

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  
Central State University

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 Manichaeism is not the answer.

LEE OSER  
Yale University

**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,