



## Introduction:

## English Studies in Transition

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This issue of *Critical Arts* arises out of a protracted and often acrimonious debate that has engaged South African departments of English for over a decade. While the papers gathered together here are concerned specifically with literary studies, the debate has not been conducted in the splendid isolation of academic departments and disciplines. Indeed, in a variety of ways the papers call into question the efficacy, or even the possibility, of an exclusively 'literary' study of those discourses which we customarily group together and valorise under the rubric 'literature'. Where once the exhortation to study poetry first as poetry and not as another thing seemed compelling, now increasing numbers of academics and students find the appeal to larger social and historical frameworks far more persuasive. The sources for those frameworks, as these essays demonstrate, lie not in the official poetics of modernism, but in social theory and social history.

Although only one of the papers -- Rob Nixon's was written specifically for this issue (the others having been produced initially for various conferences in South Africa and elsewhere), they form a fairly tightly ordered set of related inquiries. My own effort to describe the situation in South African literary studies; Michael Green's insistence on laying bare the 'manifestos' silently inscribed within conventional critical and pedagogic practices; Ian Glenn's argument that since literary value is a site of social contestation rather than an essence to which the fortunate few have access, the academic critic has less the role of powerful broker than simply a minor part to play within a larger set of processes and struggles; Rob Nixon's demonstration of the relevance of post-modern fiction to South Africa once a formalist indulgence in the 'literature of exhaustion' is dropped for an approach more alert to historical and material forces -- all these can be seen to move implicitly towards what Michael Vaughan makes explicit in his concluding question: "In what way can our academic concern with literature in English best support the objective of the cultural liberation of South Africa?"

The urgency of that question is sufficient reason for this issue.