WOLFGANG ISER AND LITERARY ANTHROPOLOGY

A thesis submitted

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Presented to The School of Design,Communication and Information

Technology by Mr Benjamin James Matthews BA (Comm) Hons (Eng)

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For Clieve and Joy McCosker

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Abstract

This dissertation argues that the literary anthropology of Wolfgang Iser allows us to resituate literary studies in response to the challenges of the "cultural turn" and the decline of literary studies. These include questions about what defines a literary text, and whether literature should be bracketed off from the remainder of culture. Iser's definition for literature focuses upon the materiality of culture, by defining the text in language rather than as a concrete object, and as a unique medium we use to meet a basic need. Iser argues that the "open ended" nature of literature reflects the dynamic human, and favours a definition of the human that points towards the performative quality of representation, in terms of the metaphor of "plasticity". However, he gives no account of the emergence of this vertical dimension in language. As a corrective measure, an argument is presented for the adoption of the originary hypothesis articulated by Eric Gans to underpin his generative anthropology. Here we follow Richard van Oort, who, in pursuing the argument for an anthropological perspective on the project of cultural interpretation conducted in the humanities, suggests the necessity for a grounding interpretation of our common origin in language. This originary hypothesis indicates that culture, language, and thereby, the human are coterminous. They each begin in a single scene, and a minimal fiction can be offered to describe this scene and provide a basic structure we can discover in each subsequent scene of human culture. The final phase of this dissertation examines the proposition that Iser's anthropology exhibits a generative perspective on literature. The outcome suggests that the supplement of an originary hypothesis brings stability to his work in articulating categories such as fictionalizing, the imaginary, play, staging, and emergence, which undergird an important new way to approach literary studies.