

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.

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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 repre-

sentations, 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.)

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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