universal. Contemporary writers have stressed the complexities and contradictions inherent in communication. "Words and meanings [are] at odds," claims the narrator of Don DeLillo's first novel, *Americana.* "Words [do] not say what [is] being said nor even its reverse. I learned to speak a new language and soon mastered the special elements of that tongue" (1971; New York: Viking, 1989, 36). In "On the Death of Robert Lowell," Myles finds drama in discrepancies. Like DeLillo's narrator, her persona speaks "a new language" as she explores the interstices between elegiac form and obscene content, between outward condemnation and repressed sentimentality.

Z. BART THORNTON
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Eliot, Joyce, Lévy-Bruhl

To the Editor:

In carefully describing the divergent uses made of the philosopher and anthropologist Lucien Lévy-Bruhl by T. S. Eliot and James Joyce ("Myths of Anthropology: Eliot, Joyce, Lévy-Bruhl," 109 [1994]: 266–80), David Spurr appears to be assuming or at least allowing that Lévy-Bruhl himself would have concurred in these appropriations. When Spurr says that "[i]t is possible to see in Joyce, as in Eliot, an attraction to Lévy-Bruhl's 'primitive consciousness' as a realm of signification that brings together myth and history, dream and reality, consciousness and unconscious, present and past, in ways denied by a rationalist, materialist age" (274), he does not make clear that Lévy-Bruhl deemed primitive mentality outright irrational and praised modernity for having largely transcended it. While arguing continually that primitive thinking differs in kind from modern thinking, Lévy-Bruhl was not arguing that primitive thinking is true, much less that it is deeper than modern thinking, let alone that it represents a level of experience to be recaptured. Lévy-Bruhl did indeed insist that primitive thinking must be grasped in its own distinctive terms, but he was scarcely thereby asserting that it must be evaluated on those terms. For him, primitives were to be faulted rather than celebrated for failing to recognize the distinctions that, as Spurr notes, Eliot and Joyce praised Lévy-Bruhl for effacing. To the limited extent that, as Lévy-Bruhl granted, moderns still blur these distinctions, so much the worse for them.

Lévy-Bruhl did acknowledge that moderns as well as primitives harbor Durkheimian collective representations, but only primitives' representations come between them and the direct experience of the world. Modern representations shape sheer conceptions but not perceptions and are therefore not theory-laden. In "The Transition to the Higher Mental Types," a section of *How Natives Think* (*Les fonctions mentales dans les sociétés inférieures*), his first anthropological book, Lévy-Bruhl charts the "progress" and "evolution" in cognition, which require precisely the filtering out of the emotional elements that distort primitive perceptions.

In short, Lévy-Bruhl would have been dumbfounded by what Spurr seemingly credits him with pioneering: "some of the fundamental concerns of twentieth-century writing in general, even the writing of what is called the postmodern era: the conflict between reason and its others, the crisis of representation, the problem of the subject . . ." (269). Not even in his posthumously published notebooks did Lévy-Bruhl abandon his cultural and epistemological absolutism. (On Lévy-Bruhl's cognitive absolutism rather than relativism see my "Relativism and Rationality in the Social Sciences," *Journal of Religion* 67 [1987]: 353–62.)

ROBERT A. SEGAL
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To the Editor:

David Spurr valuably points out how Eliot was indebted to Jewish anthropologists like Lévy-Bruhl (though this is hardly new knowledge), despite Eliot's "infamous" remark about Jews (273). Spurr cites this remark as "notorious" but conveniently provides Eliot's own explanation, which indicates that the term *freethinking* can be applied to any group of people and that "a large number of free-thinkers of any race" is what Eliot finds undesirable (279n11). In other words, Eliot did not mean to single out Jewish persons. For some reason, Spurr finds this rather clear-cut explanation "not very helpful." Impersonal allusions to Jews in Eliot's poetry, ones that reflect the persona, not the person writing, seem to have left Spurr obsessed with the notion that Eliot himself had to be biased. But was Shakespeare a racist because he put hateful words into the mouth of Iago? Hardly so.

It must be remembered that Eliot specifically denied that he was or had ever been an anti-Semite and that he strongly criticized Pound for racist bias. (See the section on Jewish ethnicity, included because some Jews are black, in my *T. S. Eliot and the Heritage of Africa* [New York: Lang, 1992, 93–118].) If Eliot was

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depicting English society, which was in some respects anti-Semitic, why should he get the blame for a creditable attempt at verisimilitude? Yet Spurr curiously thinks that the social milieu at the time "hardly excuses" Eliot's portrayal (273). In a still more curious endnote, Spurr observes that the term *estaminet* in "Gerontion" is "an anagram for *anti-Semite*" (279n10). What relevance, pray, has this to what the poet intended? The presumed wordplay makes no sense in context. The name *Spurr* happens to be an anagram for *purrs*, but does that mean that one is to ascribe feline qualities to this critic's prose?

ROBERT F. FLEISSNER
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To the Editor:

At the end of his article, "Myths of Anthropology: Eliot, Joyce, Lévy-Bruhl," David Spurr sums up the difference "between Eliot and Joyce in their uses of the primitive" (277) by drawing a distinction from Foucault between anthropology and ethnology:

> The "precritical analysis of what man is in his essence" is what Foucault calls the "anthropological sleep." . . .
> . . . Eliot's resurrection of the primitive manifests some of the "precritical" and totalizing gestures that Foucault ascribes to anthropology. (277–78)

The phrase "some of the 'precritical' and totalizing gestures" bespeaks Spurr's elision of the side of Eliot's thinking that runs counter to such gestures; in other words, Spurr takes on a straw man.

In his introduction to Charlotte Eliot's *Savonarola*, T. S. Eliot criticizes Lévy-Bruhl:

> He invents an elaborate "prelogism" to account for the savage's identification of himself with his totem, where it is not certain that the savage, except so far as he had mental processes similar to our own, had any mental processes at all.

Moving from Kant to Lévy-Bruhl, Eliot argues in effect that if "meaning" exists prior to apperception, one can neither analyze it nor base analysis on it. There is nothing "totalizing" here.

The question remains, How does one respond to complex thinkers with whom one disagrees on important particulars? Critical Manichaeanism is not the answer.

LEE OSER
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Reply:

Robert A. Segal's letter alludes to a long-standing debate among anthropologists over Lévy-Bruhl's credentials as a cultural relativist. The problem lies in the ambivalence of Lévy-Bruhl's work, where claims for "higher" forms of cognition in modern societies are made almost as an afterthought to his rich and obviously fascinated explorations of primitive thinking on its own terms. Segal revives the early negative valuation made by followers of Franz Boas, who failed to recognize in Lévy-Bruhl an ally in the cause of cultural relativism. In his introduction to *How Natives Think*, C. Scott Littleton outlines the revision of this view in Lévy-Bruhl's favor over the past thirty years by such anthropologists as E. E. Evans-Pritchard, Rodney Needham, and Daniel Lawrence O'Keefe. Characteristic of this critical revision is Needham's judgment that in the light of Lévy-Bruhl's findings,

> the premise of an absolute conception of human experience, against which cultural styles of thought and action can be objectively assessed, disintegrates, and its place is taken by an apprehension of conceptual relationships in which variant collective representatives of man and his powers confusedly contend. (Littleton xxv)

Littleton himself finds Lévy-Bruhl to have been "the first modern scholar to take non-Western modes of thinking seriously, and to accord them a modicum of respect" (xliii).

It is difficult to say what Lévy-Bruhl might have thought of the literary uses of his ideas. If he were unsympathetic to the modernist projects of Eliot and Joyce, however, it seems unlikely that he would have contributed to Eliot's journal, the *Criterion*, or that he would have met Joyce in Copenhagen in order to praise *Ulysses* and to give Joyce two of his books on primitive thinking.

If I understand Lee Oser's objection, it is to my use of the phrase "totalizing gestures" in describing the aspect of Eliot's thinking that corresponds to an anthropological notion of "man in his essence." It does not follow, of course, that Eliot's view of Lévy-Bruhl should also be described as "totalizing," although Oser somehow reads my essay as having taken this step.

Eliot's remark on Lévy-Bruhl in the 1926 introduction to *Savonarola* shows Eliot moving toward the position he takes in *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism* (1933), where he cites ethnological evidence that the prelogical mentality "persists in civilised man,

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