

Paul Morand (1888–1976) was a writer who personally witnessed the profound shift in the West from modernism to postmodernism, and *U.S.A.-1927* (1928) is the singular poetic interpretation of the tensions rapidly arising in a post-war, pre-crash America. In this paper, I propose a re-reading of Morand's vision of the U.S.A. as a spatial interrogation of the ways in which the role of traditional locality and community was gradually superseded by the polarizing effect of rapid industrial modernisation.

I argue that much contemporary ecocritical, geocritical, and cosmopolitan theory can provide novel and innovative lenses through which to read these poems. *U.S.A.-1927* represents a point of tension between the Modernist écrivain-voyageur and a culture in thrall to the possibilities of cultural acceleration. Here, I show that what Morand encounters is, paradoxically, an experiential limit of endless superficial difference that mediates and attenuates, but never resolves, the burgeoning tension between the local and the global, rootedness and movement, fragmentation and unity. The result is a poetry of extreme spatial compression, refraction, and, at its extreme, sameness and immobility.

Morand's America is a montage of spatial dis-location: here, Hollywood is just as much of a "nowhere" as the Mojave Desert – perhaps more so. This, I suggest, heralds the advent of a "société du spectacle" avant la lettre, entranced by its own global potential yet singularly unable to abandon its national roots. It is precisely these conflicting values, manifested physically in spatial practices of living and travelling, which continue to permeate the way we construe place in a postmodern world riven by these same contradictory forces.

### Scarred landscapes, hybrid spaces, and the pitfalls of technological modernity in Paul Morand's *U.S.A.-1927*

Paul Morand (1888–1976) is a complex and multi-faceted figure in the long dual histories of literary travellers and French travellers to the United States. Born to a well-to-do Parisian family at the height of the French Belle Époque, Morand was, from an early age, rubbing shoulders with the likes of such literary stars as Oscar Wilde, Stéphane Mallarmé, and Jean Giraudoux. A glittering haut-bourgeois life in politics awaited him, a destiny he initially grasped with both hands – in 1913 he came top of the *Grand Concours des Ambassades*, and was duly appointed as attaché to the French embassy in London. Thus began in earnest the vocation that was to propel Morand to all four corners of the planet during a period which ushered in a new global era of world wars, massive strides in technology and communication, and, consequently and most significantly for Morand, the possibility of literary travel in ways that had seemed implausible during the nineteenth century.

The Western leap into technological modernity was to leave an indelible mark on Morand's literary work throughout his career, though it is perhaps most visible in his writing of the 1920s and '30s. Accordingly, it is a work from that era that I will explore in detail here. The collection of poems *U.S.A.-1927* (1928) has been all but neglected by scholars of both Morand and literary Modernism. Certainly, Morand's poetry is eclipsed by his prose oeuvre, which today stands as his real legacy: works like *Ouvert la Nuit* (1922), *Bouddha vivant* (1925), *L'Homme pressé* (1941) and *Fouquet, ou le soleil offusqué* (1961) demonstrate the vivacity and sparkling wit of a figure who, much like his eponymous *homme pressé*, refused to stay still both physically and intellectually.

This collection is significant document on its own terms, and can tell us much about the biases and assumptions about America that French travellers brought to bear on their own writing. In the spirit of a creative re-appraisal of these Modernist poems, then, I want to approach this collection from the innovative, and still developing, critical perspective offered by ecocriticism. Ecocriticism emerged definitively within literary scholarship in the U.S.A. in the late-1990s as a response—albeit a belated one—to the urgent environmental issues which re-entered political discourse in the late-1980s. The emergence of ecocriticism within Anglophone literary studies marked the first real interrogation of what Cheryl Glotfelty, one of the field's key early members, calls simply “the relationship between literature and the physical environment”

(xviii). Since then, ecocriticism has soared as the ecological disaster we are facing, coupled with the physical and symbolic impacts of the Anthropocene, has become ever more apparent.<sup>1</sup> Yet it remains, for a number of intertwined political, cultural, and literary reasons, marginal and underdeveloped within French scholarship. However, the emergence of post-humanism, waste theory, and urban ecocriticism are pointing convincingly towards ways in which we might go beyond the idea of “nature” in a static sense (as Timothy Morton has encouraged)<sup>2</sup> and towards a more nuanced, pluralistic, and border-crossing understanding that can engage productively with a wider range of literary works. Such is the approach I bring to bear on the present analysis.

The confluence of French Modernism and ecocriticism may strike us as incongruent: Modernist literature does not tend to be known for its environmental engagement, least of all in works by Francophone artists like Morand, Blaise Cendrars, Valéry Larbaud, and Saint-Pol Roux, who appear more concerned with taking advantage of the new travel possibilities afforded by the mass-production of bicycles, automobiles, transatlantic steamships, and revolutions in air travel. Speed, simultaneity, and rootlessness are all hallmarks of much Francophone travel writing during the interwar period: one need only look at Cendrars’ *Prose du Transsibérien* (1913) to get a sense of this breathlessness. At a basic level, the fourteen poems of *U.S.A.-1927* are equally concerned with travel in this manner. However, they are not merely documentary accounts of an American voyage, but rather imaginative and composite works sprung from a surprisingly anxious mind.

This anxiety, as I have diagnosed it somewhat enigmatically, emerges in these poems as environmental and technological in tone and theme. The two are indissociable, for the American landscapes of the late-1920s were irrevocably marked by the industrial economic boom ushered in by Warren G. Harding and Calvin Coolidge (who was in office during Morand’s journey). What Morand saw from his automobile was no longer the “virgin land”

<sup>1</sup> The Anthropocene – or the Age of the Human – is the term proposed by Paul Crutzen and Eugene Stoermer in 2000 for a new geological epoch, distinguished from the Holocene by the rapid accumulation of CO<sub>2</sub> in the atmosphere, anthropogenic climate change, the build-up of plastic particulates, and the increased unpredictability of global temperatures, among other symptoms. The species *Homo sapiens* will leave its mark in an identifiable strata of compacted waste for future archaeologists to muse over.

<sup>2</sup> See Morton’s *Ecology Without Nature* (2007) and *Dark Ecology* (2016) for sophisticated and challenging analyses of the discursive trouble with the term “nature”. Throughout this article, the scare quotes around “nature” are implied in order to maintain a sense of estrangement.

of American myth - a myth well-known to French readers of James Fenimore Cooper, but something else entirely.

The route I take here makes its way through these poems with an eye to interrogating and exploring anxieties that emerge at the confluence of environment and technology. At one level, I want to ask what becomes of nature when it is subjected to incessant migration of communities, to technological exploitation, and to the increasingly interconnected modes of living that characterized the American 1920s. What sort of uprooting is implied in movement, and how does it dislocate individuals and communities from locality? At the same time however, I want to call into question Morand's approach towards the discursive qualities of nature itself and the ways in which he constructs his version of nature through distinctive poetic strategies. Far from intuiting a green land of plenty and promise, Morand takes a far more ambiguous approach, highlighting defamiliarizing elements of this new world: waste and wastelands, human and nonhuman hybridity, ruins, offcuts, and, eventually, complete breakdown. Morand's meshing of conceptual categories is also not without recalling much more recent post-modern work in materialism, especially that of Donna Haraway; her hybrid term "natureculture" itself gestures evocatively towards the sort of mesh of people, animals, and things that technological modernity inaugurates.<sup>3</sup> The possibility that America may have, to use Haraway's language, already been "trans-" or "post-" nature in 1927 points towards a fascinating re-reading of the role played by emergent technologies in Modernist literature (Gane 137); as we will see, the grafting of the technological onto damaged landscapes and damaged bodies brings into closer focus the limits of the travelling eye/I and its capacity to account for phenomena that seem to explode previously static notions of the "human", the "nonhuman", the "natural", and the "artificial".

*U.S.A.-1927* seems to perch at an in-between period of Morand's life: between the hectic travel of his youth and the more reflective travel of his later years. On the one hand, the two trips to America which led to these poems (as well as to short essay-style pieces like *Hiver caraïbe* and *New York*) are ostensibly marked by speed. The first of these journeys, between February 17<sup>th</sup> (as we can see from the date stamp in the first poem "El Paso") to April 2<sup>nd</sup>, took Morand and his new wife Hélène Soutzo to San Francisco, Yosemite, and the Grand Canyon in the company of Paul Claudel (who was at the time the French Ambassador to Japan), then rapidly eastward to New York via Louisiana. The second, undertaken between December 22<sup>nd</sup> and January 4<sup>th</sup> 1928, saw the Morands in New-Orleans, Alabama, and Florida. Yet, on

<sup>3</sup> See Haraway's "Cyborg Manifesto" (1985), and "The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness" (2003)

the other hand, the image of America that appears in these poems does not match up with mobility of Morand himself. Or rather, the “type” of mobility witnessed in this America– this post-war, pre-crash bubble– is at odds with the sort of cosmopolitan outlook with which Morand is most frequently associated. In the deserts of Texas and the film studios of Los Angeles, Morand appears to come up against a culture in which movement, technology, consumerism, and prosperity (both real and imagined), rather than magnifying and justifying European values (an ideal that has been pushed wholesale onto this “New World” since the earliest colonial period) instead traps the subject and submits them to a strange process of de-individualization. We must therefore contend with a tension: between a cosmopolitan French traveller and his confrontation with an equally mobile, though paradoxically compressed, American version of modernity.

## Waste

According to Anne Struve-Debeaux, one of the chief dialectics in Morand’s work is the opposition between the town – “espace totalement plein” [totally full space] – and the countryside – “espace totalement vide” [totally empty space] (124). ‘La campagne, c’est le désert’ [The countryside is a desert] (ibid.), she goes on to note, calling attention to Morand’s apparent taste for desert solitude as he expresses it 1964: ‘Mon goût profond, c’est une maison avec beaucoup de terres ou de forêts autour, de façon à être très isolé. Et j’aime beaucoup les déserts, tout ce qui est désert et steppe’ [I have a deep desire for a house surrounded by lots of land and forests, to get a feeling of isolation. I also love deserts, anything that is a desert or steppe] (Sarkany 205 in ibid.). *U.S.A.-1927* does not, however, simply present us with a binary oscillation between these two impulses. In Morand’s virile America, the effects of internal migration, increased wealth, and heightened restlessness is such that there is no clear distinction between the town and the country. Whence the poet’s fascination for the marginal, sidle-lined, and damaged spaces which appear under modernity.

To help illustrate the complex and intermeshed issues sketched out above, I want to interrogate the appearance in this collection of a distinctive type of marginal space: the wasteland. The notion of a land that has in some way been damaged, scarred, or abandoned is a recurring theme in literature, not least since the publication of T.S. Eliot’s masterpiece *The Wasteland* (1922, translated into French as *La Terre Vaine* and sometimes *La Terre Gaste*); it is a tradition that stretches to contemporary dystopian and sci-fi literature. For Morand, the idea of a wasteland emerges in his evocation of the American

desert, a place and image that seems to have fascinated him during his journeys. At one level the desert synchronizes with the idea of waste thanks to its etymology: the Latin “vastus” gives rise both to the English terms “vast” and “waste”. At its root, then, the desert is both a physical expanse and an inhospitable unknown: a paradoxically marginal space, despite its size, that repels dwelling and seems to distort those entities which do still reside there<sup>4</sup>.

The strangeness of the desert comes across immediately in the opening poem “El Paso”: “Le ciel bleu, le sol chamois / - rien, rien, rien/ d’autre.” [The blue sky, the ochre ground/ -nothing, nothing, nothing/ else] (7-9)<sup>5</sup>. The image of emptiness corresponds closely to that of the wasteland: this is a parched space which ‘n’a aucune valeur’ [absolutely no value] (3). Worthless, the desert stretches dully on into infinity: ‘Plus haut ça s’appellera le grand Désert d’Arizona; / plus haut encore/ le Colorado; / mais ce sera toujours le même désert.’ [Further up it is called the great Arizona Desert; / further still / the Colorado; / but it will still be the same desert] (46-50). It blindly ignores those most abstract of borders, the state lines, as well as straddling timeframes: its “arbres” are also “coraux” [corals], since El Paso was underwater for much of its geological history<sup>6</sup>. In “Paul Claudel au Grand Canyon”, the geology is described in no uncertain terms as an “abandon plat” [flat waste] (1); the Mojave Desert is a “paysage extrêmement abstrait” [extremely abstract landscape] (“Désert Mohave” 5). These qualities certainly combine to create, on the surface at least, the image of a wasteland. In many ways it is a classic image of the Wild West, albeit one heavily mediated through a certain ironic stereotyping; we can almost envision Morand shading his face, gazing out towards the horizon. He is clearly acutely aware of such clichés, going as far as to gently parody them in “Désert Mohave”: “Des hommes entrent, poussés par l’envie de déjeuner, les pieds pleins de boue rouge, / feutre, Far-West, cabossé, gants blancs, cigare. Pas rasés.” [Some men enter, / spurred by the desire to eat, feet caked in red mud, / fedora, Far West, battered, white gloves, cigar. Unshaved.] (12-13).

However, this wasteland has a darker and more unsettling underbelly that emerges when we look more closely at Morand’s poetic rhetoric and aesthetics. Against the rather conventional backdrop of nothingness, there is a more unnerving stratum of hybrid entities which straddle the ontological gaps be-

<sup>4</sup> This fortuitous double meaning is not captured in the French translation of “wasteland”, usually rendered as “terrain vague”.

<sup>5</sup> Parenthetical numbers refer to line numbers in each poem. All references are to *U.S.A.-1927* in the Gallimard edition of Morand’s *Poèmes* (see works cited).

<sup>6</sup> Morand evokes this again, almost verbatim, in *Hiver caraïbe*. See *Oeuvres*, Flammarion, 1981, p. 191. The telescoping of timeframes is a telling characteristic of Modernist poetry.

tween natural, human, and artificial. Interspersed among the ‘carcasses d’animaux’ [animal carcasses] (13) the poet sees ‘une piste/ festonnée de roues de Ford.’ [a track adorned with Ford tires] (23-4). Here again we see emerging the notion of waste; this time, in the form of literal human and animal waste and the “bones” of nonhuman entities. Morand elaborates this theme in one of his *Chroniques*: “Les seules ruines d’Amérique...ce sont les Ford” [Fords are the only ruins in America] (343). He evokes the “entassement de moteurs hors d’âge, ces fils électroniques tombés d’on ne sait quel crâne chauve, ces dentiers d’aluminium et ces pneus aplatis” [ageless pile of motors, those electric cables spilled from who knows what bald skull, those aluminium cogs and those flat tires] which greet the visitor at the entrance of every modern town (343). The strange equivalency of the animal and the artificial bestows a disturbing sense of agency upon the automobile: it probes the boundary between the animal and the mechanical, which is no longer clear-cut. This, too, occurs in “El Paso”: the sun does not shine, but instead “bave” [drools], becomes animate and animalised – it slobbers like a rabid dog. It is a dirty vista: the shadows take on a sullied “greasy” quality (12). The ground is scattered with a “végétation de barbelés” [barbed wire vegetation] (“Desert Mohave” 6); the cactuses have humanoid “bras” [arms] (“Southern Pacific”, 20), and are described as “fibromes” [fibromas] (“El Paso” 16) – a medical term for a fleshy tumour.

The hybridity of language leads to the inauguration of startling composite images and a certain defamiliarization. More widely, this elasticity forces us to consider that what was previously “natural” has become warped, and that what was “wilderness” is now irretrievably hybrid; things, and the words we use to describe them, have now become estranged from us and themselves. Indeed, the idea of wilderness, and in particular its “transhistorical” qualities<sup>7</sup>, is sharply undercut in these poems by the relentless invasion and infiltration of images between each other. The otherness of this American landscape does not reside in the “authentic” experience of untouched wilderness, but rather in the estrangement that comes about through a contamination of once-familiar categories.

The importance of ruined land—ruined both through the effects of unchecked development and through the deranging effects of poetic language—has long been overlooked by ecocriticism, except where it is touched upon in apocalyptic theory. Even the very earthly idea of dirt has been ignored, as Heather Sullivan points out, in favour of a generally idealised “clean” na-

<sup>7</sup> An argument that has been invoked as one of the chief reasons for preservation, despite the evidence that native Americans altered supposedly ‘wild’ landscapes long before Europeans stepped foot on the American continent.

ture that contrasts with the supposedly “dirty” town (515). Under technological modernity, however, the force of these spoiled spaces—now rendered “post-natural”—becomes suddenly evident. Morand’s deserts, in this initial example, are sullied assemblages: they belong neither to “pure” nature or “pure” urbanity.

This is a theme that appears lucidly elsewhere throughout the album. In “Hollywood”, the poet points out the “terrains vagues” on which the tourist can park his car (3); he goes on to admit candidly that “L’endroit que j’aime mieux...n’est rien qu’un terrain vague / tout près de Culver-City” [The spot I like most...is nothing but an empty plot / just next to Culver City.] (10, 39-40)<sup>8</sup>. Anne Reverseau notes how Morand scrupulously avoids stereotypes and the picture-postcard “série de vues de la ville” [series of views of the town] (924); and though he does enumerate a long list of “cleaner” places, like the Hollywood Plaza or beauty institutes, he settles on this abandoned, dirty, space where “[o]n entend le déchirement des moteurs de course / et [où] l’odeur d’huile de ricin / vient parfois de l’autodrome, quand le vent est favorable” [“you can hear the screeching of race-car engines / and [where] the smell of castor oil / wafts in from the racing track, when the wind is favourable.”] (41-44). These are not wastelands in the traditional sense; Morand actively seeks out, and professes his liking for, these hybrid spaces that are not quite marginal and not quite fully visible, but rather irrevocably in-between. Morand appears to revel in the ambiguity of these modern spaces where technology insinuates itself, sensually, into the poet and the poem.

Many of the images in this collection can therefore be read against the uncertainty of the hybrid desert, as so many modern attempts to deliberately remove the body from the material environment. Morand’s fascination with beauty parlours is key in this respect. Sullivan notes that “[m]odernity’s many anti-dirt campaigns include efforts made to remove or conceal bodily filth, waste, and the sweaty labor of agricultural processes” (526), going on to argue that

the efforts to conceal “dirt” in its many forms have encouraged urban residents to believe that dirty nature is something far away and disconnected from themselves and their bodies. This concealment functions alongside the over-production of “things” that can simply be thrown away, never to be seen again, as if waste and dirt blissfully disappeared from the earth in a wink of the eye. (526)

Such a severance—of the human body from the natural world—is evident in a poem like “Beauty Parlor”, a title which immediately sets itself against the

<sup>8</sup> As I noted above (n.6), the French term does not have quite the same connotations as its more American counterpart.

wide-open, hybrid image of the desert. This space is enclosed, walled-off: it constricts and contains like a prison. This particular “paysage” [landscape]–the use of the word can only be ironic–is one of “nickel [et] émail blanc” [nickel and white enamel] (9); surfaces reflect themselves in an endless mirror-play: “Il y a des glaces partout; / elles ne renvoient jamais la même chose: / c’est bien plus fort que Giotto.” [There are mirrors everywhere; / they never reflect the same thing; / it’s far better than Giotto] (6-8). This is not a creative difference, but rather an endless repetition into infinity: an idea which also, paradoxically, strongly recalls the overwhelming vastness of the desert. In this sterile environment, the human body itself becomes an assemblage, cyborg-like: “il arrive au cuir chevelu, / aux ongles, / à l’épiderme, / des aventures atroces.” [The hair-covered hides, / the nails, / the epidermis / undergo terrible procedures.] (10-13). The lack of agency implied in the impersonal construction “il arrive...” is heightened by the fact that there is very little in this poem we might identify as “traditionally” human. Indeed, Morand implies that they are no longer really human at all: “Ils ne peuvent rien sentir / parce qu’on leur a enlevé leur âme / pour la désinfecter” [They cannot feel anything/ because their souls have been removed/ for disinfecting.] (26-28). Shut off from the outside world, from the dirt and bacteria of urbanity, these humans–or perhaps post-humans–defy their own natures (the journey towards death) by sacrificing their humanity.

If we take a short detour away from ideas of nature in a spatial sense, we can draw an intriguing parallel between Morand’s transformation of the human under cosmetic modernity with Charles Baudelaire’s *Peintre de la Vie Moderne* (1863). In his “Éloge du Maquillage” [In Praise of Cosmetics], Baudelaire argues strongly against the idea of a beneficial or tutelary nature: ‘Passez en revue, analysez tout ce qui est naturel, toutes les actions et les désirs du pur homme naturel, vous ne trouverez rien que d’affreux.’ [I ask you to review and scrutinize whatever is natural–all the actions and desires of the purely natural man: you will find nothing but frightfulness.] (715)<sup>9</sup>. Nature is the realm of debasement and crime: “C’est cette infaillible nature qui a créé le parricide et l’anthropophagie, et mille autres abominations que la pudeur et la délicatesse nous empêchent de nommer” [“It is this infallible Mother Nature who has created patricide and cannibalism, and a thousand other abominations that both shame and modesty prevent us from naming.”] (715). On the other hand, the artificiality of makeup is brandished as a (feminine) striving towards true beauty and virtue; here, Baudelaire prefigures the post-natural and post-human effect of modernity upon the body:

<sup>9</sup> Translation by Jonathan Mayne

[Q]ui ne voit que l'usage de la poudre de riz... a pour but et pour résultat de faire disparaître du teint toutes les taches que la nature y a outrageusement semées, et de créer une unité abstraite dans le grain et la couleur de la peau, laquelle unité, comme celle produite par le maillot, rapproche immédiatement l'être humain de la statue, c'est-à-dire d'un être divin et supérieur ? (717)

[A]nyone can see that the use of rice-powder... is successfully designed to rid the complexion of those blemishes that Nature has outrageously strewn there, and thus to create an abstract unity in the colour and texture of the skin, a unity, which, like that produced by the tights of a dancer, immediately approximated the human being to the statue, that is to something superior and divine.

The body as statue and idol finds a compelling negative parallel in the desensitized humans of Morand's beauty parlour: whereas Baudelaire praises the outcome as a striving towards a superhuman perfection, Morand sees these efforts towards capturing beauty as effectively rendering the clients *less* authentically human and rather more like automatons, variations on a theme on the assembly line of twentieth-century fashion. Baudelaire's artificial masking of a chaotic nature extends easily into wider *spatial* questions thrown up by the question of naturalness. Morand's human cyborgs are a rejection of nature, but they are also framed within a post-natural space: nature is negated, replaced by the sterile regimentation of technology. There is no implied outside to this world: its openness is merely an optical illusion.

## Roads to nowhere

The fetishizing of the removal of waste in modernity is presented under two facets in the previous examples: in the waste-embracing attitude of the poet in "El Paso" and "Hollywood", and the waste-denying attitude of modern Americans in "Beauty Parlor". The hierarchisation of space as we see it in "Hollywood" relegates certain types—specifically "valueless" offcut space—to the margins, and which the poet must seek out for himself, and who, through the poem, reveals their unique potency when evoked synecdochally for a wider modern malaise.

Crucially, the borders erected between the "interior" and "exterior" extends to Morand's presentation of travel itself. If we can indeed still qualify this collection as an album of travel poems, it is the idea of superficial travel that Morand singles out as a potentially damaging lifestyle that severs the body from the natural environment. In this sense, travel strengthens its ties to environmental matters when it performs an uprooting that untethers peo-

ple from place-based relationships in favour of a goalless movement between shifting destinations.

This is a theme that emerges strongly in later American environmental works. Thus Edward Abbey, that most irascible of nature's defenders, writes in *Desert Solitaire*: "If industrial man continues to multiply his numbers and expand his operations he will succeed in his apparent intention, to seal himself off from the natural and isolate himself within a synthetic prison of his own making" (211). Abbey writes from a 1960s-countercultural perspective, yet it is striking to compare it to lines from Morand, who equally sees a self-obsessed nation jammed with "ces 22 millions d'autos qui servent à ne plus circuler" [these 22 million cars that are useful only for going nowhere] ("Battery" 10). We cannot fail to notice that Morand's images of claustrophobia are very similar to Abbey's.

This dark side of Morand's engagement with travel emerges in the counter-intuitively titled *Éloge du Repos*. He writes:

La vitesse tue la forme. D'un paysage vu à cinq cents à l'heure, que reste-t-il? Rien; les premiers et les seconds plans sont supprimés ; au-delà du 300<sup>e</sup> de seconde, les appareils photographiques eux-mêmes défontent... Le mouvement ne « déplace pas les lignes », il les anéantit... (118)

[Speed kills form. What remains of a landscape seen at five hundred miles an hour? Nothing: the foreground and middle ground are erased; beyond 300<sup>th</sup>s of a second, even cameras fail... Movement does not "move lines", but abolishes them.]

The point at which technology breaks down subverts the pleasures of speed; the status of the moving poetic eye/I is undercut by the recognition that not even the camera lens can record anything useful at velocity. If the process of seeing breaks down, how can travel poetry, which is largely predicated on an account of places seen and experienced, capture anything at all? How do we reconcile the two? What happens in these poems is something rather startling: the substitution of travel in favour of pure movement dislocates bodies from place; their trajectories become abstracted, unanchored from material reality. Although mobility and travel are undoubtedly part of the American Leviathan, in Morand's images this advance in travel technology leads only to a more intense and more hopeless sense of entrapment and stasis. As he argues above, speed and movement flatten difference, reducing it to similarity.

This brings us to important considerations, especially in an ecocritical context, concerning the notion of grounding. The thought of German philosopher Martin Heidegger has recently been taken up by a number of envi-

ronmental philosophers and ecocritics who see in a number of his writings a potentially ecological and anti-technological engagement with space and place<sup>10</sup>. Heidegger's oneiric vision of grounding and dwelling in essays like *Bauen Wohnen Denken* (1951) reveals the influence of a place-based thought that privileges attachment to locality. Jonathan Thacker notes that Heidegger "prioritises the nature of place over space... in his insistence that a kind of static dwelling in a particular location is the fundamental core the relation between human beings and space" (14). With respect to Morand, the notion of grounding and dwelling in an environment is problematized by the freneticism of American culture itself. Whereas Morand's attitudes to cosmopolitanism in the 1920s generally highlight the joyous abolition of traditional notions of distance and time that began to crumble under the dual weight of Einsteinian and Bergsonian theories and the colonial shrinking of horizons, these poems are curiously sceptical that mobility qua pure movement has any merit at all. There emerges a distinct ambiguity pertaining to the capacity for travel to perform any radical sense of deracination.

We can take the image of the steam train as a powerful lens through which this ambiguity emerges strongly. Along with the later advent of electricity, the locomotive is in many ways an archetypal symbol of modernity: already in 1876 Walt Whitman was hailing it as an "emblem of motion and power—pulse of the continent" (1900). Train travel allowed for an unprecedented scale of cross-country movement, opening up horizons for many of those seeking their fortune elsewhere. Yet this epistemological opening-up is dismissed, and the aesthetic mode Morand embraces instead foregrounds claustrophobia, sameness, and a stifling sense of disconnect. The third poem, "Southern Pacific", pits those two "mythic" ideas of America against each other. The train wagons, like the earlier beauty parlour, are initially evoked in prison-like terms; they are "blindés" [armoured] (4), and resemble "à des sous-sols de banque" [bank vaults] (5). Though mobile, rigidity reigns, underscored by the "nègres amidonnés" [starched negroes] (6) who serve the train's clientele. The train space has more in common with a restaurant than a revolutionary mode of transport. As it rushes through "des villes de zinc / et des villes de bois" [towns of zinc / and towns of wood] (21-22), tying together the two coasts in space and time, following the setting sun towards mythical California, the locomotive becomes dulled to this changing world outside. "[D]éserts rouges...déserts blancs" [Red deserts... white deserts] (15-16). The difference in quality in both lines is simply flattened out through anaphora.

<sup>10</sup> See Zimmerman 1994 for a close discussion of Heidegger's ecological credentials.

Movement, a fundamental characteristic of modern American life and also a key aspect of Morand's Modernist aesthetic, is reduced paradoxically to an extension of the Same. Whereas the desert seems to stretch on forever, the train carriage constricts; yet in both cases, the human figure is thrown out of sync and uncoupled from an unsullied environment. These travellers are trapped within a rigidly "fixed and bounded object" (Thacker 14): ironically, the same characteristics of place that Heidegger, and later Gaston Bachelard, praises as an authentic site of dwelling.

Place-markers are not therefore guarantors of environmental grounding. Indeed, Morand implies that an American sense of place is the product of a borrowing from older traditions, European in particular. We see this emerge strongly, firstly, in "Santa-Fé-de-Luxe". At first glimpse, the majority of the poem appears to be a train timetable, perhaps scribbled down verbatim by the poet. Yet what is striking is that the small provincial towns—many of which were almost brand new, built to house railroad workers—all have exotic names associated with weighty historical places and things: thus we see Bagdad, Troy, Siam, Hamlet, Wagner, to name only a few. These are all real places, yet even in 1927 they represented, for our French traveller, so many "cauchemars historiques" [historical nightmares] (*Œuvres* 196): defamiliarized hangovers from the ancient histories of other cultures. Again, there is nothing undergirding this aspiration: a name can only give an impression of historicity; it cannot create it.

This grasping for origins reoccurs in "Nouvelle-Orléans", a poem in which Morand appears to undermine the validity of place-based, and even nation-based, allegiances through his portrayal of a peculiar non-place: "Ils furent Américains pour échapper à la France jacobine. / Mais ils se disent aussi Français pour ennuyer les Américains / [...] Aussitôt après Canal St. / ce scandale cesse / et nous rentrons dans la ville américaine." [They became American to escape Jacobine France. / But they call themselves French to aggravate the Americans / [...] No sooner do we reach Canal St. / than the scandal stops / and we return to the American town] (16–21). New Orleans is interpreted by Morand as a strange heterotopia that resists categorisation as either French or America: it exists in a bubble, recalling and rejecting at the same time its past, present, and future; its inhabitants, shut away "[d]errière les jalousies" [behind the Venetian blinds] (8), belong to no tradition and are anchored in no particular place<sup>11</sup>.

<sup>11</sup> I recall here Michel Foucault's essay *Des Espaces Autres* (1967), which is one of the few texts on spatiality that he wrote during his life. The notion of the heterotopia—a simultaneously marginalised and resistant space—is sketched out more fully, but still enigmatically, in that work.

More broadly, these spaces all recall what Marc Augé famously called “non-lieux” (non-places), all the more so in that Morand prefigures Augé in his identification of “travel” networks as conducive to the homogenisation of social space<sup>12</sup>. Julian Murphet identifies the “conduits and transportational nodes” that arose in modernity (of which the highway and train are important features) as spaces that “refuse any attachment to their environment”, reduced to “prepackaged abstractions, comfortably familiar the world over” (120). Morand’s ironic evocation of these American attempts to search for some sort of origin not only points towards the way in which the new spaces inaugurated by technological modernity effectively uncouple “culture” from “nature”, but, moreover, towards the manner in which this uncoupling is *desired* as a symbol of progress.

All of these ideas are to be found in “Hollywood” once again, a longer poem that suggests that both nature and a “traditional” sense of place have been somehow sacrificed in favour of a portable illusion:

Quant à acheter la maison, il ne faut pas y compter encore,  
 elle ne sera pas finie avant le lendemain soir,  
 à moins que ce ne soit un bungalow déjà habité  
 qu'on apportera sur un camion, avec ses arbres, et le jardin... (6-9)

[As for buying the house, you shouldn't bet on it just yet,  
 it won't be finished before tomorrow evening  
 unless it's a bungalow that's already inhabited,  
 transported on the back of a truck, with its trees, and a garden...]

In this example, the “home” (or the “oikos”, the Greek root of the modern term “ecology”) does not necessarily have to be anywhere in particular for the American family, nor does it have to be distinct: it simply has to follow a standard, pre-fabricated format. More powerfully, this can also be read as a critique of the enduring American epithet “nature’s nation”; here, that mythical space has been replaced by a kitschy portable and synthetic replica. If nature itself can travel from one end of the country to the other on the back of a truck without any change in quality, then the very idea of travel as an experience of aesthetic difference is abolished. In “Hollywood”, that epitome of fictionalization, having a garden becomes nothing more than a reminder of ways of agricultural life which, in the late 1920s, were becoming severely disrupted – though the nation was yet to traverse the devastating crash of the 1930s. In Morand’s ironic sketch, natural elements like trees and grass are signs that gesture hopefully towards a much older sense of place, but in the hypermodern space of Los Angeles they do not signify anything at all,

<sup>12</sup> See Augé 1992

remaining at the mute level of the pure image; this is something close to what the Situationist theorist and activist Guy Debord would later call a “société de spectacle”.

The idea of surface image immediately brings to the fore the work of Jean Baudrillard, whose *Amérique* (1986) is perhaps the fundamental postmodern text on America’s uniquely superficial engagement with space. According to Murphet, postmodern space characterized by Baudrillard “deploys its simulated, self-duplicating surface with the goal of repelling desire itself” (Murphet in Connor 118). Moreover, Baudrillard’s insistence on the annihilating effect of speed, which represents the ‘trionphe de la surface et de l’objectalité pure sur la profondeur du desir’ [the triumph of the surface arid pure objectality over the profundity of desire] (Baudrillard 12), chimes with Morand’s 1920s images of the reproducibility of forms (such as the home) under the frantic speed of progress<sup>13</sup>. Indeed, there is much to suggest that Baudrillard’s musings in the 1980s have a certain precedent in Morand’s writing fifty years previously. Morand’s Los Angeles is already “hyperreal”, to use Baudrillard’s term: it is literally an image in the business of producing more images; its very “reality” is constituted in its dedication to the churning-out of pure representation. Almost everything Morand sees in this dream-factory is a prop in a global capitalist machine; the “grand temple de Jérusalem” [great temple of Jerusalem] he sees “juste derrière *De Mille’s Studios*” [just behind *De Mille’s Studios*] (“Hollywood” 45–46) is, of course, entirely fake: the exotic has been relocated, dragged into Western culture and appropriated as a symbol with no “real” status. Even the well-to-do women from across the globe who mill around Hollywood Plaza are dressed in “costumes de chercheuses d’or” [gold prospectors’ outfits] (20), another pastiche of earlier lifestyles invoked by this West-Coast nostalgia machine.

These reflections, finally, are by no means incompatible with ecocritical analyses. Morand’s pastiching of modernity’s attempts to grasp at some undefined “natural” origin goes straight to the heart of some “primitivist” environmental thought which deifies a similarly vague natural (and pre-technological) starting point from which humanity has fallen, a sort of secular Eden in which the apple is represented by the evils of ravenous modernity. In the final section, then, we will see more clearly how the “natural” returns to usurp modernity in a final catastrophic endpoint, and how the idea of desertification and destitution combine to create an aesthetic of disaster in a number of these poems which pitch the hubris of progress against the slower, yet more powerful, forces of the natural world.

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<sup>13</sup> Translation by Chris Turner

## America on the edge

“Exotic”, historic, and bourgeois linguistic markers barely paper over the cracks that emerge under mobile and englobing technology, as well as the natural untethering this willed ignorance implies. In fact, Morand’s wariness goes much further in these poems than mere scepticism. This America, the poet suggests, is doomed to end in collapse. At the heart of Morand’s aesthetics in *U.S.A.-1927* is something much more violent than the blurring we have seen in a number of poems: the notion of apocalypse.

Lawrence Buell argues that “[a]pocalypse is the single most powerful master metaphor that the contemporary environmental imagination has at its disposal” (285). If the ancient apocalyptic narratives—those developed under Zoroastrianism, Judaism, and early Christianity—are predominantly metaphysical or supernatural in tone, the notion of environmental catastrophe is arguably a recent occurrence; Greg Garrard notes that Rachel Carson (*Silent Spring*), Paul Ehrlich (*The Population Bomb*), and Gaia theorist James Lovelock have all appropriated apocalyptic rhetoric as driving forces in their work (101-102). However, an ecocritical approach to *U.S.A.-1927* reveals the extent to which catastrophe also feeds into Morand’s Modernist approach to a degraded environment; we might even go so far to dub this an apocalyptic aesthetic.

For Morand, collapse is implied in the very fabric of modern culture and architecture. He remarks of New York that “ces édifices sans passé n’ont pas non plus d’avenir” [these edifices have no future, either] (*Œuvres* 319). He also goes further in his dramatizations of the final destruction of modernity. A passage from one of his 1936 chroniques is revealing:

Les États-Unis ne sauraient prétendre à des fantômes ; les murs, qui sont les habits des spectres, n’y restent pas debout assez longtemps. Là, la brique s’effrite comme du sable, le fer se tord et se rouille, le ciment se casse en mille miettes comme du pain trop cuit, et les gratte-ciel [sic] qui, orgueilleusement se dressaient dans l’air indien, offusquant le soleil, n’ont pas la permission de vieillir. Peut-être si on leur laissait le temps, les verrions-nous s’affaisser sur eux-mêmes et, télescopés sous le poids des années multiplié par celui des étages, se réduire après quelques siècles aux dimensions des petites maisons londoniennes, ou même de ces chaumières d’Europe, continent où l’on voit le ciel. (343)

[The United States could make no claim to ghosts; there, the walls- the shrouds of ghosts- do not remain upright long enough. Over there, brick crumbles away like sand, iron warps and rusts, cement fractures into a thousand specks like overcooked bread, and the skyscrapers, thrusting upwards into the Indian sky, blotting out the sun, do not have permission to age. Per-

haps, given time, we might see them cave back in on themselves, telescoped under the multiplied weight of time and the number of floors, and reduced, after a few centuries, to the size of small London houses, or even of the thatched cottages of Europe- a continent where one can see the sky.]

The comparison of the European and the American is a recurring technique; yet the most striking image in this passage is the manner in which Morand emphasises, through metaphor and supernatural imagery, the possibility that technological progress can collapse back into the soil. Here, then, do we find the environment coming back to haunt modernity. The febrile, hastily-constructed buildings quite literally have no other foundation than the shifting earth: *sous le pavé, la plage!* [Beneath the pavement, the beach!] The countercultural slogan scrawled on walls across Paris in the 1960s can be retrospectively re-read from a far more pessimistic Modernist standpoint in Morand's case: what lies under the American city is not a pulsing, authentic natural world, but an indifferent, even vengeful, force.

This characterization of nature as a destructive force goes against eco-critical analyses which seek to validate the status of nature as an authentic locus of identity. On the other hand: there is no green utopia present in this collection. Nonetheless, nature is given power and agency in a number of poems, though it is often imposing and unreadable. In "Paul Claudel au Grand Canyon", the poet's description of the canyon's geography is pointedly violent: 'Insurrection de rochers, / éboulements, terrasses effondrées, / dessinées comme les jeux de la nature à l'intérieur des agates.' [Insurrection of rock, / crumbling, collapsed terraces, / sketched like the play of nature on the inwards of agates.] (11-13). Here, it is nature—the Colorado River—that is the "vainqueur" [victor] (14). Morand's quiet mocking of Claudel's lyrical musings (he sees in the rocks 'des cités entières... des cirques, / des paquebots, / des acropoles' ["whole cities... circuses, / steam ships, / acropolises."]) [21-24]) suggests that this immense geographical space has no linguistic analogue beyond the stark nominal form Morand espouses throughout the collection; though the poet expresses regret that "il n'y ait pas de soleil / parce que le puits manque de relief" [(that) there is no sun / because the crevasse lacks relief'] (28-29), we cannot take this wish wholly seriously: as in the desert, the desire for a painterly harmony is undercut by the craggy indifference of geology itself.

This geological violence— a slow violence compared to the explosive force of, say, a volcano —recurs most intensely in a post-apocalyptic moment at the end of the poem "Ascenseurs":

Un jour viendra où les amateurs de fouilles archéologiques  
chercheront l'emplacement de New York

On retrouvera toute une forêt de ces grands arbres d'acier  
Huilés, qui sont la colonne vertébrale des ascenseurs.  
Des savants  
essayeront de deviner  
si ces restes sont du XX<sup>e</sup> siècle ou de l'époque aztèque. (24- 30)

[A day will come when amateur excavators  
seek out the site of New York.  
They'll find a whole forest of these great oiled steel trees  
that are the backbone of elevators.  
Experts  
will try to guess  
if the remains are from the 20<sup>th</sup> century or from the Aztec period.]

The hybridity of this image is evident, mixing the natural (the forest), the biological (vertebrae) and the mechanical (steel and oil). Most striking, however, is the evocation of “deep time”. What is posited here is the idea of an entire culture reduced to nothing but fossils; fossils which enter into a postmodern and postnatural taxonomy of dead things. The image of the future archaeologists, scraping away the topsoil and unearthing the ruins of these dinosaur-like elevators, is lent weight by the implication of enormous stretches of time and the insinuation that human artefacts are, in fact, incredibly frail.

It is telling that T.S. Eliot's *Wasteland* prefigures these same images of collapse: Gabrielle McIntire notes that “Eliot stages a nightmarish vision in which our land and cities have reached the point of apocalyptic collapse” (190), illustrating this with an image that is strikingly reminiscent of Morand's toppling skyscrapers:

Falling towers  
Jerusalem Athens Alexandria  
Vienna London  
Unreal (373-6)

The ecocritical potential for both Modernists is plentiful. With regards to Eliot, Elizabeth Black has rightly noted that *The Wasteland* demonstrates the ‘devastating impact of lack of contact with the physical environment on the urban population of London’ (2); she remarks that Eliot's insistence on natural rhythms is undermined by a refusal to accept common metaphors. Thus, Eliot's ambivalent evocation of springtime demonstrates “a degree of disenchantment or even repulsion towards the natural world from the alienated human observer” (3).

Both approaches are examples of a literal *humiliation* – that is, a dragging-down of the deified Modern subject into the grimy *humus* that undergirds all human exploits. We can therefore interpret much of Morand's outlook in these poems as a *humbling* (the root is the same) of Modernism and modernity's claim to become 'masters rather than servants of Nature', as Henry Ford was to put it (Lewis 25). The Promethean facet of American culture that Morand intuits is doomed to end in failure: a failure brought about by the very ignorance of natural processes which, like the Freudian repressed, suddenly returns to engulf modern America's swaggering ego.

The use of apocalypse, finally, brings us directly to contemporary environmental rhetoric. There is little doubt, if we stretch out the ramifications of this destruction, that Morand's articulation of a "future collapse" is closely linked to the way in which radical environmentalists use the fear of apocalypse as an imaginative trigger; as Garrard notes, such rhetoric is "capable of galvanizing activists, converting the undecided and ultimately, perhaps, of influencing government and commercial policy" (113). It would be unwise to attribute these hopes wholesale to Morand, who was by no means an environmentalist. Yet the images Morand conjures up, when read through eco-criticism, undoubtedly feed into the same apocalyptic discourse wielded by later activists, and which even penetrates popular culture: it is not so difficult to place Morand's technological nightmares within a tradition that goes all the way to a film like *The Matrix* (1999) – another work that interrogates the split between technological modernity, its simulacra, and the "real" world.

Finally, to draw a line back to an earlier observation, there is much to suggest in these poems that Morand was, perhaps subconsciously, edging close to ideas we see emerging today under the Anthropocene. The archaeological and waste-centred themes we see above can convincingly be read retrospectively: as a reflection on massive industrialisation, the poet's envisaging of an entire stratum of man-made "fossils" calls into question once more the boundary between the natural and the artificial; it is an image of humankind altering the very form of geology – no longer simply through the whims of language, as we see in "Paul Claudel au Grand Canyon", but through a more materialist attention to changes in soil, bodies, and physical entities. Morand is distinctly aware of the layers of offcuts and detritus that are being piled up in the back alleys of modernity, and he does not let them slip from view. In this way, our present situation warps our reception of earlier literature; the advent of the Anthropocene, with all the apocalyptic and post-human rhetoric it entails, is now forcing us to perform more creative re-readings that account for emergent environmental effects that were hitherto all but invisible (Clark 2015).

## Conclusion

Morand's Modernist approach to travel in America can therefore be said to reflect compellingly a number of sea changes in attitudes towards technology, dwelling, the natural world, and that slippery notion of "progress"; travelling European Modernists in this period of American expansionism could not help but be fascinated by the new hybridity inaugurated by consumer culture and commercialism, aided once again by revolutions in travel possibilities. It is important to realise that nature is not relegated or ignored in either these poems or under Modernism more broadly; even if nature, in a "pure" sense, no longer can be said to exist under modernity, Morand's poetic vision(s) nonetheless articulate "new *productions* of nature, new articulations of relationships among human and nonhuman beings and phenomena" (Haraway in Garrard *Handbook* 101). Such is the approach in *U.S.A.-1927*, as this reading has posited.

The pluralistic and multiperspectival techniques so common to Modernist poetry becomes a convincing approximation of the boundaries and limits of travel—in the cosmopolitan sense—that must now contend not only with the experience of separate "culture", but an irrevocably intermeshed melting-pot of different world cultures, of things brought into close contact through global trade, and of new natures that arise weirdly at the meeting point of all these.

Région des orangers,  
des mandariniers,  
et des pamplemousses,  
que ramassent pour New York  
les grands trains jaune citron,  
les *Pacific Fruit Express*. (27-31)

[A region of orange trees  
of mandarin trees  
and grapefruits  
bound for New York  
on the long lemon-yellow trains  
of the *Pacific Fruit Express*]

Lines such as these, from "Descente Vers la Côte", can now be read through the lens of ecocriticism as a recognition of the incessant movement that shuttles natural goods across the country: as demand for exotic fruits grows in one part of the country, so the pressure to intensify production—with all the environmental damage we now know—increases in another. Remote places become bound together in a joint fate through the production and

consumption of nature. This is what makes Morand compelling in the twenty-first century, for he writes fluently, almost prophetically, of the unending flux that characterizes not only modern-day America, but the modern world as a whole, on a planetary scale. It is no coincidence that the first poem of the collection is an image: a silent, star-flecked black-and-white impression of the Milky Way. *U.S.A.-1927* is ecological in this sense—aware of the innumerable links that bind together not only two parts of the country (a link made physical by train tracks), but also the conceptual links that tie the human and the nonhuman, which then enter into a creative and disturbing dance. The mechanism of capitalism is on full show here, bringing with it the loss of contact with any grounded or ecological sense of identity and revealing an unstable, mobile culture which, today, seems uncannily prescient in its vision of postmodernity's essential fragility.

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