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Can One « Jazz » the French Language ?

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The preface to Paul Morand's collection Magie noire (1929) has been the subject of much discussion, including that of Louis-Ferdinand Céline, who has repeatedly referred to Morand as the first person to have "jazzed" the French language. Taking this metaphor seriously, this article sets out to systematically clarify its meanings.

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In the beginning, there was Mezzrow

In his autobiography *Really The Blues*(1946), Mezz Mezzrow (1899-1972) recalled the impact that listening to Bessie Smith's records for the first time in Chicago circa 1924 had on him. The jazz clarinetist, living proof that intelligence and sensitivity are not necessarily antagonistic to each other, wanted to find out why her voice had such a powerful effect on him:

> *"What knocked me out most on those records was the slurring and division of words to fit the musical pattern, the way the words were put to work for the music. I tried to write them down because I figured the only way to dig Bessie's unique phrasing was to get the words down exactly as she sang them. It was something I had to do; there was a great secret buried in that woman's genius that I had to get."* [10]

These were the words of an insider – or of somebody aspiring to become one. For a young Jewish man who had begun hanging out with Chicago's South Side jazz musicians, the art of Bessie Smith was an esoteric one. But instead of lapsing into hocus-pocus explanations, Mezzrow, a rationalist, chose a method used by the folklorists of his time: transcription. By perceiving the extent to which words "were placed at the service of the music" in her songs, the young man grasped the quintessence of Smith's genius, the genius of the blues: the strict adherence of linguistics to music. Mezzrow enlisted his sister's aid to help him unlock the mystery of her deeply moving singing:

> *"After every few words I'd stop the record to write the lyrics down, so my dad… Why didn't I ask my sister Helen to take down the words in shorthand? She was doing secretarial work and he figured it would be a cinch for her. If my sister had made a table-pad out of my best record or used my old horn for a garbage can she couldn't have made me hotter than she did that day. I've never been so steamed up, before or since. She was in a very proper and dicty mood, so she kept 'correcting' Bessie's grammar, straightening out her words and putting them in 'good' English until they sounded like some stuck-up jive from McGuffy's Reader instead of the real down-to-earth language of the blues. That girl was schooled so good, she wouldn't admit there was such a word as 'ain't' in the English language, even if a hundred million Americans yelled it in her face every hour of the day. I've never felt friendly towards her to this day, on account of how she laid her fancy high-school airs on the immortal Bessie Smith."* [?]

His nitpicking sister sanitized "the real down-to-earth language of the blues". By restoring conventional syntax, eliminating contractions and enforcing the use of "proper" English, Helen Mezzrow deprived Smith of an opportunity to give the full measure of her phrasing and, therefore, to generate emotion. She objected to transcribing lines like "I ain't never loved but three men in my life", which combines the notorious "ain't" with a double negative that, while not unique to African-American vernacular speech, is assuredly not Oxford English. The Columbia 1420978 rpm Smith recorded in March 1927 features "Send Me to the 'Lectric Chair" on side A and "Them's Graveyard Words" on side B. The former has an elision, the latter a vernacular equivalent of *those are*. By using such contractions and distortions, African-Americans made English the language of jazz, i.e. a language possible for jazz – clearly not without some

difficulty and resistance. The issue becomes even more acute when it pertains to French. To what extent has this language been able to handle jazz? What impact might jazz have had on the language of Racine, assuming that such an influence was even imaginable?



Aaron Douglas, illustration for the English edition of *Black Magic* by Paul Morand, 1930

Source: Collection particulière

Paul Morand, or jazz as a "new form"

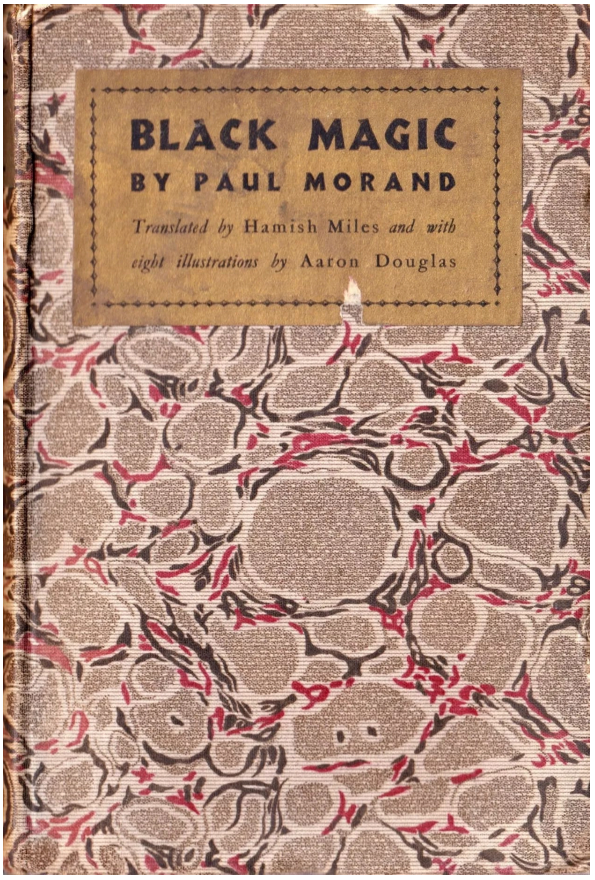
If certain accounts and statements are anything to go by, some may have thought so. In 1927, Paul Morand (1888-1976) published *Black Magic*, a collection of short stories revolving around Black female characters whose many adaptations and metamorphoses he followed across the continents and the settings in which they lived: Europe, Africa, the United States, etc. The stories, which ensure the triumph of atavism, met with a mixed reception from Harlem Renaissance figures. While painter Aaron Douglas agreed to illustrate the English-language version, [1] writer and novelist John F. Matheus took exception to what he deemed the outrageous primitivism of Morand's text. [2] Yet, reading the foreword, it seems that *Black Magic* is a by-product and a consequence of jazz, a literary object unthinkable without it. Let the reader judge from these lines:

> *"1920. I return to France. In the post-war bars. So sublime, so heart-rending are the accents of jazz has, that we all realize that a new form is needed for our mode of feeling." [3]*

In other words, jazz gave music a suitable form to express new feelings. But Morand went even further. For him, jazz worked for all the arts. It was a model not only for writers, but also painters, architects, choreographers, etc., and the only question was one of "substance", i.e. content. The rest of the foreword suggests that this is how these lines should be interpreted:

> *"But the basis of it all? Sooner or later, I tell myself, we shall have to respond to this summons from the darkness, and go out to see what lies behind this overweening melancholy that calls from the saxophones. How can we stand still while the ice of time is melting between our warm hands? Away! Away!*
> *1925. – Djibouti.*
> *1927. – Havana, New Orleans, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Virginia, the Carolinas, Charleston, Harlem.*
> *1927. – Guadeloupe, Martinique, Trinidad, Curaçao, Haiti, Jamaica, Cuba, Alabama, Mississippi.*
> *1928. – Dakar, Guinea, Fouta Djallon, Sudan, the southern Sahara, Niger, Timbuktu, the Mossi country, Côte-d'Ivoire.*
> *50,000 kilometers. 28 Negro countries."* [7]

Jazz musicians having accomplished the formal work that writers had given up on or failed to do, all that remained was to look around and discover what "dark matter" lay beneath the groundbreaking, moving and, in a word, modern, form produced by saxophones. Driven by various ideologies and intentions, many writers, from Céline to Gide, Albert Londres, Michel Leiris, William Seabrook, Joseph Kessel and dozens more, answered the "summons from the darkness". The destinations Morand lists in his foreword, and a reading of *Black Magic*, echoes a sort of pan-Africanist intention or intuition (the first Pan-African Congress took place in Paris in February 1919) but this intuition is perverse in that it essentializes Blacks, treating them as if they were all one and the same person. To be fair, Morand was only swimming in the intellectual current of a time when all writers, even the most anti-colonialist ones, went on about "the Negro question" or "the Black problem". In their book *Le Jazz* (1927), André Schaffner and André Cœuroy set out in search of nothing less than "the Negro soul", and in 1931 poet and civil rights activist Nancy Cunard published the massive anthology *Negro*.



Cover of the English translation of *Black Magic* by Paul Morand, 1930

Source: Collection particulère

Morand's position can be summarized by radicalizing it: *Black Magic* is Negro in style (its "form"), Black in subject (its "substance"). It is jazz in a book, in literary form. Little does it matter that jazz, strictly speaking, or nightclub scenes, for example, take up little space in *Black Magic*. The book is first and foremost a matter of style. Perhaps Morand would have described the other works he published in the 1920s, such as the novel *Lewis and Irene*, the travel book *Paris-Tombouctou* (*Paris-Timbuktu*) and the short story collections *Open All Night* and *Fermé la nuit* (*Closed at Night*), as sharing the same jazz aesthetic as *Black Magic*. Needless to say, I do not share the appealing but rather weak and lazy positions in Morand's foreword (the style/substance dichotomy, unquestioned trans-semiosis, etc.). I feel infinitely closer to Sartre, who in the introduction to *What Is Literature*? assures the reader that he had no intention of enlisting painting, sculpture or music under the banner of commitment, noting:

> *"And why would we want to? When a writer of past centuries expressed an opinion about his craft, was he immediately asked to apply it to the other arts? But today it's the elegant thing to do to 'talk painting' in the argot of the musician or the literary man, and to 'talk literature' in the argot of the painter, as if at bottom there were only one art which expressed itself indifferently in one or the other of these languages, like the Spinozistic substance which is adequately reflected by each of its attributes."* [7]



Cover of *Jazz Hot*, January 1967. The photo was taken at Jazzland, where Jean-Paul Sartre, who used to listen to Charlie Parker there in 1949, went downstairs to see Sonny Rollins perform.

Source: Collection particulière

Besides, what would writing jazz be like? Could the new music's "sublime accents" be transposed linguistically into French? And if so, in what form?

Céline, exponent of the jazz "model"

As muddled as they may seem, Morand's ideas made enough of an impression that echoes of them can be found in writings by one of the major literary figures of the time, Louis-Ferdinand Céline (1894-1961). In *Journey to the End of the Night*, he celebrated (or attacked; it is unclear which) "*la musique négro-judéo-saxonne*" [?] but the writer's most interesting references to jazz show up in his correspondence with Brandeis University literature professor Milton Hindus between 1947 and 1949, when he was living in Denmark after the war. In these letters, Céline no longer considered jazz a socio-musical phenomenon – the soundtrack of the interwar period – but an aesthetic model for other art forms. In one of the first letters, he wrote:

> *"It must be remembered that Paul Morand was the first of our writers to have jazzed the French language. He is not an emotional person like me, but he is a damn good wordsmith. I recognize him as my master."* [?]

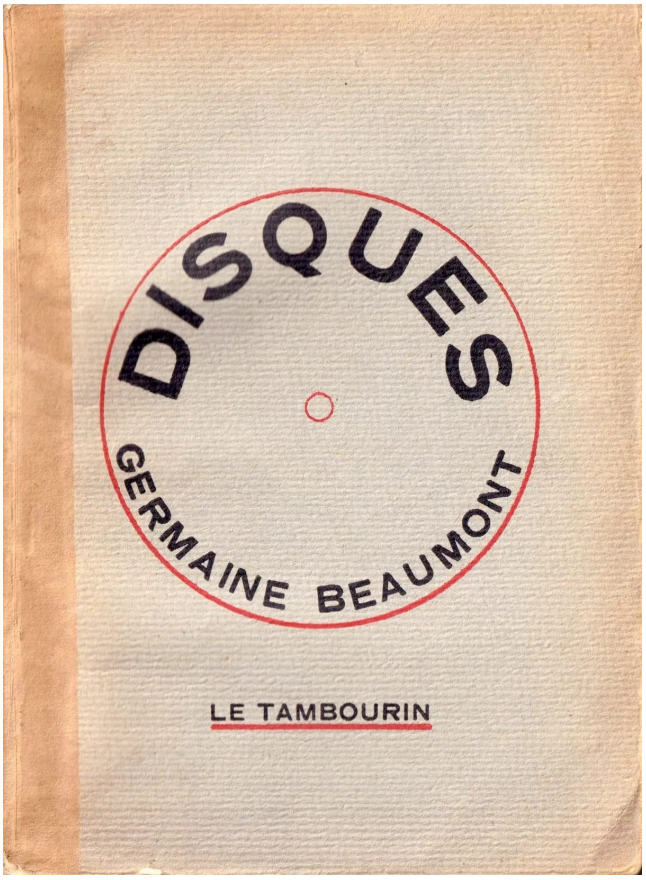
He mentioned the jazz model again in another letter to Hindus six months later:

> *"The career diplomat Paul Morand [...] is a very original writer (Open All Night, etc.), the first to write in jazz, dare I say – he is really a discoverer of style, a born writer of the rarest kind."* [7]

It is possible that Céline would not have written those words if Morand, in the foreword of *Black Magic*, had not made jazz the formal paradigm of all modern art. Céline had an almost religious passion for dance and wrote many stories for ballets. In his mind, the jazz model was constantly competing with the choreographic model, in particular classical dance, which the writer's wife Lucette continued to teach long after his death. But he also loved showgirls. In fact, he dedicated *Journey* to the American dancer Elizabeth Craig, the great love of his life, who starred on Broadway and the stages of Paris. This insistence raises questions and must be taken seriously.

The two statements are not exactly juxtaposed. In the second, very close to Morand's ideas, Morand is the inventor of *writing in jazz*. He wrote in jazz as Mauriac wrote in French, D. H. Lawrence in English and Alfred Döblin in German. Céline is so aware of how bold his statement is that he feels the need to qualify it with "dare I say". Jazz as a language? Or even, more restrictively, jazz as a natural language available to the writer along with many others?

It is not that clear, and the jazz model can be extended to macrostructural data : generic choices, arrangement of masses, composition, *etc*. After all, Morand spoke of "form", not language, in his foreword. For example, journalist and writer Germaine Beaumont called the collection of reviews she published in 1930 *Disques* (*Records*). [8] If, as Pierre Mac Orlan said, the record brought jazz like clouds bring a storm, the spread of phonographs and the foxtrot invasion being two absolutely concomitant and interdependent phenomena, Beaumont structured her book like one of those binders with sleeves for ten or twelve 78 rpm records (the Revelers, Ted Lewis, Paul Whiteman and other popular dance bands) that in so many early 1930s homes lay next to phonographs, before pompous critic Hugues Panassié's purism drove these shameful manifestations of dance music out of the jazz genre. It took three minutes to play a record and three to read a review. Without ever mentioning it, the book owes something of its structure to jazz.



Cover of *Disques* by Germaine Beaumont, 1930

Source: Collection particulière

But far from developing the hypothesis of jazz as a compositional model, Céline stressed the idea of jazz as a natural language with Morand as its first speaker. The rest of the quote restricts the seminal power of jazz to stylistic, and, therefore, linguistic considerations ("he is really a discoverer of style"). The first quote, less radical and explicitly metaphorical, more clearly restricted jazz's linguistic impact by making Morand the craftsman of a jazzification of language.

Jazz is no longer just another language: it is the French language that Morand has jazzed up. He "wrote jazz" in French. But what linguistic facts and precise stylizations is Céline aiming at with his metaphors, with which Morand's prose overflows? What does jazz mean here? Is it a matter of lexicon, rhythm and syntax? Or of "substance"? can anything other than jazz be written about in jazz? The questions abound.

Maingeneau and "magnetization"

Perhaps the eye of a professional linguist will help make things clearer and give Morand and Céline's statements a precise, non-figurative meaning. In his 1993 book *Text and Context*, Dominique Maingueneau explicitly associated jazz and writing. Unfortunately, just as the goal comes within reach, it slips away again. Maingueneau introduced the concept of *perilanguage*:

> *"Music often gives perilanguage a face. For example, Diderot dreamed that an (Italian) opera composer would make use of his transposition [of Racine's Iphigenia]. Celinian enunciation, haunted by the desire to project a raw emotion, often seems magnetized by jazz."* [7]

Ten years later, Maingueneau completely refashioned this paragraph and deleted every reference to Céline and jazz. In my view, he censured himself not for ideological reasons (associating jazz with raw emotion had a primitivist tinge that was already politically incorrect in 1993) but theoretical ones. Although writers accept and even seek metaphor, it cannot contaminate metapoetic statements made by linguists. If it does, the scientific added value is nil or almost nil. Consequently, what could "magnetized by jazz" mean if not that, at the same time as what Cocteau called "the American arrival of rhythm" [?], Morand, Céline, Cendrars and Soupault's writings offered a modernist style that is hard to characterize linguistically? But the use of a jazz comparison can give the impression of coming close.

Short-circuit, electricity

In *Reading Writing* (1982), Julien Gracq recalled his adolescent passion for Morand's novels, which almost changed the course of his life. He especially enjoyed Morand's first novel, *Lewis and Irene*, published in 1924, the same year King Oliver recorded his masterpieces and Mezzrow discovered Bessie Smith. But the French were completely in the dark about all that. they were listening to Mitchell's Jazz Kings on Pathé records and, while they prepared to welcome Sidney Bechet, it was as Josephine Baker's accompanist. Recalling his youthful infatuation, Gracq noted about *Lewis and Irene*:

> *"Reread in 1977, the book, spoiled by some modernist childishness that dates it too closely to the Bugatti era (the jasmine that makes 'its perfume ring out in two beats'), incorporates a new expedient into the novel: the short circuit, which unfortunately, because of the risk of blowing a fuse, could only be used to a limited extent. So much so, that it now appears, in the literary lineage of the interwar period, as the equivalent of one of those falsely plausible technical solutions that led to a dead end at the time – the seaplane, the zeppelin or the hydrofoil. On the contrary, one of the novel's most compelling secrets seems to be the ability to manufacture slowness from a sparsely counted material duration." [?]*

While outdated, the metaphorical text brings a solution closer into view and has a microstructural application, even if, in this excerpt, it is mainly conceived of as an instrument for managing duration, a tool of novelistic time, a "short-circuit", through the discontinuity it implies. The same applies to the composition of the work as a whole (ellipses, narrative leaps, prolepses or analepses, the refusal to "say everything", etc., all ingredients of a literature of the "man in a hurry"). It also applies to the sentence level (anacoluthons, punctuation, including Céline's famous ellipses) and the word level: elisions, apocopes, abbreviations, all elements that short-circuit the sovereign deployment of an academic written language by abbreviating, perforating and crushing it. All of these writers were contemporary with ragtime, not jazz. Mitchell's Jazz Kings did not play or record jazz. How could it have been otherwise, given that many of the bandmembers had already moved to Europe before the war, i.e. before the arrival of jazz? They played ragtime, a contraction of two words, ragged time. I cannot imagine the first line of Soupault's 1917 poem *Ragtime* being recited in any other way than, "Le nègre danse électric'ment" (see the excerpt below) and we find the chair to which Bessie begs the judge to sentence her: "Send Me To The 'Lectric Chair". If the focus shifts from the verse to the stanza as a whole, the pace changes and discontinuity, and parataxis, takes over from elision, or more exactly, combines with it:

> *The Negro dances electrically*
> *Have you forgotten your homeland and the town of Galveston*
> *Let the banjo cackle*
> *The old men will go at last*
> *along the skyscrapers climb the elevators*
> *sparks bounce*
> *Hello there!* [?]



Minstrel, Chromolithography, circa 1910

Source: Collection particulière

The usual American attributes – negroes, banjos, skyscrapers and elevators – an alexandrine tooled as perfectly as a standard meter, and memory, of what the metric of the past might have been, closer to a corset than rags, produce what Breton called, not without some annoyance, "American poems". [?] He was referring to Aragon, but he could easily have been alluding to Soupault's text as well as to Cocteau's foe, in which the parataxis and lexical emblems of a dreamed-of America can be found. Aragon later found the formula to illuminate this moment in French prose. In *Le Mentir-vrai*, published in 1964, he wrote about "syncopated speech, the oral French that belongs to [his] generation", [?] i.e., his generation of writers. Aragon, known for breathing new life into the moribund carcass of alexandrine verse, played a key role in the establishment of spoken French in literature. He was also a master of words that may seem rough and slapdash but in fact are carefully crafted prose, words that are spoken or claim to be. (*Claim* because the prose of Céline, Aragon and Morand is as close to actual spoken French as the works of André Hodeir are to truly improvised music.) They all sought a way to *simulate* or produce the illusion of oral speech or

improvisation. But whereas Céline claims to be a follower of Morand, Queneau recognizes quite a different lineage. In a text published in 1950 in *Letters, Numbers and Forms*, he wrote, "*Journey* is the first important book where spoken French is employed not just in dialogue, but also in narration. Previously, that had been found only in a few short stories in *Libertinage*: Aragon, and surrealism in general, had an undeniable influence on Céline." Critic Jérome Meizoz wrote about *Libertinage*, a collection of stories and plays written between 1918 and 1923, in his book *L'Âge du roman parlant (1919-1939)* (*The age of the Speaking novel*). [?] Speaking or spoken.

Jazz, a one-size-fits all comparison

Jazz or syncopation in writing refers to the introduction of a large amount of oral speech, something like *jaserie* ("chatter" in French), in literary prose. As Leiris wrote in *Simple glottal Ticks*, a dictionary of puns marked by Cratylism and what Claudel called "Western ideograms": "jazz – zigzagging chatter" ("*jase en zigzag*"). [?] In 1947, Céline approached the phenomenon with the words of jazz, while 20 years later, Aragon preferred the more general term *syncopation*, which had the advantage of bringing ragtime back into the picture but was nevertheless misleading. As always in these matters, its linguistic meaning (i.e. the phenomenon by which one or more phonemes are removed from a word) and its musical meaning only marginally coincide and the syncopation of language, a phonetic phenomenon with rhythmic consequences, has a much smaller impact on prose than musical syncopation does on music, in particular African-American music.

If so many different poetics have been approached under the banner of jazz, it is because for two decades jazz, which took the world by storm in ragtime's wake, represented, often in total ignorance of the constraints to which it was subjected, the laws that governed it, real improvisation, etc., the ideal form of freedom, speed and organized disorder. As free as everyday speech being made up as the speaker goes along can be, it was the absolute yardstick, the paradigm for everything from Matisse's painting to Morand's style, in much the same way as, in France in the 1960s, any long-haired young man wearing flowery shirts was called a Beatle, even if he owed his allegiance to "Autumn Leaves" or Eric Dolphy. It is therefore not by examining things from a linguistic perspective that the most tangible forms of the Americanization of French prose will be found. French writers certainly felt the impact of American literature. Even more than Céline, Sartre the novelist drew inspiration from Faulkner and Dos Passos, including in his narrative technique. Vernon Sullivan would not have been possible without James Cain, etc. But the emergence of spoken prose would probably have occurred even if jazz – *horresco referens* – had never been born. The omnipresence of the "jazz" comparison seems to say more about African-American music's power over European imaginations, and even bodies, than about an authentic process of the Americanization of French prose. While the omnipresence of the jazz metaphor strips it of much of its relevance as a model, it puts us at our ease and allows it to be used with complete freedom. For example, Jean Giono, whose novels are populated more by rattles than solos, more by hussars than "jazz negroes", must be recognized as one of the authors who wrote best in jazz. You would even swear it was his mother tongue.

Banner illustration: dust jacket for "Black magic", by Paul Morand, translated from the French by Hamish Miles, New York: 1929, Viking Press, illustration by Aaron Douglas. Yale University Library

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NOTES

1 Paul Morand, *Black Magic* (London: William Heinnemann Ltd, 1929). [^4]: Yannick Séité, « L’inscription de la musique dans l’anthologie *Negro*», *Gradhiva* 19 (2014) : 92–93. [^5]: Paul Morand, *Black Magic,* trans. Hamish Miles (London : The Windmill Press, 1929), i. [^6]: Morand, *Black Magic*, ii. [^7]: Jean-Paul Sartre, *What Is Literature?*, trans. Bernard Frechtman (New York : Philosophical Library, 1949), 8. [^8]: Céline, *Voyage au bout de la nuit* (1932) in *Romans I* (Paris : Gallimard, 1981), 72. [^9]: Céline, « Lettres à Milton Hindus », *Les Cahiers de l’Herne*, 1972 : 115. [^10]: Céline, « Lettres à Milton Hindus », 127. The italics are the author’s. [^11]: Germaine Beaumont, *Disques* (Paris: Le Tambourin, 1930). [^12]: Dominique Maingueneau, *Texte et Contexte* (Paris : Dunod, 1993), 114. [^13]: Jean Cocteau, *Portraits-Souvenirs* (1935), in *Romans, Poésies, Œuvres diverses*, (Paris : Le Livre de Poche, 1995), 763. [^14]: Julien Gracq, *En lisant en écrivant* (Paris : José Corti, 1980), 196-197. Translation by the translator of this article. [^15]: Philippe Soupault, « Rag time, » in *Georgia, Épitaphes, Chansons et autres poèmes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1984), 43. [^16]: Letter from André Breton to Théodore Fraenkel dated October 7, 1917, quoted in Louis Aragon, *Œuvres poétiques complètes*, vol. I (Paris: Gallimard, 2007), 1187. [^17]: Aragon, *Le Mentir-vrai* (Paris : Gallimard, 1980), 13. [^18]: Jérôme Meizoz, *L’Âge du roman parlant (1919-1939). Écrivains, critiques, linguistes et pédagogues en débat* (Genève : Droz, 2001). [^19]: Michel Leiris, *Langage tangage ou Ce que les mots me disent* (Paris : Gallimard, 1985), 35.

2 Mezz Mezzrow and Bernard Wolfe, introd. by Ben Ratliff, *Really The Blues* (New York: New York Review Books, 2016): 86-87. [^2]: Mezz Mezzrow and Bernard Wolfe, introd. by Ben Ratliff, *Really The Blues* (New York : New York Review Books, 2016): 86-87. “*À chaque bout de phrase, je devais arrêter le disque pour écrire les mots, alors mon père me fit une proposition : pourquoi ne pas demander à ma sœur Helen de prendre les paroles en sténo ? Comme elle était secrétaire, il se disait qu’elle ferait ça en un tournemain. Ma sœur se serait servie d’un de mes disques en guise de dessous de plat, ou de mon vieux ténor comme boîte à ordures qu’elle ne m’aurait pas exaspéré plus qu’elle ne le fit ce jour-là. Je n’ai jamais autant écumé, ni avant ni depuis. Elle était d’humeur pédante, il faut croire, car elle s’obstina à corriger l’orthographe et la syntaxe de Bessie, rectifiant ses mots et les mettant en “bon” anglais tant et si bien qu’on aurait dit le jargon figé et collet monté d’un dictionnaire au lieu du langage authentique et simple du blues. Cette fille avait le cerveau si bien moulé par l’école qu’elle n’admettait pas l’existence de mots tels que* “ain’t” *en anglais, même lorsque cent millions d’Américains le lui*

hurlaient dans la figure à toute heure du jour. Depuis ce moment-là, je n'ai plus jamais éprouvé d'amitié pour ma sœur, à cause de ses airs pincés d'universitaire devant l'immortelle Bessie Smith."