

Response to review - D Johnson

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Reviewers are at liberty to say what they see fit about other people's books, and writers should stay out of arguments with them. However, reviewers should *not* enjoy the right to commit basic errors in a style which is slovenly as to the matter of facts. Further, reviewers should not be allowed to commit the indecency of wilful misquotation for the pleasure of making their conclusions just so.

David Johnson does all of this in a review of my book, *Civilising Barbarians* (*Transformation* 31, 1996), in a piece of writing which is astonishing in its slovenliness. Coming from a scholar with a reasonable reputation, these lapses are all the more remarkable.

In his first sentence Johnson identifies me as the person who, with *Martin Trump*, edited a book in 1996 called *The Heart in Exile: South African Poetry in English, 1990-1995*. *Martin Trump* died in 1994, more than a year before *The Heart in Exile* was even conceived. My co-editor is in fact *Ian Tromp*.

Johnson then identifies me as the editor of a journal he calls "Scrutiny 2". Again this is an error, but it suits his purpose of drawing a parallel between my journal and the one edited by FR Leavis in the early part of this century, *Scrutiny*. The journal I edit is called *scrutiny2: issues in english studies in southern africa*. The "2" in our title is affixed to the word "scrutiny", and the shortened title, *scrutiny2*, has always been presented either in capital letters entirely, or in lower case entirely. It has never been represented by us as "Scrutiny 2". Perhaps this is too subtle for Johnson. An editorial announcing the journal's inaugural issue in 1996 explicitly drew attention to the ironic distancing between Leavis's *Scrutiny* and *scrutiny2*, but perhaps it is too much to expect that Johnson would have read the editorial.

The worst lapse of academic decency, however, comes at the end of the review, where Johnson knowingly misquotes my words. Johnson quotes one of my phrases from an essay in the *Southern African Review of Books*, and then, after an ellipsis, quotes a succeeding phrase which actually appears *seven phrases before* the first phrase he quotes. If he wanted to paraphrase my sense, that would be a different matter, but Johnson places the jumble *he* makes out of my words in quotation marks as if I had written the words in this manner myself. The reafrrangement means that the complexity of my original (long) sentence is

translated to dogmatic assertion. Again, subtlety or complexity do not seem to sit well with the reviewer in the instance, who, in his eagerness to score a point or two, will go so far as to misquote his subject.