Australian Literary Criticism and Theory: 
From Textual Politics to Cultural History

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Abstract

The teaching of Australian literature in universities and schools has been the subject of much media debate and controversy over the last twelve months, and has the state of literary publishing in Australia, with talk of the 'decline of the literary paradigm' and the shrinking of the 'backlist' of Australian literary titles in print. While many of these controversies have been misleading or mischievous, the discipline or profession of literary studies has itself been going through a significant period of reassessment and transformation. Following the cultural nationalism of the 1970s and 1980s, the linguistic turn or the textual politics of the 1980s and 1990s, Australian literary studies is experiencing something of a 'historical turn', a move from various directions into what might best be called cultural history. This involves a reassessment of the dominant modes of 'negative critique' which, while principled in their attention to the issues of gender, race, nation etc, provided little positive justification for our investment in literature. this paper will examine both the recent controversies surrounding Australian literature and the trace the changes in critical paradigms which have begun to appear over the last five or six years, many of which have been reflected in new kinds of research projects awarded national grants. It will outline a new agenda for literary studies in Australia, one which will connect with similar arguments occurring in other regions.