

## David Johnson's thoughts on De Kock's response.

David Johnson

I am grateful to the editors of *Transformation* for the opportunity to reply to Leon De Kock's response to my review of his book *Civilising Barbarians* in *Transformation* 31 (1996): 101-4.

Reviewing is a generous act, hardly worth the free copy of the book, and my review was written in a generous spirit. Rather than reproduce safe platitudes of the 'worthy-addition-to-the-field' type, it sought to offer within the limits of the review a summary of the book and introduce *Transformation* readers (most of whom have only a passing interest in English studies and historiography) to current debates in English studies about travelling theory, critical method, and the place of Marxism. De Kock's response is instructive in demonstrating the extreme sensitivity of these debates.

De Kock ignores the main thrust of my critique, and objects to three errors, all of which are incidental to the substance of the review. I deal with them separately. About the first one, apologies to Ian Tromp for not acknowledging his editorial contribution to *The Heart in Exile: South African Poetry in English, 1990-95*.

The second error is more interesting. De Kock thinks the failure to tell the difference between *Scrutiny 2* and *scrutiny2: issues in english studies in southern africa* (with an editorial distancing itself from F. R. Leavis's original effort) reveals a lack of subtlety on my part. To this charge I plead guilty. But I would like to add that De Kock's attempt to effect 'the ironic distancing between Leavis's *Scrutiny* and *scrutiny*' relies - as does all irony - on the assumption of an audience sharing common values. In this case, my own impoverished sense of irony might be attributed to a distance from those assumed common values, and also to my understanding of the history of the original *Scrutiny*. Francis Mulhern's concluding assessment of Leavis's journal in his definitive study *The Moment of 'Scrutiny'* (1979) runs as follows:

the basic and constant discursive organization of the journal ... was one defined by a dialectic of 'culture' and 'civilization' whose main and logically necessary effect was a depreciation, a repression and, at the limit, a categorial dissolution of politics as such. Nothing could be more disorienting for socialist cultural theory than the ingestion of [such] a discourse (330-1).

Is it therefore surprising given this history that a new literary journal in South Africa in the 1990s re-invoking the title 'scrutiny' might be viewed with caution from the left? *anti-scrutiny* or *CONTRA-SCRUTINY* might have conveyed the ethos De Kock claims his journal embraces, but *scrutiny*?

Finally, De Kock is distressed at the way I abbreviated his remarks on Marxism. I am happy to re-produce 'the complexity of [his] original (long) sentence':

And when I tried to patch things up with the likeable but formidable Nic Visser, he told me you can't compromise on Marxism: it either is or isn't a theory of the last word. For him it must be that, or it is nothing at all. I can't agree with that kind of Marxism, and neither can the Subaltern Studies scholars who were at the conference, nor, for that matter, will you find many scholars in the 1990s anywhere in the world who will say that as forbiddingly - and as honestly - as Nic Visser does.

(*Southern African Review of Books* July/August 1996: 20)

Nic Visser to my knowledge has never committed himself to print in quite these terms. However, it is not for me to defend Visser: he discusses De Kock and other South African postcolonial theorists and their relationship with Marxism at length in *Yearbook in English Studies* 27 (1997: 79-94). For anyone interested, these issues are re-visited in essays by Kelwyn Sole and Shane Moran in *Alternation* 4.1 (1997). Rather, I need to elaborate very briefly on my juxtaposition of De Kock and Jacques Derrida on Marx. Most South African literary critics since the end of apartheid - like 'many scholars in the 1990s anywhere in the world' - have with a sigh of relief declared an end to Marxism in English Studies, thus consigning much of the political criticism of the 1980s to a conveniently closed chapter of local literary history. De Kock concurs here with this version of the discipline's recent history. In quoting from Derrida's 'Spectres of Marx' in my review, I sought to alert *Transformation* readers to the arguments of but one of many *other* scholars in the 1990s in the world, who have rejected this kind of comfortable eclecticism pervading literary studies, and have argued instead in favour of a renewed critical engagement with Marx and the Marxist tradition.