

# An Interview with Wolfgang Iser\*

*Conducted by Shan Te-hsing*

## ABSTRACT

Conducted in March 1990 and revised by the interviewee Wolfgang Iser himself, this interview (with its eighteen questions and answers) is the result of a dynamic interaction in English between two students of literature who, though from as diverse backgrounds as Chinese and German, share some common interests. Dialogic by nature, it remarks Iser's development as a German intellectual after World War II, his various "intellectual debts," his position in the so-called Constance School, his relationship with and judgment of the English and American academic circle of literary criticism and theory, his significance as the founder and proponent of the theory of aesthetic response and in the multifarious camp of Reader Response Criticism, and his progress during the last two decades from the theory of aesthetic response to literary anthropology.

## KEY WORDS

Wolfgang Iser

Reader Response Criticism

the act of reading

literary anthropology

Constance School

the imaginary

interview

theory of aesthetic response

phenomenology

interaction

the fictive

cross-cultural understanding

---

\* This interview was conducted in March 1990. The interviewer, then a Fulbright Post-Doctoral Research Fellow at the Department of English and Comparative Literature, University of California at Irvine, would like to express his thanks to Prof. Wolfgang Iser for his revision of the interview.

Shan: Let's begin with your recent book *Prospecting: From Reader Response to Literary Anthropology*. How would you regard it as an intellectual autobiography for a period of nearly two decades from the publication of "Indeterminacy and the Reader's Response in Prose Fiction" in 1971 to that of "The Play of the Text" and "Toward a Literary Anthropology" in 1989?

Iser: Well, I certainly did not conceive this book as an intellectual autobiography. Perhaps by hindsight, one might be able to say that it documents basic issues I have been concerned with over the years, and in this respect it is an intellectual itinerary. The "Indeterminacy" essay was a seminal piece for me as I deemed it necessary to investigate text-processing in order to find out what happens between text and reader. I was fully aware at the time that the essay was rather sketchy and did by no means cover the kind of area and the range of questions which were mapped out in it and to which I meant to address myself. *The Implied Reader*, my next book, was an attempt at tracing potential or intended recipients inscribed in or prefigured by the literary text. Of course, such an endeavor was based on the assumption that a text can only come to life in the reading process and is to be considered a compact between author and reader.

Assumptions, however, are heuristic presuppositions and stand in need of being tested as to the insight they are able to open up. As each text manoeuvres its potential recipients into different positions and elicits certain attitudes to be adopted, it became necessary to ponder the reading process, because in the latter, the reader is pricked into action and instigated to do things which, in turn, have repercussions on him. For this reason a framework had to be devised in order to give an exposition of the reading process. If this framework was occasionally criticized, it was due to the fact that the critics concerned have taken it to be a statement of a factual happening in reading, whereas I considered it to be heuristic in nature, allowing me to describe variations of what may happen in reading.

I conceived it as a heuristics for two reasons. Firstly, a description of the reading process requires certain presuppositions in order to find out what might be relevant and what could be the guidelines in regard to what one wants to explore. If one does not have a framework, one is unable to construe an argument. Secondly, a heuristic framework can never be identical to any single reading experience, yet it nevertheless allows to assess or diagnose even actual readings, or to make statements about individual

text-processing. Within such a frame of reference, actual reading experiences can be subjected to scrutiny.

*The Act of Reading* was therefore a book with a theoretical thrust, in consequence of which it became obvious that it called out for certain underpinnings, as it raised issues which a systematic conceptualization of the reading process could not concern itself with. First of all, why do we still read literature though we know it is make-believe? Why don't we discard literature altogether if it is nothing but an illusory enactment of what happens in life? Why do we still enjoy this strange form of doubling, knowing perfectly well that it is nothing but fiction? Though fictions pretend something, they disclose their fictionality, and yet our awareness of that does not discredit them. These were questions which *The Act of Reading* did not answer.

Consequently, one would have to ask oneself: Why do we need fictions, and why can't we dispense with them, although we seem to know what they are like? Obviously fictions and fiction-making have something to do with the human make-up. This is the reason why *Prospecting* tries to address itself to problems posed by, yet left open in, *The Act of Reading*. Meanwhile I got involved in the anthropological implications of literature, and as the book I have written will take another couple of years before it appears in English, I thought it appropriate to publish *Prospecting* as an intermediate protocol.

Shan: Would you somehow catalogue your intellectual debts in the various periods of your intellectual development? For instance, the role of phenomenology in the development of your theory of aesthetic response and the theoretical underpinning of literary anthropology?

Iser: If I were to account for the intellectual debts I have incurred on the way along the road, it is very obvious that phenomenology was something which intrigued me at the beginning of my intellectual career. The reason for being attracted to phenomenology has something to do with the political experience to which a German of my generation was exposed. I went up to university immediately after the end of World War II with the intention of finding things out for myself after a politicized education to which all of those were subjected to who had their high-school years during the Hitler period. Phenomenology was a predominant postwar philosophy, primarily so, as it was in no way connected to any political ideology. Furthermore, phenomenology was a philosophy which confined itself to description. At

a time when it was necessary to come to terms with the postwar situation, the mode of description was the only dispassionate one, as it was not tinged by any preconceived bias.

This may also be the reason why I eventually got interested both in speech-act theory and in general systems theory. My interest in speech-act theory is due to the fact that interpersonal relationships are basic for social understanding. This, of course, makes communication a prominent issue, the exploration of which will also give a different direction to the study of literature. In terms of communication, a text not only means something, but in actual fact does something to its potential recipient. This allows both for meaning-production to be studied and transformation by interaction to be investigated. Literature lends itself to be conceived as a paradigm of communication in view of the fact that what it transmits is not dominated by pragmatic exigencies as is communication in our social life. Furthermore, it highlights how a past which has never been our own can nevertheless be put across and understood even though we have never experienced it ourselves.

General systems theory became interesting for me due to the fact that the inherited notion of reality no longer pertained to our situation. We live in worlds, and worlds are being made, so that there is an on-going conflict between the various versions of world, not only concerning the one in which we live, but also the versions of world which dominate and make other world versions and systems subservient to themselves. General systems theory provides us with a frame of reference for coming to grips with the necessary reduction of the complexities of the world in which we live, and creates an awareness of the structures that underlie our world versions.

However, I should say that the various philosophies to which I felt attracted had an importance for me only in so far as they pose questions to which I was inclined to address myself. In this respect, I do not consider myself a partisan of phenomenology, or speech-act theory, or general systems theory respectively, but take them rather as points of departure which enabled me to chart the territories of my own interest. And these have always been — though perhaps not articulated strong enough — questions like: Why human beings need illusions, fictions, and the whole network of make-believe? As these are extensions of man, the question arises: Why do we want to stretch ourselves beyond ourselves? Literature appears to be the medium in which this very impulse can be acted out. And therefore I believe that a theory of literature may be able to come up with answers concerning

the necessities for the extension of man.

Anthropology has by now become a very diversified discipline, or even split up into different disciplines, be it that the latter concern themselves either with prehistorical areas of culture or with written culture. As literature is a prominent paradigm of written culture, the question arises as to whether we have to resort to language in order to devise the parameters within which the anthropological dimension of literature is to be opened up. Do we have to latch on — as Lévi-Strauss did — to the binarism of structuralism in order to establish the heuristics for the investigation of what the make-believe in a written culture is able to reveal? Or would it not be better to fall back on the components of this particular medium itself, such as the fictive and the imaginary as well as the interplay which occurs between them?

Shan: Jane P. Tompkins's anthology *Reader Response Criticism: From Formalism to Post-Structuralism* traced its beginnings in New Criticism, through structuralism, stylistics, phenomenology, psychoanalysis, and deconstruction. Susan R. Suleiman distinguished in *The Reader in the Text: Essays on Audience and Interpretation* "six varieties of (or approaches to) audience-oriented criticism: rhetorical; semiotic and structuralist; phenomenological; subjective and psychoanalytic; sociological and historical; and hermeneutic" (6-7). And the exchange of opinions between you and Norman Holland, Wayne Booth, and Stanley Fish testifies to the fact that there are varieties of reader-oriented criticism. What do you think are the characteristics and contributions of Reader-Response Criticism in general and your theory of aesthetic response in particular?

Iser: Reader-Response Criticism has branched out into a great many different directions. Norman Holland takes over Freudian psychoanalysis in order to assess what happens in reading. Wayne Booth — to a certain extent — subscribes to an idea of rhetoric and narrative discourse which, according to his understanding, provides directions for the potential reader. Stanley Fish maintains that the communities of interpreters always decide what is going to happen when people read texts. Psychoanalysis, rhetoric, and a decision-making prescription as to what the reader is meant to do, provide basic orientations for Reader-Response Criticism. The general contribution made by Reader-Response Criticism to the field of literary studies can best be summed up by referring to Sartre's dictum that reading is a compact between author and reader — a compact, however, which needs to be detailed and elucidated. In that respect, Reader-Response Criticism has charted a

territory which to a large extent had not been in view in literary criticism. In this respect it reinvigorated an interest in literature.

The perennial question of finding out what a literary text means had been an overriding concern in critical practice, and in this respect Reader-Response Criticism has changed the question: no longer asking what a text means, but what it does. Reader-Response Criticism has both implicitly and explicitly alerted the intellectual community to the many different appeals by means of which texts — ranging from politics to advertising — make us want to do things according to guidelines layed down by them. Reader-Response Criticism is basically able to provide the platform in order to critique the various ways in which human beings in modern societies are being acted upon, if not manipulated.

If I had to define my own contribution to this overall enterprise, I would say that I focused primarily on the response-inviting structures of the literary text. Tracing these structures and their multiple interrelationships permits to delineate the patternings of a text as a structured prefigurement for the potential impact it is able to exercise. There is no doubt that these patternings are constructs. They allow, however, both to monitor and assess each individual actualization of a literary text. In this respect, it was my endeavor to make self-reflexivity — being the hallmark of High Modernism — operative.

Shan: Would you say something about your next book on the fictive and the imaginary, of which the essay “Feigning in Fiction” is the first chapter?

Iser: My next book, provisionally entitled *The Fictive and the Imaginary: Towards a Literary Anthropology* concerns itself with the fictive as an extension of man and with the imaginary indicating that human beings live on the subsidies of their imagination. The main objectives of the book are: why do human beings need fiction, why are human beings set on boundary-crossing, and why do they want to overstep themselves. Literature appears to be the medium for man's self-enactment, and human beings stage themselves because they cannot ever be present to themselves? If the fictive indicates the boundary-crossing and the overreaching of oneself, then the fictive taps the imaginary in order to picture how one wants to attain the unattainable, to make available the unavailable, and to penetrate the inaccessible. For this process, the interplay between the fictive and the imaginary is a precondition. This interplay is to be conceived in terms of game-theory,

highlighting the modes according to which human self-staging is being acted out.

Shan: Would you like to say something more about why and how you come up with the idea of a literary anthropology? How would you relate it to and distinguish it from the theory of aesthetic response?

Iser: Well, in addition to what I have previously said, we should distinguish between different types of anthropology, which would make it perhaps all the more plausible why a literary anthropology could really become an issue. There is cultural anthropology, which by now has reached the stage of presenting the knowledge gathered together on the evolution of humankind in form of handbooks. These are basically a thesaurus of knowledge acquired in field studies.

In contradistinction to an evolution-oriented cultural anthropology, we have a structural anthropology represented by Lévi-Strauss as its best known proponent, who, however, takes his framework from a different discipline, namely structural linguistics, in order to describe prehistoric social organizations of human beings.

We also have a generative anthropology as advanced by Eric Gans, who starts out with the minimum assumption of what he calls the "originary scene" in which the killed animal was the source of potential conflict which had to be counteracted by rituals in order to prevent the conflict from breaking out. Such an originary ritualization proved to be the matrix for further differentiation out of which — according to Gans — culture arose.

In relation to these types of anthropology, a literary anthropology confines itself to a medium of make-believe which moves fiction-making as a form of boundary-crossing into focus. Reaching beyond oneself or stepping out of oneself and simultaneously staying with oneself is a form of doubling into which human beings split themselves up. This may be seen as an indication of a basic urge not only to be, but having oneself in one's very being, or perhaps to know what it is to be. In other words, inaccessibility, unavailability, and whatever in human life eludes cognition, knowability, and experience set our fictionalizing activity in motion, ranging from lying to artworks, simultaneously exhibiting why we constantly have to subsidize the human situation by our own imagination.

Shan: Why do you privilege literature for an investigation into the human make-up?

Iser: As mentioned earlier, literature is make-believe, and yet we do not dispense with it. Whatever we have seen through, be it illusions, semblance, deceit, cheating, and lying as forms of make-believe, we unmask and discard. Why does this not happen to literature, although it appears to belong to the same category and even discloses itself as make-believe? This very self-disclosure renders consciousness — otherwise a guardian against deception — helpless. Human beings obviously like picturing things which are not immediately within their reach. This may be one of the reasons why, at least in Western culture, people have become avid TV viewers. Even if we are annoyed by commercials, we nevertheless pay some kind of attention to what happens on the screen. Images — as we know — appeal to the unconscious, which is borne out by the fact that we also dream in terms of images, and not in terms of arguments. On the contrary, arguing is dispensed with in dreaming. Furthermore, image-making is in one way or other also a form of world-making. By means of images, we make ourselves present to ourselves or give presence to something which is either absent, elsewhere existent, or perhaps even non-existent. If it is true — as my colleague Gordon Globus from the Medical Faculty in Irvine maintains — that we create new worlds every night in our dreams, then obviously this image-creating activity is perhaps even more important for keeping our balance as human beings than the guidance provided by consciousness in our day-to-day living.

Literature could be related to the kind of activity which occurs in our dream life, although there is a vital distinction which has to be kept in view. Even if in dreaming we are aware that we do dream, we can never step outside the dream itself; we remain the prisoners of our own images. In literature, however, we are constantly provided with an opportunity to step out of ourselves and simultaneously remain ourselves. This duality could be considered a distinguishing mark of literature, allowing us as human beings to be simultaneously in the midst of life and outside of it. That, too, seems to be a fascination whose analysis may tell us something about deeply entrenched human dispositions.

Shan: In your recent essays, such as “Representation: A Performative Act” (1987) and “The Play of the Text” (1989), you seem to try to bring mimesis back to life, so to speak, by emphasizing the performative function and play elements of literary texts. What’s the reason behind your endeavor?

Iser: With regard to “Representation: A Performative Act” and “The Play of the Text,” I did not really intend to resuscitate the notion of mimesis,



although I did not want to discard it altogether; instead I tried to point out that representation is a rather inadequate notion when it comes to describe what happens in literature. Representation appears to imply that there is something pre-given, which, for whatever reason, is being presented again. This may not have posed a problem for a closed world, such as the Greek cosmos or the Medieval world picture. The moment, however, when open-endedness became the overriding feature of the world we live in, the question of what is pre-given and hence has to be represented is no longer a viable form of assessing what happens in literature. Literature has always displayed a performative quality, and this holds true even for Aristotle. If the constitutive forms of things, the Aristotelian *morphé*, have to be represented, the very act of representation is a performance. The performative quality, however, was subservient to such a representation. Yet, in an open-ended world, the performative quality of literature becomes paramount. Instead of representing or even imitating something which is pre-given, literature brings forth something which prior to such a production did not have an existence of its own. The more the awareness prevails that worlds are not given but made, literature becomes a paradigm of world-making which can no longer be equated with mimesis.

Shan: Words with the prefix of "inter-," such as "interaction" and "interplay," appear in your writings over and over again. Why is this *obsession* with "inter"?

Iser: If the assumption that literature as a paradigm of world-making is tenable, one can no longer insist on interpreting, assessing, or judging positions, but has to switch to an analysis in terms of relations. This is the basic reason why I privilege the focus on interaction, interrelation, interplay, etc. We have to keep in mind that even positions solidify into some kind of an entity not least by the relations entertained between them. Therefore a framework for assessing types of relationships has to be concocted which can be shaped according to terms of game-theory. Conceptualizing relationships has to start out from the back-and-forth movement of positions related, which are in play with one another. This basic play movement is operative in all kinds of games such as *agôn*, *contest*, *chance*, *mimicry* or mutual *carnivalization* which, in turn, give shape to the specificity of the relationship concerned.

Shan: You seem constantly to have in mind "literary theory and its application to texts" (*Prospecting* vii). For instance, *The Implied Reader* is primarily an application, whereas *The Act of Reading* is, as its subtitle indicates, "a theory of aesthetic response." As for your recent book *Prospecting*, Part One and Part Three are theoretical discussions, whereas Part Two is the application and modification of your conceptual framework erected in Part One. Would you like to elaborate on, to use your own words, the "mutual spotlighting" between theory and application and the significance of this "mutual spotlighting"?

Iser: I believe that literary theory derives from the encounter with literary texts, and each theory bears the mark of the textual experience out of which it has arisen. There is hardly any theory I can think of which has not issued from such a practical experience. Taking this into consideration, one could say Reader-Response Criticism, at least as I understand it, was an upshot of an encounter with Modernism. Modern texts did not lend themselves so easily to questions of what they are meant to mean, but rather provide an experience of undercutting, subverting or even reshuffling of prevailing cultural codes. Such a process stood in need of elucidation.

Moreover, there is a hermeneutic problem involved. Literary theories which arise out of the encounters described, are bound to be forms of abstraction which, when used as heuristic models for exploring individual texts, will reveal shortcomings. Therefore, what a theory is unable to cover has to be fed back into it, and so, by modifying it, enhances its capabilities. Theory as a model for interpretation allows to put questions to the text and is therefore a feed-forward; it will produce the salience of problems which it is not able to tackle, and as these are not featureless, they can be fed back, thus turning the relation between theory and practice into a cybernetic one.

Shan: You and Hans Robert Jauss are usually regarded as the two major members of the Constance School. But in your recent book, you mention Jauss only once in an endnote as one of the two editors of the book in which your essay appeared. Similarly, Jauss also seldom — only three times, actually — mentions you in his recent book *Question and Answer: Form of Dialogic Understanding*. Here I am, of course, referring to your books published in English. How do you explain this and how would you characterize the Constance School?

Iser: With regard to the differences between Jauss and myself, I have given certain descriptions of our different scholastic interests in an essay

entitled "Reader-Response Criticism in Perspective." Although our interests are related, they nevertheless branch off in different directions and have individual concerns. Jauss focuses on the historically-documented reception of texts — an endeavor which he tries to describe according to what Collingwood once called a question-and-answer logic, which implies that in each historical situation certain questions pose themselves to which answers have to be provided. Reception of literature is then assessed against the respectively predominant horizon of expectation.

I myself am more interested in theory-building, which I consider to be a basic requirement both for analyzing of what happens in interpretation and for finding out what literature may tell us about our anthropological dispositions. In a situation in which pluralism is advocated, it is necessary to probe into the assumptions underlying the various forms of interpretation. In order to avoid confusion when doing so, certain theoretical parameters have to be fixed to which reference can be made, when institutionalizing acts of interpretation are brought under scrutiny. Furthermore, when literature — especially in Western societies — has become peripheral and is under stress, we cannot conceive any longer of interpreting texts as the be-all and end-all of critical practice. Therefore the medium itself has to be investigated in order to be able to answer the question: why is literature?

If Jauss and myself figure under the name of the Constance School we do not object to it, although we didn't invent this common denominator under which we have been subsumed. Yet this common denomination glosses over certain differences and interests which — though they are related — do not overlap.

Shan: Do you think that you have been too aesthetic and not political, or not political enough?

Iser: Whether one is political or not has something to do with one's own historical experience, and as we all know experiences are very hard to transmit from one generation to another. This is one of the basic reasons why there is always conflict between fathers and sons. If one has grown up — as I have — in a highly politicized situation in one's formative years, to turn antipolitical may in itself be a political decision. When my generation went up to the university after the end of the Second World War, we shared a collective impulse to sort ourselves out after years of indoctrination. In those days this meant to do literature which, of course, was part of our bourgeoisie

heritage. Twenty years later, when the student rebellion erupted in the late 'sixties, we would have done sociology, I guess. These experiences have undoubtedly been conditioning factors for not turning political in the sense in which it has been conceived at least in the late 'sixties and throughout the 'seventies. To be interested in aesthetics — in the broader sense of the term — may nevertheless entail a form of commitment. I have always understood it as a way of exposing shortcomings, subverting reifications, and unmasking concealed interests by which our ideology-ridden century has been motivated.

Shan: Do you think it is your own situation, or can it be generalized to include other members of the Constance School or even the whole generation?

Iser: If one were to generalize, one would have to take a very important circumstance into consideration. It was one of the very strange historical moments in German history that, in 1945, liberation and restoration coincided. We were liberated from a political dictatorship which meant for the German universities that the curriculum which was current in the 1920's was repeated all over again, especially as Germany during the Hitler years had been cut off from what was going on in the world of science and the humanities. This repeat, however, had serious repercussions. Those of us who were students between 1946 and 1950 were cut off from modernism, as we didn't hear anything about psychoanalysis, structuralism, and Marxism for that matter. By the time we graduated, and that meant we had our Ph.D., we were rather uneducated and consequently became self-taught people. I arrived in Britain at the beginning of the 1950's, and all of a sudden I found myself in a modern world of which I had not the slightest clue. This situation could be illustrated by a footnote. One of my teachers at Heidelberg University was a famous existential philosopher, Karl Jaspers, who in these days was considered to be Heidegger's counterpart. He had been dismissed in 1935 by the Nazis. In 1945 he was reinstated and considered to be one of the foremost models of German intellectuals. In 1947 he gave a lecture called the absolutists of our century: Freud and Marx. In order to illustrate what "absolutism" according to his understanding entailed, he made a reference to Hitler, whom, of course, we knew. Now, if these others were also absolutists, then we might as well forget about them. And this is the reason why we were almost completely sealed off from modernism. I became a philologist and did *Beowulf* over and over again. I remember that once the name de Saussure

cropped up, and the professor said de Saussure must be “nuts” because he thinks there is a synchronic system of language. The very fact that we were barred from modernism in our student days meant that we had to find out our intellectual interests for ourselves and – though gropingly – developed interest in the analysis of interpretative procedures, in text-processing, and in whatever is considered to be a source of exercising effects and impacts.

Shan: It’s interesting to note the production and circulation of your work/knowledge in the English-speaking world. For instance, three of your books, *The Implied Reader*, *The Act of Reading*, and *Prospecting* were published by the Johns Hopkins University Press. Your deep involvement in the English-speaking academic society can be clearly seen in your “Acknowledgements” in *Prospecting*, and, as I count it, ten out of the thirteen essays appeared either in English periodicals or in various English anthologies of critical essays. You are a Professor not only of the University of Constance, West Germany, but also the University of California, Irvine, USA. Although already a famous scholar in Germany, you have become an international figure mainly through your English writings. Would you regard it somehow as a form of “Imperialism” in the sense that the English language, at the present time, is one of the dominant discourses, if not the most dominant one? Would you like to historicize and politicize this phenomenon?

Iser: I think it is a fact in these days that if you want to be read you have to write in what is now the *lingua franca*, i.e., the most widely shared common language. For this reason I have translated some of my own books into English, not least because Reader-Response Criticism has sprung up simultaneously in Germany and the United States. I still remember my first get-together with Stanley Fish in early 1971 when he gave me his manuscript of “Affective Stylistics” after I had just read a couple of months before my “Indeterminacy” essay at an English Institute conference at New York. Both of us felt at the time that we had something in common, which later turned out to be a fallacy. It is a fact in these days, especially in the sciences, that the results are exchanged almost exclusively in English, and if the community of scholars wants to make an effort towards reinvigorating the humanities – for whatever reasons – a common language is indispensable, not least in order to articulate the individuality of the various voices.

Shan: What is the general relationship between the German literary

scholarship and that of the English-American?

Iser: There is perhaps a difference in approach to the text. American scholars still privilege close reading, and critical theory is only relevant in so far as it may change the approach or refine the instrument indispensable for the business of interpretation. This may also be the reason why Deconstruction had such a boom in the United States, as it equally favored close reading which initially New Criticism had established as a critical practice. This type of close reading, however, followed guidelines set up by classical aesthetics, according to which dichotomies, discrepancies, etc. had to be reconciled in the artwork itself, thereby exhibiting its aesthetic value. When this classical framework proved to be inadequate and became out-dated — especially when criticism had to cope with modern literature — Deconstruction came on the stage in the right moment and exercised a tremendous impact on American scholastic circles. The link between New Criticism and Deconstruction is the practice of close reading. Paul de Man once said that Deconstruction is the closest of close reading, and as Deconstruction brought a modernist framework to bear in order to read differently from what New Criticism had advocated, it provided a substitute and allowed to exchange the neoclassical concept underlying New Criticism by post-structuralist ideas.

English literary scholarship has always been antitheoretical, as it was very strongly historically-minded, and therefore devoted a great deal of attention to the context within which the literature under investigation was produced. If one were to say that American scholars favored close reading, then the hallmark of English literary scholarship is appreciation. Appreciation is a concept of multiple reference. Its components are taste, literary culture, historical knowledge, refined observation, empathy and judgment. Therefore appreciation figured prominently in an education through literature and the arts in general in order to form a cultured personality.

As far as German literary scholarship is concerned, it is more often than not theoretically-minded, i.e., concerned with approaches to literature and what they yield in relation to cognition and insight. Furthermore, assessing literature is intended to find out what it has to say about human life, what function it has to fulfil in society, to what extent it is historically conditioned and serves, in turn, as a divining rod for tracing what was important in historic situations. Consequently the sociology of literature, especially the one advanced by Marxism, became a prominent preoccupation.

This holds equally true for Reader-Response Criticism and aesthetics of reception, which gained momentum when the impact exercised by texts both

on society and the individual recipient became an important issue.

So, as a sweeping statement, one could say close reading is emphasized in America, appreciation in British literary education, and theoretical orientation in German scholarship.

Shan: It seems to me that your familiarity with the Western tradition somewhat embodies what T. S. Eliot names the European mind. What would you be prospecting from the interaction/interplay between the European mind and the Oriental mind (not in the sense of Edward Said's *Orientalism*)?

Iser: For some years I have been engaged in a project under the auspices of the German-Israeli Foundation of Research and Development. The project under discussion is "Institutions of Interpretation." What we try to do is to confront different types of interpretation pertaining to and arising out of different cultures such as the Judeo-Christian and the German culture. In the course of our deliberations, we confronted a Western hermeneutics, which is one of mediation (i.e., mediating past and present, God and the world, etc.), the Torah (the five books of Moses), which is an exegesis in terms of appropriation (i.e., the exodus out of Egypt takes place on the very night of the high Jewish festival, and the five thousand years between that event and its re-enactment are totally eclipsed), and the Talmudic (Jewish law) interpretation, which is an exegesis in terms of decision-making. We try to find out what the different institutionalizing acts of these different types of interpretation are, in order to open up means of cross-cultural understanding. In this particular relation, the different modes and appearances of otherness are of paramount concern. Simultaneously we try to find out what happens when one culture is translated into another one, and to what extent there are definite barriers as to the mutual translatability of cultures.

Shan: Don't you think it somewhat curious that we — a German and a Chinese — are conducting an interview in English, the result of which would probably be translated into our respective mother tongues and disseminated among our respective audiences?

Iser: As long as we are interacting in English, it may be strange. Unfortunately, however, neither of us knows the language of the other, and so again we have to switch to the *lingua franca*. Nevertheless, I regard it as very important that we communicate across these great distances which exist between German as a central European culture and Chinese as a Far Eastern one.

You may know that China and her culture has always figured prominently in German thought. Germans have had great reverence for Chinese culture as documented from Hegel right through to Jaspers who have always considered China the cradle of humankind. Either of us may be subjected to a kind of defamiliarization when we discuss all the issues which you have raised in English, but the kind of conversation we are just having — at least to my understanding — does not concern itself with German and Chinese culture respectively, so that the question arises as to what extent the topics we are talking about are concerns in which you and I — coming from different backgrounds — share an interest. As this appears to be the case, obviously dialogue seems to be the only possible way of bringing about an interaction between cultures in the sense that the common topic we are talking about may be viewed — or perhaps even understood — differently. I don't mind differences, because a cross-cultural contact is actually not meant to eradicate distance or difference, but should be made productive for a heightened self-awareness which is always an opportunity to be obtained when cultures encounter one another.

Shan: How would you view this interview as a product of interaction? I mean, the whole process of question-answer-transcription and editing-revision-translation into German and Chinese with possible foreword, afterword, footnotes, etc.?

Iser: I would still think that the interview — if you consider it to be a genre — is very important for interaction in the humanities. To my understanding, the subject-matter of the humanities has its location in dialogue. For this reason the interview not only provides an exchange of ideas but also has a humane aspect to it, as it provides an opportunity for the person interviewed to explicate himself with regard to all the implications he is bound to produce in his own writings.

Furthermore the very questions asked in an interview alert the person who has to answer them as to what seems to have been important to other people, of which he is — more often than not — to a large extent unaware. Thus the interview testifies to the overriding importance of the dialogic principle, which I think is in complete accordance with the basic concern of our professional activity, namely, the encounter with texts.

Shan: Then, how about the "authorship" of the interview?



Iser: Well, it depends on how you view it. The interviewer wants the person to be interviewed to say something according to guidelines set down by interviewer and not by the person to be interviewed. In this respect, an interview is — in terms of reception — a very interesting genre, because the interviewer — as long as he is considered to be an author of sorts — makes the interviewed “write” a text, which would never have been “written” by him in such a manner, had he not had to answer certain questions, which he himself would either not have raised or which even would never even have dawned on him. In this respect, the interviewer is a self-effacing person, although he is the author of this self-effacing effort and thus instrumental of producing a text which otherwise would never have come about.

