Review

Review of Leon de Kock's *Civilising Barbarians: Missionary Narrative and African Textual Response in Nineteenth-Century South Africa*. Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press, 1996.

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1996 has been a productive year for Leon de Kock. His publications for this year include: a collection of recent South African poetry edited by him and Martin Trump entitled *Heart in Exile: South African Poetry in English, 1990-1995*; the first issue of *Scrutiny 2*, a new journal of English Studies he edits from UNISA; and his first book, *Civilising Barbarians*. More recently, he has written a report on the Shakespeare-Postcoloniality conference at Witwatersrand University for the *Southern African Review of Books* (July/August 1996). More manifesto than report, de Kock in this short piece provides a frame for reading his more substantial work: he pleads for an eclectic research method, which might produce - like the work of visiting academics Ania Loomba and Dipesh Chakrabarty - 'extremely subtle, negotiable and inclusive deployments of both class *and* the politics of identity', and then goes on to define himself against Nic Visser's uncompromising defence of Marxism. These two aspects of *Civilising Barbarians*, viz. the pursuit of a more subtle and negotiable methodology, and the uneasy relationship with Marxism, form the focus of this review.

In *Civilising Barbarians*, de Kock takes his lead from US-based academics like Clifton Crais and Jean and John Comaroff in promising a theoretically-sophisticated product, which offers 'more than the materialist version of history in which relations and forces of production and their articulation in social classes are explained' (p8), providing instead a view of the 'South African colonial order as a discursive event . . . [and] not as an adjunct to material history' (p21-22). His first chapter genuflects to a range of postcolonial and new historicist authorities in order to establish his own theoretical credentials, and each subsequent chapter juxtaposes theoretical analysis and historical discussion of the colonial encounter between Christian missionaries and the Xhosa in the Eastern Cape in the second half of the nineteenth century. Thus, in chapter two, Foucault's essay 'The Subject and Power' is used to introduce how a range of discursive procedures undertaken by the missionaries promoted an 'English subject position' among the Xhosa; in chapter three,

Hayden White's insistence on the literary forms (romance, comedy, tragedy, satire) of historical narrative is invoked to explain the letters and policy declarations of Lovedale principal, James Stewart; in chapter four, Homi Bhabha's well-known argument about the colonial subject's capacity to resist colonial authority through acts of subversive mimicry provides the basis for a sympathetic analysis of John Tengo Jabavu, editor of *Imvo Zabantsundu*; and in chapter five, Bhabha's vocabulary of colonial hybridity and ambivalence percolates discussion of the influential missionary convert, Tiyo Soga.

There is much to be said in favour of de Kock's efforts to read history and theory against each other: social history frequently proceeds with a common sensical vocabulary which leaves its own critical assumptions unacknowledged, while literary theory often inhabits a de-contextualised discursive domain 'above' history and politics. To transgress the disciplinary boundary separating history and theory might, therefore, represent a way of challenging the silences and occlusions of each discipline. But there are of course significant risks in choosing this route, and 'discipline specialists' will certainly view de Kock's efforts suspiciously. For the social historian, the lengthy epistemological soul-searching will seem self-indulgent, the relatively modest amount of new primary material a weakness, and (for the social anthropologist particularly) the lack of any sustained attention to the forms of pre-colonial Xhosa culture will appear as a serious omission. Also, while de Kock is energetic in correcting South African social historians and literary critics, he is remarkably respectful towards the literary theorists of the northern hemisphere: at no stage are the fascinating histories of the Eastern Cape allowed to interrogate the theoretical categories of the contemporary western academy. History is ultimately subordinate to theory.

For the literary theorist, the uncritical reliance on domesticated US versions of European philosophy and theory, rather than any sustained engagement with the original sources, will disappoint. Two (of many) examples: when deconstruction is mentioned (p11), the acknowledgement is not to Jacques Derrida, but to Brenda Marshall's (highly partial) reading of Derrida; and when 'hegemony' is mentioned (p20-1), the reference point is not Antonio Gramsci, but the Comaroff's (again, highly selective) use of Gramsci. Southern African history is thus read through star-spangled theoretical lenses. It is important to register these modifications because every text (including theory) should be read in its context, or as de Kock himself notes with respect to the nineteenth-century missionary writings, '[t]he two realms, the "representational" and the "material", should not be regarded as separate' (p9). If the writings of Stewart, Jabavu, and Soga are to be placed in the context of the Eastern Cape in the nineteenth century, why then should the theoretical texts of the western academy in the 1980s and

1990s - Foucault, White, Bhabha - exist in privileged zones outside the particular histories of post-1968 France, Reagan's America, or Thatcher's Britain? Or, to return to the examples of Derrida and Gramsci, we might reasonably ask: does 'deconstruction' mean quite the same thing in Paris in 1967, in New York in 1992, and in Pretoria in 1996; or, does 'hegemony' connote the same range of meanings in Turin in the 1930s, in Chicago in 1991, and Pretoria in 1996? Put more crudely, why should the particular American definitions of these terms - forged in the highly professionalised and fiercely competitive context of the US academy - prevail as master tropes explaining Southern African histories?

As regards de Kock's resistance to Marxism, it should be read in the context of a long history of opposition to Marxism from within English Studies. Writing during the depression in England, FR Leavis, the architect of the original Cambridge *Scrutiny*, concedes in *For Continuity* (1933) that there is a place for the Marxist analysis: 'the economic maladjustments, inequities and oppressions demand direct attention and demand it urgently, and of course there is a sense in which economic problems are prior' (p6). But crucially, for reading English literature, such an emphasis is not enough: 'there *can* be intellectual, aesthetic and moral activity that is not merely an expression of class origin and economic circumstances; there is a 'human culture' to be aimed at that must be achieved by cultivating a certain autonomy of the human spirit' (p9). Leavis's elegant declaration here on the priority of the literary over the economic settled into the ruling orthodoxy of English Studies, both in England and South Africa. Combining neatly with IA Richards's 'practical criticism', the emphasis on 'human culture' underwrote a literary education which focused exclusively on the canonical literary text, and viewed not only the economic with disdain, but also the political and the historical. In South Africa, the invariable correlative of practical criticism was a myopic and complacent white liberal politics. De Kock's project is of course some way from the pious humanism of Leavis, both in terms of subject matter and in terms of his critical method; moreover, his concluding remarks on the intimate connection between 'English' and a 'coercive colonial history' (p192) expose the imperial resonances of Leavis's *Scrutiny* project.

However, with respect to their relation to Marx and Marxism, there are unsettling similarities between Leavis and de Kock. In the first place, neither of them have read Marx with any attention. Leavis readily concedes in *For Continuity* 'I have not read the Bible' (p5), and de Kock in *Civilising Barbarians* refers to Marxism (twice) and never to Marx. As a result, they engage (and disengage) with particular versions of Marx: Leavis re-acted against the economism of Second International Marxism; de Kock reacts against the Marxisms of Althusser and South African social history. Thirdly, de Kock shares

with Leavis a perception of Marxism as unequal to the subtle demands of textual analysis, and sees as a result the need for some supplementary analytical resource ('human culture' for Leavis; 'discourses of identity' for de Kock). In Leavis's case, the supplement 'culture' entirely displaced Marx's radical historicising and social critique; de Kock's supplement 'discourse' in *Civilising Barbarians* threatens a similar displacement. In turning away too hastily from the resources of Marx and (especially Third World) Marxisms, and favouring instead the academic post-modernisms and post-structuralisms of the US Enterprise, de Kock thus mutes considerably his own efforts to disrupt the conservative imperatives of South African English Studies.

In his report on the Wits Shakespeare Conference, de Kock asserts that you will not 'find many scholars in the 1990s anywhere in the world who will still say ... you can't compromise on Marxism'. I end with the words of one of the few exceptions, the guiding light of post-structuralism, Jacques Derrida: 'Upon re-reading the *Manifesto* and a few other great works of Marx, I said to myself that I knew of few texts in the philosophical tradition, perhaps none, whose lesson seemed more urgent *to-day*, provided one take into account what Marx and Engels say . . . about their own "ageing" and their intrinsically irreducible historicity' ('Spectres of Marx', *New Left Review* 205 [1994:32]).