The Use of Fiction in Literary and Generative Anthropology: An Interview with Wolfgang Iser

Richard van Oort

Department of English and Comparative Literature
University of California at Irvine
Irvine, CA 92697
rvanoort@uci.edu

This interview took place in February 1998 at the University of California, Irvine. What follows is a collaboratively edited version of the original interview.

RvO: Professor Iser, it's been twenty years now since the publication in English of your very successful book *The Act of Reading*. In that book, you develop a theory of aesthetic response, which you define as a dialectic relationship between text, reader, and their interaction. The result was, as you put it, a "phenomenology" of reading. More recently, in your latest book, *The Fictive and the Imaginary*, you explore the anthropological consequences of such a phenomenological approach. That is, you investigate not only the interaction between text and reader but the broader anthropological implications of fictionality in general. Perhaps you could begin by saying a few words about how your own thinking has evolved and how you have come to be interested in what you call "literary anthropology."

WI: Reader-response criticism needed an underpinning because it was concerned with text processing, that is, the way in which readers relate to texts. Consequently, a psychological aspect was involved, which I tried to develop at the time along the lines of Gestalt psychology. Reading as text processing also means — and this was an implication which may not have come sufficiently to the fore — finding out something about the human makeup: namely, the way in which the letters we perceive translate into a stream of imagery in our minds. Therefore reader-response criticism needed further exploration in order to find out something about human dispositions by means of literature.

RvO: You refer to Gestalt psychology. This would imply a shift toward the ontogenetic? A shift away from the literary text to the reality of the reader?

WI: No, I don't think so. The fact that we are conscious of literature as a form of make-

believe means that in assessing it we do not abide by what one might call a Cartesian principle, namely, that what we have seen through as make-believe should be discarded. However, we don't discard it, although we know it to be an illusion. Obviously there seems to be a need for this type of fictionality. And as this is the case, we could use fiction as an exploratory instrument in order to investigate this human urge. This, however, is not an ontological approach.

RvO: In your essay, "The Significance of Fictionalizing" (which appears in this issue of *Anthropoetics*), you quote approvingly Samuel Beckett's Malone, who says "Live or invent." You suggest that the fictionalizing impulse arises from our inability to be present to ourselves. We exist and yet we simultaneously desire to "have" ourselves. So we fictionalize. I find your remarks very suggestive here, but I'm not altogether sure I understand your reasons for stating this. Could you concretize these suggestions a bit?

WI: As early as the sixteenth century we have had reflections on fiction and fictionality. Bacon once said that fictions provide a "shadow of satisfaction to the mind of man in those points wherein the nature of things doth deny it." Now there are a great many things of which we can be pretty certain. We shall die. We have been born. But we neither shall have an experience of these events nor any knowledge of them. One could further say that we do not doubt that we exist, but we do not know what this existence is. If you are a believer, then you know what it is. But if not, you are not satisfied with this not-knowing. As the events mentioned are impenetrable in terms of experience and knowledge, we produce fictions. To put it in Beckett's terms, either we live — but then we don't know what it is to live — or we want to know what it is to live, and thus we come up with all kinds of explanatory fictions in order to grasp what is barred from knowledge.

RvO: So this is a very broad conception of fiction, one that doesn't refer simply to the literary text.

WI: Yes. I use the literary text as a starting point in order to find out what this particular type of fictionality might disclose about human dispositions. For instance, if we lie, we also produce a fiction, which means we live in two worlds simultaneously. We know what the truth is, but we make something up for whatever purpose. The ordinary occurrence of lying is already a way of extending ourselves. The type of fictionality which we encounter in literature is also a way of extending ourselves. If that is so, the question arises: Why is there this urge of extending ourselves?

RvO: This is the anthropological question.

WI: Yes.

RvO: Your book, *The Fictive and the Imaginary*, attempts to explore this anthropological question. But in order to get at the latter, you make some very interesting theoretical claims at the outset. You begin by rejecting the dichotomy that opposes fiction to reality and substitute the triad: the real, the fictive, and the imaginary. I find your description of these last two categories somewhat abstract and difficult to grasp. I wonder if you could expand on this a little here, just in order to give us some idea of these key terms for your conception of "literary anthropology"?

WI: The old dichotomy between fiction and reality implies that there is a stance outside either, which would allow us to designate one particular instance as fiction and the other one as reality. This is logically impossible. There is no such transcendental stance which allows us to come up with these predicates. We can only say something about fiction by way of its manifestation and its use. There is a welter of different uses to which fictions can be put. Thus an ontological definition of fiction is impossible. We can only examine its many uses. Fictionality in literature seems to be different from fictionality in lying. We are always "in the midst of things," and for this reason we can only spotlight the manifestations of fiction. The same holds true for the imaginary. It was dubbed as a faculty in faculty psychology. Then it was considered to be a means of conjuring up something that is absent. Or we could refer to the mirror stage of Lacan, or to the desire of Freud. In other words, we have the same situation in the latter instances, namely, we can only ascertain its manifestations. I think that the fictive is a conscious attempt to spark the imaginary into action and channel it into a specific use in order to make an impact on something, or a representation of something if one were to use Gans's terms. In other words, there is a continual interaction between the conscious element which is prevalent in fiction and the imaginary potential which that conscious element stimulates in order to effect something. As the fictive cannot make an impact upon itself or the imaginary, it has to make an impact upon something other, and for this reason I have introduced the triadic relationship between the fictive, the imaginary, and the real.

RvO: Of these three categories, then, the real or the actual is the most traditional or straightforward.

WI: Yes.

RvO: The other two — the fictive and the imaginary — have been introduced as a way of mediating the traditional dichotomy between fiction and reality.

WI: Both the fictive and the imaginary — their interaction and their relationship — function by shaping something which we might call the actual or the real. Conceiving this triadic relationship in these terms, we are out of the quandary of providing ontological definitions for the fictive, the imaginary, or the real. Moreover, given the anthropological interest implied in this triadic relationship, there's something else worth pointing out. Human beings

live on their “subsidy.” This “subsidy” is the imagination which in banking terms is the only “collateral” we have for substantiating all our activities.

RvO: Well, I would agree. But nevertheless you still find someone like Searle who explains fiction along the lines of the traditional dichotomy. It seems strange that he can ignore the anthropological aspect, this collateral of which you speak. For him it’s simply a logical question. Fictions suspend the rule of reference that applies to all normative or nonfictional language use.

3

WI: Yes. But both Searle and Austin call fictions “parasitic,” which implies that they are pseudo-real. Fiction veils itself by copying structures of reality. Austin and Searle presuppose reality as a given. Yet speech acts, as long as they are considered to be performatives, actually produce reality. If speech acts are able to produce realities, one could just as well say that fictions are not parasitic in relation to reality. Rather, by intervening into reality they also produce realities — just as a lie produces realities.

RvO: I think that Searle would try to draw a distinction between ontological realities and what he might call epistemological realities, where fiction would be in the category of the latter. Realities that are agreed upon. But of course the foundation is granted to the former, to what he refers to as “natural scientific ontology.”

WI: I have problems with these distinctions — ontological or epistemological — not least as they presuppose a stance which would allow us to discriminate between them. The very fact that epistemology, once the king’s way of philosophy, is no longer of central interest is largely due to the fact that one had always to posit something from which deductions had to be made. Whenever positing something is in play, the agency which does it always does so from outside. How can one warrant such a stance in order to introduce these discriminations? Even inside analytic philosophy, Nelson Goodman has observed in his *Ways of Worldmaking* that worlds are made out of other worlds. Thus the distinction between what seems to be ontologically given or epistemologically cognized is artificial and very hard to substantiate.

RvO: Since we’re speaking of the speech-act philosophers, I have a specific question about Austin, one that is related to a point you make in *The Act of Reading*. There is a playful moment in his *How To Do Things With Words* where he asks: “When the saint baptized the penguins, was this void because the procedure of baptizing is inappropriate to be applied to penguins, or because there is no accepted procedure of baptizing anything but humans?” Well, Austin offers this question in fun, of course, but it seems to me hard to talk about baptism in terms of procedure only. The rite of baptism does not exist independently of its participants. Since penguins — as far as we know — do not engage in this kind of rite, it seems pointless to ignore its anthropological specificity. So surely the point of the question

is to remind us that baptism as a particular kind of speech act cannot be abstracted from the concrete anthropological scene of its occurrence. In the original context of the quote, Austin is making a point about the importance of historical tradition and convention. There is no historical precedent for baptizing penguins so the act can only ever be void. You claim in *The Act of Reading* that literature functions precisely in opposition to this kind of appeal to historical convention. By selecting speech acts from ordinary real-world situations, literature reorganizes preexisting conventions and fields of reference, and undermines them in that very process. So I suppose in literature the saint *can* baptize penguins. But we're still left with the original question about the function of baptism. To what extent is this theory of "the literary" capable of responding to such a question?

WI: As we know, the "felicity" of speech acts depends upon the existence of two presuppositions: conventions and accepted procedures. Both are necessary. Conventions are historically established frames of reference and so are procedures. Obviously the example that Austin gives is outside established conventions and outside established procedures as well. However, when you asked this question, it struck me: Might there be an instance in history in which the animal kingdom stands in a kind of typological relation to basic conventions? I am thinking of the *Physiologus*, which was an assembly of animals that formed a typological correspondence to the Christian doctrine. For instance, when the pelican tore open its breast to provide sustenance to the young pelicans it was considered the *figura Christi*. This may be an odd example, but still there would at least be a time in history when this type of convention existed. Of course this is on an eschatological level, rather than a baptismal one. Since we no longer consider the tradition of the *Physiologus* valid, we may draw the inference that conventions are historically conditioned forms of consensus. Similarly, one could say baptizing penguins was not a historically agreed upon convention.

Now as far as the second part of your question is concerned, for a convention to function it has to have a vertical validity. By vertical validity I mean what has been valid in the past with regard to a particular convention is still valid in the present. What had been valid with respect to the *Physiologus* is no longer valid today. What had been valid with regard to how baptism had been executed is still valid in the sense that animals cannot be baptized. Now literature also is full of conventions. But these conventions are taken from different sets of conventions and are organized, not vertically, but horizontally. Consequently, they run counter to what appears to be the necessary guarantee for the validity of conventions in ordinary life. When conventions are broken up and organized horizontally — that is, taken from different areas — they are depragmatized. They no longer have a regulatory function but are held up for inspection. When conventions are thus depragmatized and arranged horizontally, they become a topic of scrutiny. This is what literature does.

RvO: May I ask you to expand on that. You describe your project as a "literary anthropology." Now I take that to mean that literature is your primary source for speaking about the human. You say that literature depragmatizes conventions, holds them up for inspection. Does the literary text offer an anthropological view that is unavailable to other types of discourse?

WI: Taking literature as our example, I would be inclined to say that though we may critique conventions in our day-to-day living, what literature does is to stage a whole array of conventions more or less simultaneously in a text. Obviously if one wants to find an anthropological implication in this particular exposition, one might say that human beings have an urge to look at their regulatory principles. Why is there such an urge? We appear to want to be with ourselves and simultaneously outside ourselves. If that seems to be a basic human situation — a way of extending ourselves — then this question of assembling an array of conventions horizontally in the literary text might be a way of looking at the regulatory functions according to which human beings conduct their lives.

RvO: Let me return to the ontogenetic question I broached earlier, which I would like to connect to the thoughts you have just related. In *The Fictive and the Imaginary*, you refer a number of times to Winnicott's notion of the "transitional object." At one point you call the intentionality of the text a transitional object. And elsewhere you refer to the fictive as a "'transitional object' always hovering between the real and the imaginary." You link Winnicott's transitional object to Piaget's theory of childhood development. The child makes the crucial leap from "imitation" to "symbolization" when, instead of "imitating" the empirical world through perception and visualization, it uses these stored "images" to assimilate the inaccessible — to extend itself. You suggest that Piaget offers "anthropological" corroboration for your model of the fictive and the imaginary. But should we not say that Piaget's very interesting theories of childhood development are ontogenetic, that is, psychological rather than anthropological? Why does the child need to assimilate the inaccessible?

WI: Insofar as one considers this to be ontogenetic, I've nothing against it. If this seems to be a general human urge, that's fine. Now as far as the "transitional object" is concerned, it is a convenient metaphor which I have used for the literary work, insofar as it consists of two components: the fictive and the imaginary. The transitional object, as Winnicott maintains, is something the child needs in order to be weaned away from the mother, so that it can relate thereafter to the world. The child reaches beyond the confines of its mother. The work of literature is also a means of reaching outside of what we are caught up in.

With respect to Piaget, I would say that the child does not use imitation to "conquer" the inaccessible, but that it uses imitation in order to get outside itself. So a stick, for example, is a horse. By imitating the action of horse and rider in using the stick, the child assimilates

a world that lies beyond it. Thus the stick functions as a way of charting something which does not as yet exist. This is exactly what literature does. It assembles items which can be identified from the world in which we find ourselves, and it combines them in such a way that they point to something beyond this familiarity. Literature is structured in such a way that something beyond our ordinary reach is charted and thus incorporated into our lives.

RvO: Well, I don't want to push Piaget's theory into this discussion too much, but I was interested in the way you brought Piaget into your argument at that point. I suppose I want to know how much weight you are willing to put on Piaget as anthropological corroboration for your own theory.

WI: In a way, Piaget inverts the relationship between imitation and symbolization. Because first of all you have to imitate something, and then you have to use what has been imitated in order to reach out and map that which is beyond what you are imitating. This appears to be a general anthropological tendency.

RvO: I agree. Since we're on the topic of imitation and mimesis, this might be a good point to move on to discuss the relationship between "literary anthropology" and "generative anthropology." Let me begin by simply asking: How do you respond to Gans's work? What is your general impression of generative anthropology?

WI: First of all, I have to say that it is a most impressive enterprise by a highly original thinker. It strikes me as one of those rare occasions of a new charting of human culture. What is all the more remarkable is that this enterprise is so cogently reasoned and reveals such an impressive intellectual rigor, which adds conviction to the basic hypothesis and to what it allows us to apprehend. What I can't understand is that Eric Gans has not met with an adequate reception which this kind of undertaking merits.

RvO: Well, I am of course similarly bewildered. But allow me to be a bit more specific. What similarities do you see between your own field of "literary anthropology" and that of "generative anthropology"? What are the differences?

WI: First of all, I would say that the common anthropological interest forms the link between what Gans and myself are pursuing. If one were to pinpoint a difference, I would bring it down to what I wouldn't call an opposition, but a differentiation, namely, whereas he uses fictions as an explanatory instrument, I am inclined to use fictions as an exploratory one. Fictions are "explanatory" in his case because he wants to provide an overall picture: from the originary scene right through to the postmodern situation. I'm not as ambitious. Literature has been around for the last 2500 years. Obviously it satisfies a human need. If fiction is considered the hallmark of literature, then fictions could be a means of exploring the human makeup. So I think it's a different direction in which the two of us go.

RvO: Yes. And I think that's at least partly encapsulated in the different emphasis in the titles you give to your respective projects: *literary* anthropology vis-à-vis *generative* anthropology. Gans has to address the historical position of his own theory. And perhaps that is one reason why people seem to be a little scared off by him.

WI: Why? Because of the rigor or what?

RvO: Because ultimately he has to explain the emergence of generative anthropology as something that is — I don't want to say necessary — but at least historically theorizable. How it must emerge from previous representations, in particular, from literary works, which he calls "discovery procedures." But the point of generative anthropology — of the originary hypothesis — is that it is a more rigorous attempt than literature to return to the originary event. So he has to articulate this historical movement from literature to generative anthropology. Do you see what I mean?

WI: Yes. He wants to be all-encompassing. And he has to be so, for the simple reason that if you have this parsimonious originary hypothesis you can only give it plausibility by continually unfolding inherent aspects which in turn provide an explanation for historic situations. I think this is the most admirable aspect of his undertaking: namely, that he continually fans out the implication of what he has postulated and yet simultaneously uses these implications, aspects, and perspectives to explain historical phenomena. Such an explanatory unfolding allows him to bring out the multifariousness that is inherent in his basic hypothesis of the originary scene, and simultaneously makes it possible for him to fold the whole of history back into the originary scene, thus lending credence to the initial postulate. History is not conceived as an ascent towards a goal; instead, the basic constituents of the originary scene, i.e. center and periphery, dominance and resentment, structure the developing history, whose cyclical movements highlight what the "origin" entails, and whose folding back into the "origin" out of which history has arisen makes both history and the originary scene highly plausible. Thus Gans demonstrates the persuasiveness of his explanatory fiction.

RvO: Yes.

WI: But that's not my undertaking.

RvO: No, but you've articulated what I think a lot of people have difficulty seeing, and that is that just because you postulate this originary scene that doesn't mean you close everything down. Gans has repeated over and over again that the whole point of the originary hypothesis is to open up our understanding of culture.

WI: Yes. I would also add that it is a most fundamental misunderstanding to say that people who concern themselves with origins are not to be taken seriously. We find ourselves in the situation where the deferral of origins appears to be the be-all and end-all. I don't think that

this is an adequate understanding of the way in which Gans has formulated the minimal hypothesis. For him, the latter is a blank. The fact that he suggests how the originary scene might have taken place — with a kill or whatever — people are prone to take for a reality. The originary scene, however, is definitely a blank. And this is where I am in sympathy with the way in which Gans conceives his hypothesis, namely, if it is a blank, it is an energizing source, which can never be filled. For this reason, anthropology can indeed only be "generative." As I'm also interested in the energizing or generative qualities of gaps and blanks, I feel pretty close to Gans along these lines.

6

RvO: With that in mind, let me then ask you about an important principle in the formulation of this initial blank or hypothesis, namely, Ockham's razor or the principle of parsimony. Within the heuristic of the originary hypothesis, no more elements should be introduced than are necessary to explain the manifold phenomena of human culture with which the theory is concerned. For Gans, the originary is therefore synonymous with the minimal. The first moment of culture — the event in which the minimal scene of representation is established — is also the most elementary. In keeping the hypothesis minimal, Gans claims that we respect the originarity of the event. I find this kind of commitment to parsimony highly laudable. It necessitates a certain rigor, and it also provides an implicit methodological criterion by which to evaluate the hypothesis. One continually strives to minimize one's presuppositions as one works from the originary hypothesis through the varying manifestations of representation in history right through to contemporary culture and then back again. Yet when I look around me today in the field of literary and cultural studies, I see no such commitment to minimal or "originary" thinking. On the contrary, diversity and difference — complexity — is pursued as an end in itself. We seem terribly afraid of minimal mimetic centers, of hypotheses, of — dare I say it — constructive theories. We're very concerned these days with "questioning assumptions," but usually this means bashing a few other critics on the head, which seems to me a poor substitute for minimizing your own assumptions. No doubt the latter is much harder to do, but still this doesn't explain the stubborn resistance within the humanities to the kind of cogent project Gans offers us. Your own generosity with respect to generative anthropology has been a notable — and welcome — exception to this general refusal. How do you respond, first, to the principle of parsimony in Gans's theory, and, second, to the broader question of the contemporary fear among literary and cultural theorists toward such a theory.

WI: The principle of parsimony is a necessity because one should not burden the blank with all kinds of conceptions, perceptions, or "leads," though people look for that kind of thing. From an empirically-oriented point of view, one wants to know what in actual fact happened, whether these people stood around the kill and made the ostensive gesture as the deferral of violence. The moment of course you take that as a representation of what actually happened, you are on the wrong track, because then you will not be able to fathom

the energizing element which this parsimonious conception entails. To keep it as minimal as possible is necessary in order to be able to unfold and explicate the energizing drive inherent to this “generative” blank. For this reason I think to call it generative is appropriate because if the originary scene had just consisted of the kill with these guys standing around it, nothing much would have ensued from it. The very fact that the minimal hypothesis points to what Gans calls an *event* is fruitful if one thinks, for example, of Whitehead’s definition of an event, namely, that it is an occurrence without referentiality. That’s exactly the nature of the originary event that Gans describes. In this respect, he might have been better off if he hadn’t offered these naturalistic “leads.” Perhaps in an empirically-oriented culture one needs something of this kind. But then things may be misconceived, as they seem to have been in his case.

Now as to questioning assumptions, I consider this first and foremost an old Marxist ploy, which has spilled over into ideology critique. Such a strategy has by now become rather old-fashioned owing to its operative principle. The latter entails that the premise of the opponent is disputed on the ground that those who make the objection judge from the basis of having the right or valid presupposition. It is the opponent’s hypothesis which is called in doubt, whereas the one the critic entertains is “off limits.” Basically, this is a proleptic strategy, inducing someone to make a statement, then proving the person wrong, thus asserting one’s superiority. Having achieved this, it depends how to proceed further; one might give some help to the defeated person by providing some education or even brainwashing. However, this is a strategy that I am inclined to consider a holdover from the nineteenth century which, however, appears still adequate in a highly politicized intellectual climate — if one can call a politicized climate intellectual at all.

Apart from questioning assumptions, if there are cultural theorists, enthnographers in particular, who do not buy Gans’s basic hypothesis, this may be due to the fact that he doesn’t do any fieldwork. I would fall under the very same verdict. It depends on whether one considers studying literature and cultural phenomena fieldwork or not. So, again one would have to say: What kind of training do you have to presuppose? Do you have to be an ethnographer to begin with? In fact there are ethnographers — Geertz, for example — who are well aware that they are using fictions as explanatory concepts.

7

But apart from the ethnographer’s argument, what is going on in cultural studies in the broader sense of the term is basically partisan. There are special interests which are being pursued. Owing to this partisan approach, the field is to a large extent politicized. Politics seems to be the only holistic conception which is nowadays acknowledged as valid. But politics is interest-governed. Whatever is of interest would presuppose that there are certain options to choose from — a kind of smorgasbord in which some things are more appetizing than others, but where no item may be privileged. Thus, interest-governed politics is in itself

partial and as this is the case, one opposes *any* overriding, umbrella explanation of things. So, in the final analysis, the objection from politicized circles would be that generative anthropology is nothing but logocentrism, owing to the intellectual rigor with which it is unfolded. As an offshoot of logocentrism, it need not even be refuted, but must be dispensed with on political grounds. I think this is the reason why, at least in the American context, Gans may have difficulties.

RvO: I sense that too. Many people — especially literary and cultural critics — are instinctively suspicious of Gans's work because of his explicit attention to origins. They tend to evaluate such a project as unnecessarily normalizing and universalizing. But as you say that is a partisan or "political" approach. But what about the overriding ethical dimension of the originary event: the deferral of violence through representation? This event has to found the scene of representation. Although what is ultimately designated is a blank — and is therefore generative — this blank does have an ethical result or consequence. Gans is fairly forthright on this question. The only way to evaluate his theory is if it is of ethical benefit to humans.

WI: I would say that whenever you provide an overall conceptualization, you have to pay a price. Narrowing down the act of representation to the deferral of violence is such a price — that is, when your overall conception is guided by an explanatory impulse. If, on the other hand, you have an urge to explore, you can be more diversified. One could use literature as a medium in order to spotlight why human beings are prone to be with themselves and simultaneously outside themselves. We need fictions to come to grips with ends and beginnings. We are sure that we are born and that we shall die, but we have neither experience nor knowledge of either of them. Frank Kermode has once cited the Greek physician Alkmaeon who earned Aristotle's approval by stating that human beings must die because they cannot bring beginning and end together. We cannot tolerate situations of which there is no experience or knowledge, although we are sure that they will happen or have happened. Similarly, we exist and yet we do not know what it is to exist. In other words, we have an evidentiary experience, and simultaneously we want to know what this evidentiary experience is. So we begin to fictionalize. Fictions are modes that allow us to come close to what these situations might be or how they might be tackled.

Then there is what I would call the "multiformity of human plasticity." Representation as a deferral of violence is certainly one way in which this human plasticity is patterned, but it is not the *only* way. I should like to add that plasticity is just a metaphor for the fact that we know very little about human nature. Nonetheless there is this plasticity, which is continually patterned and shaped. If one uses fictionality as an *exploratory* instrument, there are many ways to branch out into questions of this type. Basically, one might say that an exploratory use of fictionality allows for the staging of multifarious patternings of human plasticity. For this reason, literary anthropology is not as consistent as generative anthropology. But still I would say that we are heading, or perhaps rather groping, in a

shared direction. Therefore, we should consider ourselves comrades-in-arms, instead of saying “I’m right and you are wrong.”

8

RvO: I couldn’t agree more. And I’m in fact struck by a number of passages in *The Fictive and the Imaginary* that seems to identify the same kind of paradoxical process at work that Gans locates in what he calls in his latest book *Signs of Paradox* the “originary paradox” of the linguistic sign. For you, fiction is always a doubled phenomenon. On the one hand, the fictional text denotes a reality that stands outside it; on the other, it overleaps that reality and insists on its “as if” or fictional separation from that reality. In the process it creates something new, that is, it has the structure of an event. Gans seeks to trace this paradoxical structure that you locate in fiction back to an originary source. Hence what you call his “explanatory” impulse. Humanity invents/discovers itself when it learns to represent itself. For Gans, this originary moment is cast as the specifically anthropological element of his theory. To put it somewhat in your terms — in terms of fictionality rather than representation — the fictional moment occurs in the moment when the sign as the aborted gesture of appropriation intervenes and is accepted by the originary participants as an imitation, not of a model-mediator, the imitation of which is entirely unreflective because it appropriates rather than thematizes the object, but rather of a centrally configured object, the very centrality of which is a function of its “figured” or “fictionalized” status. This is of course a highly condensed paraphrase of Gans’s argument. But the basic implication there is that the object is no longer mimetically sought after by imitating the actions of a model, but is instead represented within a public scene. The act of imitation becomes a formally closed sign that “imitates” — represents — the object. Piaget calls this the movement from accommodation to assimilation, from visualization and perceptualization to symbolization. But the ontogenetic theory cannot explain the originarity inherent in this very transition. On Gans’s anthropological model, the transition is explained as an *event* that produces the originary sign. Primitive imitation-of-the-model becomes representational mimesis of the object. But the older form of mimesis as a performance — as an event — remains. Reality is doubled by the *act*; the object must henceforth be *interpreted* for it is now only accessible via the mimetic structure of the scene of representation. Hence Gans’s concept of a *generative* anthropology. All cultural phenomena ultimately derive from the event of origin. You, on the other hand, are clearly less inclined to speak about anthropological origins. Your concept of a *literary* anthropology places its focus on already existing texts, that is, on literature. Still, there appear to be a lot of similarities when it comes your reflections on fiction. Would you agree? How would you assess both these similarities and these differences? That is, how would you compare your similar thoughts on the paradoxical nature of fictionality and your dissimilar starting points: literature for you, and human origins for Gans?

WI: Well, to cut it down to a final viewpoint, specifically with regard to Gans’s latest book:

What he calls the “signs of paradox” means that all these representative patterns which manifest themselves in history have a certain duality inscribed into them, or perhaps are an unfolding of a specific aspect inherent in the originary event, or are a specific unfolding of what it means to defer acts of violence by means of representation. Having postulated the originary scene, one cannot declare: That is it. Rather, Gans explains what is entailed in the notion of representation as the deferral of violence. So he brings out the implicit multifariousness of that concept as revealed throughout history. He branches out into different fields, for example, language and semiotics, thereby demonstrating the multiplicity of aspects in what is originally quite a straightforward scenario. There is a similarity between Gans and myself insofar as his basic conception lends itself to fanning out the originary event into so many different profiles. My view is that — and this is both the closeness and the difference — fiction is marked by a duality. A lie would be a duplicitous example of the latter. This duality has in itself a blank, that is, a gap between whatever is comprised by fiction as what is mutually exclusive. This inherent blank has a generative force out of which the welter of literature arises. So one might say there is in Gans’s basic concept of representation a potential multiformity which he unfolds. I would say that the duality of the mutually exclusive points to the energizing force in fiction. In this mutual mirroring of the mutually exclusive, a world beyond the world in which we live is created, a possible world emerges.

RvO: Would it be fair to say that your conception of fictionality is more of a structural conception, whereas Gans’s is a historicized version of it? Gans insists on the actual occurrence of this originary event.

WI: Yes, insofar as a privileging of structure seems to be necessary in order to account for the multifariousness to which it gives rise. This, of course, doesn’t put me in a situation of postulating an originary scene for this energizing drive. Basically, I am inclined to say that whereas Gans is interested in representation as the deferral of violence, I am interested in the way in which fictionality generates possible worlds. The latter may not necessarily have anything to do with the deferral of violence. Gans explains why humankind is able to sustain itself through representation. I am interested in why we need possible worlds instead of the one in which we live. What could this urge for continually creating and indulging in possible worlds reveal about human dispositions? These possible worlds are in turn, of course, also historically conditioned. There is no doubt about that. So this is roughly what brings the two projects together and also what reveals their distinction.

9

RvO: Thank you for this succinct delineation. I have just one final question for you, and it’s a bit of an indulgent one on my part for it puts you in the awkward position of having to prophesy about the future. You have enjoyed a long and distinguished career in the field of literary studies on both sides of the Atlantic. Could you say a few closing words about your

thoughts on departments of language and literature today? What future do you see for the profession? Is there a place in the humanities for the kind of broad anthropological reflection you yourself have engaged in and to which *Anthropoetics* is dedicated? Is there an audience — a need — for this kind of reflection? Is cultural studies a "groping" attempt to come to grips with "the anthropological."

WI: Well, this is a very difficult question.

RvO: A fantasy question.

WI: I am inclined to say that the humanities can be conceived of as a self-defining process. At the inception, the humanities were intimately geared to the nation-state as it emerged at the threshold of the nineteenth century. However, throughout the nineteenth century this paradigm had been subjected to a great many changes. Initially it was assumed that the nation-state found its adequate expression in art and literature through which the norms and values of a people were bodied forth. In this respect the humanities functioned as the "curator" of the nation-state. Toward the end of the century, a distinctly visible shift occurred as people wanted to know how other nations conceived of themselves through art and literature in particular, in consequence of which departments of English, French, and what have you were established — a set-up which is still in place today. However, even in the nineteenth century, questions of methodology and attempts to demarcate the humanities from the sciences became an issue that governed the scholastic activities in the humanities. Such a pursuit had very little to do with the nation-state as the original paradigm. In the twentieth century quite a few paradigm switches have occurred, ranging from the predominance of historical preoccupation through close reading to theory, to name only a few prominent ones. Without further detailing the development of the humanities, overseeing what has happened during the last couple of centuries, the humanities turned out to be a self-defining process, in the course of which they addressed concerns that have been current at the time. For instance, after the phase of impressionistic criticism, a need for criteria developed according to which art and literature could be assessed. New Criticism was the response to such a situation which, in turn, created a growing dissatisfaction as it was based on the framework of classical aesthetics. Deconstruction remedied this apparent deficiency by providing a postmodern framework for close reading. In this vein one might continue to describe the changes occurring in the humanities, all of them pointing to the fact that the shifts highlight a certain sensitivity of the humanities to what appears to be a current need. If we keep this general tendency in mind, we might say that the humanities have experienced several "crises" since their inception; the "crisis," however, does not mean that the humanities were constantly teetering on verge of collapse, rather it proves to be the "fuel" which keeps the humanities going.

Given this general frame, one might ask what current need is to be met. Well, the humanities have to become market-oriented. This happens in Europe to a large extent by

dissolving the old departmental set-up and establishing “area studies” instead, such as *Institutes of Western European Studies* or *Far Eastern Studies*. I myself have been involved in designing such an institution at the Humboldt University, Berlin. After the Berlin wall came down, state governments tried to introduce a new type of institution in order to meet demands from the growing integration of the European Community, for which a new generation of students had to be trained. Therefore, it did not make much sense to go back to the old departmental system modeled on the nation-state. The curriculum of such institutes is basically cross-cultural, as experts are needed for both industry and European administration who are familiar, for instance, with English literature, common law, international government, industrial management, and equally with what would be the equivalents in French, Italian, and other European cultures. Well, of course, the various curricula offer specialization geared to needs and individual interests. Something similar is happening in Britain, and to a certain extent in France. These fledgling institutions cater to a market which is rapidly emerging and for which so far no education was provided.

10

Such a market-oriented reconceptualization of the humanities need not and should not dispense with research altogether. However, the future research will certainly not be confined to literature, although literature may be an important component of interdisciplinary subject matters that have first of all to be constituted by collaborative research of different disciplines. It may well concern itself with questions of anthropology, although I am not saying that this is the “guiding light” for research in the next couple of decades. What I should like to stress, however, is the necessity for acquiring what has come to be called in Europe a “cultural competence.” For this competence, a disciplinary grounding is indispensable, otherwise we get a dilettante jack of all trades. Interdisciplinary research would have to focus on how to underpin the market-driven orientation. For instance, “liminality” might be such an issue, designed to explore borderlines and the distinctions derived from them. The exploration of cross-cultural relationships might be another one which could result in developing ideas concerning cross-cultural discourses. Furthermore, translation of cultures is a highly pertinent topic, as is the related topic that calls for an investigation of what happens when different or even heterogeneous levels of culture are interacting. In other words, the examples mentioned are areas for interdisciplinary research geared to the practical demands the humanities have to meet. Accordingly, the humanities will have a dual function. On the one hand, research will be devoted to aspects of an overarching nature — of which literature is certainly a part, but not the be-all and end-all, which it used to be when the nation-state was the commanding paradigm — on the other, there is the market-driven orientation. This two-tiered situation which seems to be emerging strikes me as a response of the humanities to current requirements. It ties in with the observation that the humanities are a self-defining process. I am not denying, however, that there is a certain faddishness, which always accompanies shifts in orientation. We see this happening all the time. In the sixties, for instance, society

was the focal point of intellectual concerns in the humanities, in the seventies it was language, and now it is otherness and narcissism. However, the very fact that trends produce focal points indicates that the humanities are not an exclusively research-oriented enterprise like the sciences, but respond to what appears to be in the air. Thus the humanities, basically in the service of the tradition, nevertheless keep responding to what the tradition might be needed for.

RvO: Thank you very much, Professor Iser, both for your time and, more importantly, for your thoughts.